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Madame de Staël's *Considerations* and the Post-revolutionary French Liberals

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Parler politique pour moi c'est vivre
Madame de Staël

Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution was Germaine de Staël's political testament, posthumously published in 1818, a year after her death and four years after the return of the Bourbons on the throne of France. The book quickly became one of the main reference points for a new generation of liberals who came of age during the Bourbon Restoration¹ and remained an object of special interest for liberal-minded intellectuals after that. Thinkers as diverse as Charles de Rémusat, Sainte-Beuve, Edgar Quinet, and Alexandre Vinet were inspired by Madame de Staël's work and, particularly, by her defense of the Revolution and her liberal agenda for political reform². She could have played a prominent political role during the Restoration if a stroke had not paralyzed her and made it impossible for her to write any longer (she could only dictate after that). She passed away a few months later, on July 14, 1817 at the age of fifty-one.

Although many obituaries were published on Staël's untimely death, there was surprisingly little consensus on her other than a general agreement on her fabulous wealth (inherited from her father, Jacques Necker) and unique personality endowed with a true

¹ The profile of this generation was analyzed in A.B. Spitzer, *The French Generation of 1820*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1987.

² As C.-A. Sainte-Beuve once pointed out, the other major reference for the members of the French generation of 1820 was Chateaubriand. See, for example, his long essay Madame de Staël in *Portraits des femmes*, Paris, Didier, 1852. On Staël's political thought, see B. Fontana, *Germaine de Staël: A Political Portrait*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016; M. Gauchet, *Staël*, in Aa.Vv., *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, eds. F. Furet and M. Ozouf, Cambridge, Belknap Press, 1989, pp. 1003-09. On Madame de Staël's life, see M. Fairweather, *Madame de Staël*, London, Constable, 2005; C. Herold, *Mistress to an Age: A Life of Madame de Staël*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1958; C. Blennerhassett, *Mme de Staël. Her Friends, and Her Influence in Politics and Literature*, 3 voll., London, Chapman and Hall, 1889.

genius for the art of conversation. This was due to a mixture of political, intellectual, and social reasons. Staël's personal life had always been an object of intense speculation, given her colorful affairs (among them, with Benjamin Constant) and her unhappy first marriage to Erik Magnus Staël von Holstein, the Swedish Ambassador to Paris, whose gambling debts were generously paid off by her father. Necker, the famous minister of Louis XVI, had played a key role during the last decade of the Old Regime and the first year of the Revolution, and was also the author of several important books on politics, economics, religion, and morality. Germaine's mother, Suzanne Curchod (1737-1794) held an influential salon in Paris. Years later, Germaine's own salon at Coppet in Switzerland became famous throughout the entire Europe. Madame de Staël and her guests shared a genuine respect for the plurality of cultures, institutions, mores and customs³. The Coppet circle turned out to be an island of civility and freedom on a continent increasingly dominated by the armies and power of Napoleon. It became in the end, in Lucien Jaume's words, "*le creuset de l'esprit libéral*"⁴ in the French-speaking part of Europe.

For all her of fame, Staël's personality triggered powerful controversies. If some regarded her as the "Egeria of liberty"⁵, others criticized her strong Anglomania and were put off by the allegedly exaggerated affection for her father. Her complex persona comes to the fore in *Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution*, an eclectic book consisting of three volumes divided in six parts. The very title of the book points to its subjective nature: the author did not want to provide a systematic account of the Revolution, its causes, actors, and outcomes. Madame de Staël's real intention was to offer a series of personal impressions and recollections mixed with political and philosophical reflections on the principal events and actors of the Revolution. As such, her work differed from Necker's monumental and ambitious four-part *De la Révolution française* (1796), which contained an important appendix, *Réflexions philosophiques sur l'égalité*, in which he rejected Rousseau's conceptual framework and provided a trenchant critique of the sovereignty of the people and undivided sovereignty.

