

H-France Review Vol. 11 (November 2011), No. 243

Michel Winock, *Madame de Staël*. Paris: Fayard, 2010. 602 pp. €24.80 (cl). ISBN-10: 2213654514; K. Steven Vincent, *Benjamin Constant and the Birth of French Liberalism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 288 pp. \$85.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN-10: 0230110096; and Emmanuelle Paulet-Grandguillot, *Libéralisme et démocratie: de Sismondi à Constant, à partir du Contrat social (1801-1806)*. Geneva: Slatkine, 2010. €85.00 (cl). ISBN-10: 2051021678.

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These three books, each focused on a key member of the Groupe de Coppet, are, despite their common theme, about as different as three books can be. Michel Winock's is a biography of Madame de Staël written for the general public; Stephen Vincent's is a scholarly argument about the contributions of Benjamin Constant to French liberalism; and Emmanuelle Paulet-Grandguillot's is a technical analysis of the responses of Simonde de Sismondi and Benjamin Constant to Rousseau's *Social Contract*. Collectively these books exhibit the richness and diversity of the work being done on the Coppet Group, while raising our awareness of its value and significance. Moreover, each book has something particular to say about the origins of modern liberalism.

Today, Sismondi (1770-1842) is best known for his economic views, as expressed in his groundbreaking *Nouveau principes économiques* (1819). He is widely seen as a proto-socialist, one of the first to break with Smithian *laissez-faire* principles. In *Libéralisme et démocratie. De Sismondi à Constant, à partir du Contrat social (1801-1806)*, Paulet-Grandguillot turns her attention to Sismondi's political views with an analysis of his little-known work, *Recherches sur les constitutions des peuples libres*, completed in 1801, but left unpublished during his lifetime. In this manuscript, Sismondi engages critically with the thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and, in so doing, articulates his own, very sophisticated and nuanced perspective on key political concepts such as the social contract, popular sovereignty and liberty. Sismondi's views on Rousseau went on to influence his friend, Benjamin Constant (1767-1830), whose *Principles of Politics* (Paulet-Grandguillot discusses the manuscript version of 1806) begins with a pointed refutation of Rousseau. Both Constant and Sismondi were, of course, painfully aware that Rousseau's notions of popular sovereignty and general will had been invoked to legitimize the Terror—and then, paradoxically, the counter-revolution as well. Aiming to articulate a centrist political position, they sought to rescue what was salvageable from Rousseau's political philosophy and they did this by redefining key Rousseauian concepts. They tried to reconcile popular sovereignty with representation and the individual with the state. A meticulous examination of texts leads Paulet-Grandguillot to conclude that Sismondi's reaction to Rousseau was nuanced and profound, while Constant's was more polemical and radical.

Paulet-Grandguillot's exposition is clear, thoughtful and compelling. Her analysis shows that a rich and sophisticated engagement with Rousseau lies at the inception, one might even say at the very heart, of modern liberalism. A reworked version of her Ph.D. dissertation, the book nevertheless suffers from a few fairly minor problems. First, it has a tendency towards repetitiveness, which might have been avoided by more rigorous editing. Second, one wishes that the author had ventured some broader conclusions. It would have been enlightening to

learn why the relationship she uncovers between Rousseau, Sismondi and Constant is important, or how her findings contribute to ongoing scholarly debates about the origins of liberalism, the relationship between liberalism and democracy and/or between liberalism and republicanism. It seems from Paulet-Grandguillot's book that a constellation of Swiss, Protestant and republican thinkers first articulated the key principles of modern liberal democracy. This is an exciting proposition that merits an explicit statement and discussion. Instead, we are left to hazard such conclusions on our own.

Steven Vincent adopts a broader perspective in *Benjamin Constant and the Birth of French Liberalism*. His aim is to contribute to scholarly discussions about the origins and nature of French liberalism. In the current climate, it has become customary to speak of the weakness, if not the *absence*, of a liberal tradition in France. Even scholars committed to locating such an indigenous tradition, such as Lucien Jaume and Pierre Rosanvallon, have tended to dwell on its singularities and failures. Focusing much attention on François Guizot and the Doctrinaires, they have exposed the elitism, excessive rationalism, and statist or centralizing tendencies of French liberalism. Vincent wants to recalibrate discussions. It was Benjamin Constant, he reminds us, and not François Guizot, who invented French liberalism. And Constant's was a markedly pragmatic and pluralistic variety of liberalism that went on to have a major, and positive, influence on democratic and republican politics in France.