Madame de Staël had initially conceived the idea of writing her book as early as 1804, a few months after Necker's death, as a posthumous vindication of her father's legacy. Nonetheless, as she put it, Necker's career and life were entirely linked to the

³ See S. Balayé, *Le Groupe de Coppet: conscience d'une mission commune*, in Aa.Vv., *Le Groupe de Coppet. Actes et documents du deuxième Colloque de Coppet*, 10-13 juillet 1974, Geneva and Paris, Slatkine, 1977, p. 32.

⁴ See Aa.Vv., *Coppet, creuset de l'esprit libéral: les idées politiques et constitutionnelles du group de Madame de Staël*, sous la dir. de L. Jaume, Aix-en-Provence & Paris, Oeconomica, 2000.

⁵ S. Tribouillard, *Le Tombeau de Madame de Staël: Les discours de la postérité staëlienne (1817-1850)*, Geneva, Slatkine, 2007, p. 22.

“greatest period of European history, the French Revolution”⁶. She returned to the project six years later, in 1810, but the controversies triggered by the publication of *De l’Allemagne* and her decision to go into exile (to escape Napoleon’s reach) prevented her from focusing on the work until the fall of 1812. Some of the materials used for her account of her exile in *Dix années d’exil* would constitute the basis for the drafting of *Considérations* which would slowly evolve into a political manifesto for liberal reform in France.

1. What makes the *Considerations* a special book?

There are many interesting things worth pointing out about Madame de Staël’s unusual and influential book. The first and arguably the most important one is that the text published posthumously in 1818 was, to use Victor de Broglie’s words, “*un ouvrage terminé sans être achevé*”⁷. It was certainly *not* the version that Madame de Staël would have sent to the press if she could have revised the entire manuscript. She had completed a first draft of the manuscript between by early 1817, but her stroke and the ensuing complications made it impossible for her to prepare the final text for publication. As Broglie remarked, Madame de Staël used to write quickly the first drafts of her manuscripts and would subsequently had them copied in order to produce a second and third version (most of her manuscripts had three drafts). The case of *Considerations* was different; before her death, she could only revise a second draft of the entire manuscript, whose last two books were not polished. According to Staël’s will, her son, Auguste de Staël, and her good friend, Wilhelm Schlegel, were entrusted with the difficult task of revising the entire manuscript based on her notes and existing drafts. To this effect, Auguste also enlisted the help of his brother-in-law, Victor de Broglie, a member of the Doctrinaires’ group⁸. They both made important changes to the manuscript that are presented in the recent monumental critical edition of *Considerations* edited by Lucia Omacini⁹. Sometimes, the editors deleted or redacted specific passages which, in their view, could have created unnecessary controversies or changed the image of the author; on other occasions, they completed the manuscript “in the spirit” of the author. As

⁶ G. de Staël, *Du caractère de M. Necker et de sa vie privée*, in Id., *Œuvres Complètes de Madame la baronne de Staël publiées par son fils*, vol. II, Paris, Treuttel and Würtz, 1821, p. 262.

⁷ V. de Broglie, *Souvenirs du feu duc de Broglie: 1785-1870*, vol. II, Paris, Calmann Lévy, 1887, p. 15.

⁸ On the French Doctrinaires, see A. Craiutu, *Liberalism under Siege: The Political Thought of the French Doctrinaires*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2003. An enlarged French edition can be found in Craiutu, *Le Centre introuvable: la pensée politique des doctrinaires français sous la Restauration*, trans. I. Hausser et revue par l’auteur, Paris, Éditions Plon, 2006.

⁹ G. de Staël, *Œuvres Complètes, série III. Œuvres historiques, tome II. Considérations sur le principaux événements de la Révolution française*, sous la dir. de L. Omacini, S. Tesser et N. Jaquenod, 2 voll., Paris, Honoré Champion, 2017.

Omacini has demonstrated, their changes, deletions, and additions were considerable to the point that it is virtually impossible for us to know exactly what the final shape and content of the book would have been, had Madame de Staël herself been able to revise the full manuscript for the press.

Second, the political agenda of the book was advanced not in the form of a theoretical treatise reminiscent of Rousseau's abstract *Du Contrat social*, but through a series of personal reflections on key events and main characters of the Revolution as well as on the constitution of England, a long-time rival of France. This was supposed to be a lively and personal book in which the powerful voice of her author was expected to be heard. The very fact that Madame de Staël praised England in unambiguous terms was not insignificant. That she considered it as a possible political model for France must have been received with some surprise by those who were displeased by the presence of English troops on the French soil a few years after the defeat of Napoleon.

Third, although a work of history, the book offered a selective and ultimately subjective interpretation of the Revolution, making a clear distinction between the principles of 1789 and those that had made possible the Terror of 1793-94. In her view, the Revolution was not to be regarded as a single block, nor was the Terror present in the "noble" moment of 1789. This perspective was bound to elicit controversy in a country deeply divided by the legacy of its recent past. The French, Staël claimed, could have been free if they had not made major errors during the original phase of the Revolution, and if they had followed sound and well-tested principles like those undergirding the English political system. Her most famous claim made at the beginning of chapter XI of Part One of the original manuscript of the *Considerations* was that in France, liberty had ancient and strong roots while despotism was modern and was based upon shaky foundations. This striking statement allowed Madame de Staël not only to convey an optimistic note to her readers — a system of liberty could be built in France, after all —, but also to justify and defend her commitment to equality before the law, individual and civil liberties, and careers open to talent, to name only the most important principles of her liberal agenda.

2. The political muse of the Restoration

With the benefit of hindsight, it is not difficult to understand why the publication of Staël's account of the French Revolution, initially conceived as an attempt to vindicate the memory and the legacy of her beloved father, Jacques Necker, was bound to elicit strong controversies in France¹⁰. The intensity of the debate should have come as no surprise to anyone who had known Madame de Staël, a female writer and Protestant in a

¹⁰ On this issue, see Tribouillard's comprehensive *Le Tombeau de Madame de Staël*, cit. and Frank P. Bowman, *La polémique sur les Considérations sur la Révolution française*, in «Annales Benjamin Constant», 8-9 (1988), pp. 225-41.

Catholic country, the daughter of Necker and the rival of Napoleon whose agents denounced her for being non-French. She was a moderate situated between the extremes. As she put it in a letter from April 1797 to her friend Henri Meister, she found herself between two worlds of the Revolution and the Counter-Revolution: «La République m'exile; la contre-révolution me pend»¹¹.

Indeed, one of the main arguments against her book was that it did not advance exactly the agenda of any political camp. As one of her younger admirers noted, Staël's posthumous book «ne convenait exactement à aucune opinion»¹². It was too liberal for the royalists and conservatives, too revolutionary for the Doctrinaires, and too aristocratic for the revolutionaries. In the eyes of the French patriots and some ultraconservatives, Staël appeared as an uncritical admirer of England, while in the opinion of others, she was too cosmopolitan, an uprooted intellectual, with dubious allegiances. Louis XVIII read her book and regarded it as «strongly republican»¹³; those who lamented the glory of Napoleon found her critique of the Emperor excessive and unfair.

One thing must have been obvious to anyone, in spite of their disagreements: the stakes were high and the whole debate around the main themes of Madame de Staël's book went far beyond her persona or her biography¹⁴. Some contemporaries could have interpreted the ideas of *Considerations* as a response to—and as a partial refutation of—Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). There were enough reasons to believe that, even if it is unclear whether Madame de Staël had actually met or read Burke's writings before or during her sojourn in England in 1793. What we do know for sure is that she never referred to Burke in the published text of *Considerations*. It is also possible to assume that her book was a rejoinder to two other influential interpretations of the French Revolution. The first was Joseph de Maistre's *Considérations sur la France*, originally published in 1796 and reedited in 1814, as Staël began writing her own work on the same topic. The second was Montlosier's *De la monarchie française depuis son établissement jusqu'à nos jours*, published in three large volumes in 1814¹⁵.

¹¹ As quoted in S. Tribouillard, *Le Tombeau de Madame de Staël*, cit., p. 99. On Staël's moderation, see chapter four in A. Craiutu, *A Virtue for Courageous Minds: Moderation in French Political Thought, 1848-1830*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2012.