Vincent takes note that much scholarship on liberalism has been conceived backwards; it first identifies core values deemed liberal, and then tells the story of their emergence and development retroactively. Vincent reverses this procedure. Adopting a rigorously and self-consciously historical perspective, he begins with those French thinkers who actually called their political stance "liberal" and then proceeds to explain what they meant by this.

The book expertly narrates Constant's early years and development into a liberal political thinker and actor. It provides excellent descriptions of post-revolutionary France and the problems Constant confronted when he entered politics in the 1790s. Vincent convincingly argues that Constant's liberal political stance emerged quite early, namely during the Directory and Consulate, and that it was conceived expressly to deal with the issues of his time. We learn much about Constant's intellectual relationship with Mme de Staël, their broad political agreements and occasional disagreements, and about Constant's critical engagement with the thought of William Godwin. Vincent furnishes concise and enlightening summaries of Constant's main political works, as well as an insightful explanation of how his novel, *Adolphe*, relates to his political ideas.

One of the most interesting and innovative aspects of Vincent's book is the importance he accords to the notion of character in Constant's political thought. Character, Vincent insists, was "a central issue for Constant" (p. 139), who was deeply concerned about the "narrowness, egoism, and privatized sterility" (p. 156) that surrounded him. Like others among his contemporaries, Constant spent a lot of time thinking about human nature, the emotions, and how these relate to political systems. He believed that centuries of royalism had created a "mutilated, fatigued, faded generation" (p. 59). The Revolution had only reinforced harmful character traits that would work to undermine any liberal political regime. Fanaticism and egoism were a real problem, as were vanity and frivolity. France, in Constant's estimation, was "a nation weakened by the excess of civilization, a nation which has become vain and frivolous due to the education of the monarchy, and in which even the enlightened have become sterile..." (p. 139.) Therefore, the establishment of a constitutional and representative regime that guaranteed equal civil rights for all would not be enough. A liberal political regime required men and women of character to sustain it. The right moral sentiments and human passions had to be cultivated in the population. One of the healthy passions that Constant and de Staël both

thought should be encouraged for the sake of France's political future was "enthusiasm." Enthusiasm could heal France by countering fanaticism and selfishness, and by fostering generosity, compassion and mutual toleration. To quote Germaine de Staël, "enthusiasm is tolerant...because it makes us feel the interest and beauty of all things...Enthusiasm finds in the reverie of the heart and in the vastness of thought that which fanaticism and passion lock up in a single idea or a single object" (p. 146.)

Michel Winock's biography of Madame de Staël was written with the general public in mind. In his introduction, Winock explains that, prior to writing this book during the ten-or-so years that he taught the history of political thought at Science Po in Paris, he had never once dedicated a lecture to Mme de Staël. Like so many others, he tended to think of her as a second-rate thinker, less interesting and less important than, for example, her companion, Benjamin Constant. This biography, one is led to believe, is meant to atone for this neglect and to repair "l'injustice faite à Germaine de Staël" (p. 11). Winock intends to restore Mme de Staël to "sa véritable place dans notre culture" (p. 11). This is certainly commendable, as is, in this regard, his decision to write for the general public, although not including footnotes may disturb some. The question is whether Winock achieves his goal of rehabilitating Mme de Staël's reputation. For, despite Winock's being a renowned expert in the history of political thought, this is not an intellectual biography and the focus is not on Mme de Staël's contributions to political theory.

Madame de Staël's life is anything but boring and Winock writes well. He covers a great deal of ground quickly and understandably. He gives ample space to de Staël's private life, using correspondence to provide insights and detail. In fact, this is very much the point of Winock's book. He wants to convey a sense not just of de Staël's public and intellectual side, but of her whole personality—including the intimate or domestic dimension of her life. Madame de Staël was not just a *femme de tête*—she was also a daughter, a wife, a mother and a lover. Thus we learn about her early childhood, her infatuation with her father, her strained relationship with her mother, her loveless marriage to a Swedish baron, and her many extra-marital affairs. Sections of the book alternate between her private life and her political activities. Over the course of her lifetime, Winock notes, she had one husband, fifteen lovers and five children. And she *also* wrote books.