¹² Ch. de Rémusat, *Mémoires de ma vie*, présentés par Ch.H. Pouthas, vol. I, Paris, Plon, 1958, p. 342.

¹³ As quoted in C. Blennerhasset, *Mme de Staël. Her Friends, and Her Influence in Politics and Literature*, cit., vol. III, p. 581.

¹⁴ On this issue, see S. Tribouillard, *Le Tombeau de Madame de Staël*, cit., pp. 100ff.

¹⁵ On Madame de Staël's dialogue with Montlosier, see C. Takeda, *Mme de Staël and Political Liberalism in France*, Singapore, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. For more details on the writing and reception of *Considérations*, see my *A Thinker for Our Times: Madame de Staël, Her Life and Works*, in G. de Staël, *Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution*, ed. by A. Craiutu, Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, 2008, pp. vii-xxiv.

Critics from different parts of the political spectrum disputed Madame de Staël's conclusions, even if they focused on different parts and themes of her book. On the Center-Left, J. J. Bailleul provided a chapter-by-chapter critical analysis of Staël's ideas in *Examen critique de l'ouvrage posthume de Mme la Baronne de Staël, ayant pour titre: Considérations sur les principaux événements de la Révolution française* published in two volumes in 1818. He disagreed with Staël's views on the role of monarchy and aristocracy during the Old Regime, while other liberal-minded friends objected to her defense of the Directory, or were exasperated by her exceedingly harsh treatment of Napoleon. She regarded the Emperor as being intoxicated with the poison of Machiavellianism and responsible for enslaving the French nation by shrewdly using war for an object instead of liberty¹⁶.

On the Right, Louis de Bonald attacked Staël's liberal ideas and attributed them to her Protestantism; he also criticized her for her fidelity to her father who, in his view, had been an «unexperienced pilot»¹⁷ at the helm of the state. Furthermore, Bonald dismissed the *Considerations* as a mere «political novel» that, he alleged, did not differ substantially from her previous novels. It was still Delphine and Corinne, Bonald wrote, who were making politics as «they used to make love before»¹⁸. Bonald did not think that Madame de Staël was in the right position to offer an account of the French Revolution as whole; as he put it, there was always too much movement and agitation in her life in order for her to be able to impartially observe and accurately describe the main events and actors of the Revolution. According to Bonald, Madame de Staël failed to understand that the real revolution which agitated Europe and risked undermining its ancient institutions was, first and foremost, religious rather than political or social. Moreover, for Bonald, there was absolutely no difference between the principles of 1789 and the events of 1793-94: the Revolution as a whole was wrong-headed, as it were, both at the outset and in the end, and had to be condemned as such. In the eyes of ultra-conservatives such as Bonald and Maistre, the Terror of 1793-94 was the logical outcome of the ideas that had made possible the initial stages of the Revolution in 1789¹⁹.

And yet, in spite of all these critiques, or possibly because of them (to a certain degree), the publication of Madame de Staël's *Considerations* turned out to be a momentous event that, according to Sainte-Beuve, established her firmly in the Pantheon of liberal thought in France, admirers of the English political system and partisans of political moderation. It transformed her into «the historical and political muse of the

¹⁶ As the recent publication of the original manuscript of *Considerations* shows, a few less critical passages about the Emperor were deleted by the editors and were not included in the final text.

¹⁷ L. de Bonald, *La vraie révolution. Réponse à Mme de Staël*, ed. M. Toda, Etampes, Clovis, 1997, p. 165.

¹⁸ *Ivi*, 83.

¹⁹ See *ivi*, pp. 165-67.

Restoration»²⁰. Her political testament came to be regarded as the Bible of French post-revolutionary liberals, or, as a journalist writing for *La Gazette de France* described it, «the code of liberal ideas»²¹. The mere fact that this influential book had been written by a woman could not have escaped the attention of her readers either. «Its effect was electrical», Lady Blennerhasset wrote in her biography of Madame de Staël, «and for the first time in modern political life, the word of a woman who had only her personal opinion to give was of decisive weight in the balance»²². Another widely read journal, *Le Moniteur*, published no less than three articles commenting on Staël's book, described as an intelligent defense of middle-of-the-road type of liberalism, attached to the principles of constitutional monarchy.

The moment in which *Considerations* came out certainly played an important role in the reception of the book. It coincided with an intense debate on whether it was possible to overcome the legacy of the Empire—including the humiliating presence of foreign troops on the soil of France—and build viable representative institutions in France. As a result of the Treaty of November 1815 following the defeat of Napoleon, England and its allies demanded that France surrender a considerable piece of its territory and accept a humiliating three-year military occupation. The country was required to accommodate approximately 800.000 foreign soldiers who had to be supplied by means of requisitions; such a decision could hardly please even a liberal thinker and former opponent of Napoleon such as Madame de Staël. Under those circumstances, it was perfectly legitimate to ask whether liberty, the goal the French had been unsuccessfully chasing for several decades, was possible in France on the ruins of the Old Regime and the Empire.

Political impartiality seemed therefore a utopian goal for Necker's daughter, given the conflict-ridden context in which she lived. As Lady Blennerhasset put it, Madame de Staël «held fast to the conviction that she had a message of liberty to deliver to the world»²³. She wanted to convince the French that they, too, could be free one day if they wanted to. It is no surprise then that she wrote her book on the French Revolution in order to advance a particular political liberal agenda—liberal in the European, original sense of the term²⁴. She was not alone in this regard. During the first years of the Bourbon Restoration, it was common to invoke the lessons of history and use historical writings in order to advance a particular political program²⁵. In light of the contested

²⁰ Cit. in L. Theis, *Présentation*, in G. de Staël, *La Passion de la liberté*, éd. établie par L. Theis, Paris, Robert Laffont, 2017, p. 299.

²¹ Cit. in S. Tribouillard, *Le Tombeau de Madame de Staël*, p. 125.

²² C. Blennerhasset, *Mme de Staël*, vol. III, p. 581.

²³ Ivi, p. 585.

²⁴ On this issue, see E. Fawcett, *Liberalism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2014.

²⁵ On this topic, see Stanley Mellon, *The Political Uses of History: A Study of Historians in the French Restoration*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1958.

legacy of the Revolution, its uncertainties and dilemmas, revisiting and, in some cases, reimagining the past were effective ways of looking forward into an uncertain future and trying to shape it. Far from being a form of political or intellectual escapism, writing historical books turned out to be a surprisingly effective way of understanding what had to be done and what could be done in the political sphere, given the complex context of post-revolutionary and post-imperial France.

3. Madame de Staël and the French liberals

French post-revolutionary liberals constituted a surprisingly diverse family with important internal differences among them. While it is possible to designate as “liberals” all those who embraced the main ideas and principles of 1789, such an approach would miss important nuances, especially during the first years of the Bourbon Restoration when, as Enzo Cappadocia once remarked, a distinction must be made between liberals and Liberals²⁶. The latter were placed on the far side of the Left, and counted among its ranks prominent figures such as Lafayette, Manuel, and Bailleul. At the same time, other liberals were attracted to Madame de Staël’s book because it cast their hero, La Fayette, in a positive light. The former—the ‘liberals’—held more conservative views and included the group of the Doctrinaires that played an increasingly important role in the political and intellectual life of France beginning with 1816.²⁷ There were also a few differences between liberals and Liberals with regard to their views of Napoleon. The first were inclined to have a more favorable opinion of the Emperor and this made them question to a certain degree the account given by Madame de Staël who emphasized not his proverbial egotism and pernicious intoxication with personal power, combined with an air of vulgarity. Napoleon, she wrote in *Considerations*, represented a whole system of power and was much more than a human being. He was moved by no emotion of the heart and always regarded his fellow citizens as mere things and means to be played with at will²⁸.

In spite of these differences, the two liberal camps were in agreement on a few important points. They welcomed the publication of Staël’s *Considerations* and agreed with the main thesis of the book according to which the Revolution had not been an accident, as its conservative critics claimed but had, in fact, been prepared by a long series of events and factors with deep historical roots. According to this view, the events

²⁶ See E. Cappadocia, *The Liberals and Madame de Staël in 1818*, in Aa.Vv., *Ideas in History: Essays Presented to Louis Gottschalk*, eds. by R. Herr and H.T. Parker, Durham, Duke University Press, 1965, pp. 186-95.