But herein lies a conundrum, for it is doubtful whether one can do justice to Mme de Staël from this bifurcated perspective. Winock insists on separating Mme de Staël's emotional life from what he considers her more rational political interests. In so doing, he depicts her as a hopelessly divided creature. Time and again, Winock seems surprised that de Staël can fall in love, get pregnant, give birth, and tend to domestic concerns, while still retaining an interest in politics. She can write a passionate love letter one day and a reasonable political treatise the next—she can get angry, feel slighted and betrayed, and yet manage her financial affairs. One wonders whether these are the extraordinary traits that make Mme de Staël so special and valuable? In the end, Winock's shockingly deflating conclusion about one of the great intellectuals of her time seems to be that, despite her turbulent emotional life, Mme de Staël managed to have some rational thoughts about politics: "Reste que, par-dessus tout, cette passionnée est une femme de raison. ...La romantique avait une tête politique." (p. 506)

Apparently the fact that Mme de Staël could write rationally about politics is all the more surprising given the many emotional problems Winock attributes to her. Judging from her letters and presumably also her novels (it is not always clear where he gets his information from since there are no footnotes), Winock concludes that Mme de Staël liked to exaggerate. Her personality tended to extremes. She cried and complained a lot. Her moods oscillated from enthusiasm to melancholy, showing "les marques de l'hystérie"(p. 14). One wonders how such a conflicted and troubled individual could even function, much less formulate the political ideas

and exercise the political influence of Mme de Staël. This is indeed a strange form of rehabilitation.

Steven Vincent's book suggests a more fruitful approach to Mme de Staël. He shows that both Constant and she thought deeply about the emotions and their effects on politics. They believed that the right kind of emotions was needed to sustain a liberal political regime. In particular, they believed that increased "enthusiasm" could combat the endemic selfishness and narrowness of French political culture. Is it not possible, then, that Mme de Staël's very effusiveness—her willingness to express strong emotions—was, in fact, a way for her to *live* her liberal principles? If so, then Mme de Staël's emotional side would not be just an embarrassing aberration or sign of psychological disfunction, but an inextricable part of her political philosophy. In fact, the importance accorded by Mme de Staël's to "rational" constitutionalism on the one hand, and "expressive individualism" (Vincent, p. 162) on the other, may very well be one of the most distinctive and original contributions she and Benjamin Constant made to modern liberalism.

Even more disappointing is how often Winock employs the words of her critics to describe Mme de Staël. Many insulting comments are reproduced with little or no context or commentary provided by the author, leaving one to speculate why they are there. For example, Winock faithfully repeats, again and again, that Mme de Staël was domineering towards her lovers. Not surprisingly, then, that they all left her. She was, according to Winock, "trop dominatrice pour ne pas susciter à la longue chez ses amants un désir d'émancipation" (p. 158). With snide condescension bordering on misogyny, Winock amplifies a comment made by Constant: "être dominé par une femme qui n'est même pas douée au lit, c'est un comble que Benjamin exprime en termes plus distingués" (p. 208). Winock is also relentless when it comes to her critics' commentary on how ugly she was. Mme de Staël was "une femme au physique peu flatteur," (p. 36); "privée de beauté physique" (p. 93); generally unattractive (p. 39); "laide" (p. 178); "laide de visage et gauche de corps" (p. 255); "laide" again (p. 277). She apparently had a "corps alourdi" (p. 406), a disappointing physical appearance (p. 422); and was a "grosse femme bavarde" (p. 442). In his concluding chapter, entitled "Qui êtes-vous, Madame de Staël," Winock repeats, this time on his own authority, that "Germaine de Staël n'était pas belle" (p. 500). He also speculates, without any convincing proof, that Madame de Staël's supposed ugliness caused her considerable emotional distress.

As the *coup de grâce*, Winock appears unappreciative of many of de Staël's writings, especially her novels. These are now "obsolètes" (p. 513). Once again, we read that she had a tendency to exaggerate. *Delphine* is too heavy and clearly not a masterpiece. *Corinne* is too chatty. *De l'Allemagne* reads too much like a travel guide to appeal to the modern reader. Her *Considérations sur la Révolution* has been superseded by countless other such works. It is therefore not surprising that no one reads Mme de Staël anymore. If Winock's goal really was to rehabilitate her reputation, one has to ask oneself: with friends like this, who needs enemies?

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ISSN 1553-9172