²⁷ On the group of the Doctrinaires and their role in their epoch, see A. Craiutu, *Liberalism under Siege*, cit., pp. 19-85.

²⁸ See, in particular, the detailed account of Napoleon’s rise to power in Part IV of *Considerations*.

of 1789, far from being accidental, were in reality part of a greater historical development that consisted of three different eras: the feudal system, despotism, and representative government. This ran contrary to the famous thesis defended by Burke in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Staël believed that the same social and political forces that had brought about the two revolutions of 1648 and 1688 in England were also the prime cause of the revolutionary wave in France in 1789. There was also an indirect political message of the book, which did not go unnoticed: those who dreamt of turning back the clock of history were wrong to entertain such vain hopes and were destined in the end to lose their pointless battles. The Old Regime was gone forever and all attempts to restore its institutions were futile, counter-productive, and dangerous.

Second, liberals of all stripes acknowledged that liberty had been jeopardized and weakened during the previous two centuries when the French kings governed the country in an absolutist way, ignoring the legitimate demands of the rising Third Estate²⁹. That is why they believed that the first stage of the Revolution covering the period 1789-1791 had been inevitable and legitimate, and that those who opposed it were wrong to do so. Finally, liberals were persuaded that the task of their generation was to “close” the revolution by establishing representative institutions and constitutionalizing the civil liberties enshrined in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* of 1789. In a review of Montlosier’s work on French monarchy, Guizot expressed the belief of his entire generation when calling upon his fellow liberals to confess without hesitation: «As a destructive [phenomenon], the Revolution is done and there is no question of returning to it; as a founding moment, it only commences now»³⁰. Guizot and his fellow liberals saw themselves as belonging to *la France nouvelle* which, they believed, they were called to build on the ruins of the Empire. On this view, the principles and representative institutions along with the social interests in the bosom of the new society had to be defended against the opposition of a broad and eclectic coalition of forces that included ultraconservatives on the Right and critics on the Left. As such, the young liberals needed a new catechism which they found in Madame de Staël’s striking claim that in France, liberty was ancient and despotism modern. As a result, retrieving the ancient roots of liberty in France became one of the main tasks of what historian Alan Spitzer once called the «French generation of 1820».

4. Guizot and Madame de Staël

In this final section, I would like to examine in further detail how Madame de Staël’s ideas were received and interpreted by two prominent French liberals, members of the

²⁹ It is interesting to note that Bailleul admired Louis XIV whom Madame de Staël strongly criticized in her book.

³⁰ F. Guizot, *On Montlosier’s De la monarchie française*, in «Archives Philosophiques, Politiques et Littéraires», vol. III, Paris, 1818, p. 397.

Doctrinaires' group³¹. The most famous among them was François Guizot (1787-1874). Born in 1787 in Nîmes to a Protestant family that narrowly escaped the guillotine, Guizot entered the political scene during the first years of the Bourbon Restoration and eventually became one of the most important political thinkers and politicians of nineteenth-century France during the July Monarchy. There is no denying that Staël's *Considerations* exercised, in Guizot's own words, «a great and salutary influence» over the entire generation of younger French liberals³². Nonetheless, there were important differences between her political vision and the Doctrinaires' political philosophy. After all, they belonged to different generations and had different political and formative experiences. Staël's liberalism represented, in Lucien Jaume's words³³, a form of individualist «liberalism against the state» that differed from the liberalism «through the state» embraced later by her younger admirers within the Doctrinaires' camp. Yet, there were also a few interesting similarities between them that made possible an interesting intellectual dialogue which has been often overlooked by historians of political thought³⁴.

From July 1817 to December 1818, Guizot, assisted by his older friend, Pierre Paul Royer-Collard, and benefitting from the collaboration of Victor Cousin and Charles Loyson, among others, edited a new and important journal, *Archives philosophiques, politiques et littéraires*; five substantive issues were published during this period. Its stated mission was to promote internal peace, support the throne, defend the new institutions of France, and nurture public and civil virtues while opposing the spirit of factionalism³⁵. The journal had special sections covering politics, political sciences, physical sciences, political economy, literature, and miscellanea; most of the articles published in the *Archives* were not signed. Although the *Archives* had a limited audience—the number of subscribers was well under one hundred³⁶—it published a number of important and influential texts that discussed various issues ranging from elections and freedom of the press to the French Revolution. Reread today, many of the contributions to the five published volumes remain interesting for us, as a testimony of the remarkable renaissance of thought that had occurred during the first years of the Bourbon Restoration.

³¹ For more details, see A. Craiutu, *Liberalism under Siege*, cit., pp. 19-85. Madame de Staël's son-in-law, Victor de Broglie, was also a member of the Doctrinaires' group.

³² This phrase appears in the opening note written by Guizot that accompanied the publication of Rémusat's essay on Madame de Staël in *Archives philosophiques, politiques et littéraires*, vol. V, Paris, 1818, pp. 27-47. In Tribouillard's view, it is possible to regard the Doctrinaires as the true heirs of Madame de Staël's political thought (*Le Tombeau de Madame de Staël*, cit., p. 148).

³³ See L. Jaume, *L'individu effacé ou le paradoxe du libéralisme français*, Paris, Fayard, 1997.

³⁴ A few exceptions are worth noting: S. Tribouillard, *Le Tombeau de Madame de Staël*, cit.; C. Takeda, *Mme de Staël and Political Liberalism in France*, cit.

³⁵ See «Archives philosophiques, politiques et littéraires», vol. I, Paris, 1817, p. 171.

³⁶ Apud S. Tribouillard, *Le Tombeau de Madame de Staël*, cit., p. 134.

It is no coincidence that the meaning of the French Revolution loomed large in the pages of the *Archives philosophiques, politiques et littéraires*. Of the several important texts published in its pages, I would like to highlight here three substantial essays by François Guizot and Charles de Rémusat that analyzed and commented on Madame de Staël's account of the Revolution and the legacy of her ideas. There were important differences between Guizot and Staël's personalities and backgrounds, but they did share one important thing in common: their Protestantism. They had met at least once, from what we know. In the first volume of his memoirs, Guizot recalled a short visit he paid to Madame de Staël in Switzerland in 1807, when she invited him to dine with her at Ouchy, in the vicinity of Lausanne³⁷. The account given by Guizot is rather brief. We know that they spoke at length on that occasion about a controversial article by Chateaubriand published a few days before in the *Mercure*, in which the famous writer warned the Emperor that a new Tacitus had already been born in the Empire and was ready to chronicle the crimes of the new Nero (the piece did not go unnoticed by the censors and led to the suspension of the journal). We do not know for sure whether or not Guizot had met Staël after her return to Paris in 1814—most likely not—but it is clear that they did not belong to the same social circles, in spite of the affinities between their liberal outlooks.

The fact that Guizot devoted two long essays to discussing the main themes of Staël's book was no accident. Her *Considerations* were of interest to him because they shared, *toutes proportions gardées*, a few important liberal principles, including the preference for a form of constitutional monarchy *à l'anglaise*. It might be worth examining in a separate study the affinity between Madame de Staël's long-term perspective and Guizot's *longue durée* perspective in *Histoire de la civilisation en Europe* and *Histoire de la civilisation en France*, which he published a decade later, at the end of the 1820s. Although Guizot did not write a history of the French Revolution, he commented at length on the factors that had paved the way for the events of 1789.

In the essay published in *Archives*, he creatively used the opportunity to comment on the main themes of Staël's book in order to highlight the steps that had to be taken in order to consolidate the fledgling representative institutions in France. The first essay, published in the July 1818 issue, had twenty-five pages while the sequel, published three months later (October 1818), amounted to twenty pages. Like other liberals, Guizot applauded Madame de Staël's «goodness, her zeal for, and love of justice»³⁸ as well as her strong commitment to morality. He began by drawing attention to—and agreeing

³⁷ F. Guizot, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de mon temps*, Paris, Michel-Lévy Frères, 1858-1867, vol. I, pp. 11-12. Also see C. Takeda, *Mme de Staël and Political Liberalism in France*, cit., chapter 7.

³⁸ F. Guizot, “*Considérations sur les principaux événements de la Révolution française*” (1er article), in «*Archives philosophiques, politiques et littéraires*», vol. III, Paris, 1818, p. 431.

with—her claim that the French Revolution was one of the greatest epochs of social order and ought not to be regarded as a historical accident, as its critics wrongly claimed. It had been prepared by the silent work of past centuries and the actions of thousands of individuals who had lived in obscurity and did not know each other. This explains why the Revolution had such a great clout and significant consequences when it appeared on the world stage; the secret force behind the visible events and actors was unstoppable and irresistible. Staël's main merit, according to Guizot, lay in the fact that she rose above the spirit of party and endeavored to give a general picture of the Revolution, seeking to unveil its deep roots which risked remaining invisible to the eyes of superficial or biased observers. In so doing, she insisted that it was important to try to understand the profound motivations of the main actors of the Revolution rather than limit oneself to examining views and impressions that bear the mark of the spirit of party.

Guizot noted with satisfaction Staël's preference for moderates, the unsung heroes of the French Revolution, and commented on her critique of the *tabula rasa* mentality of the main revolutionary actors who displayed an unprecedented confidence in the power of their reason along with a marked disrespect for the past. This was evidenced, among other things, by the unwise decisions taken by the members of the Constituent Assembly called to draft the first written constitution in France. In the footsteps of Necker, Staël criticized them for drafting the Constitution of 1791 as an attack against the executive power and thus failing to create a necessary balance of powers in the state. Noting her endorsement of the principles of 1789, Guizot pointed out that, on this view, what triggered the revolution was the pure love of liberty which became corrupted over time as actors from all sides resorted to various stratagems to defend their narrow political agendas. He pointed out that Madame de Staël denounced the sophisms of the politicians of all stripes and reserved particularly harsh words for those who chose dubious political expedients instead of relying upon the fixed and firm principles of morality. One of these sophisms, Guizot pointed out, was that the idea that tyranny may sometimes be necessary and acceptable in order to prevent the errors of liberty. Such an idea, he insisted, was entirely wrong as arbitrary power is never justified and has nothing to do with liberty. Madame de Staël, Guizot wrote, «has never dissimulated the horror or absurdity of tyranny» and she never excused nor defended a single act of tyranny³⁹. He also agreed with Staël's claim that once the revolution started, it was the events that led the individuals rather than vice versa; the power of individual actors turned out to be much smaller than it was commonly believed⁴⁰. Guizot agreed with Staël's conclusion that the

³⁹ Ivi, p. 434. At the end of the first essay, Guizot did mention the events of the 18th Brumaire but did not comment on Staël's controversial attitude during that period.

⁴⁰ Wrote Guizot: "*A travers les combinaisons des hommes, tout se precipitait échappant de leurs mains à mesure qu'ils croyaient le saisir*" (ivi, p. 424).

noble «sentiment of liberty»⁴¹ which had manifested itself for the first time in 1789 could no longer be uprooted from the hearts of the French, not even during the absolute reign of Bonaparte, the other dark hour of French history.

The second essay of Guizot devoted special attention to Staël's critique of Napoleon whom she viewed as having created a pernicious system that spread its immoral tentacles deep into the fabric of the entire country. Bonaparte, both Staël and Guizot claimed, based his strategy of consolidating power on individual interest and egoism and stifled any form of independent thought. He dried up the sources of all virtues by separating politics from morality and reason. By elevating individual interest to the rank of supreme virtue, Napoleon ended up isolating people and atomizing society. The castle he built lacked solid foundations and was at the mercy of circumstances; under his reign, one could find only «*une continuité de petits soins, de petites ruses, de petites intrigues*» and no durable ambitions or projects⁴². Thus, insisted Guizot, Napoleon's failure shows not only the narrowness of individual interest but also reminds us that society always needs general ideas, common interests and sentiments around which people can rally to pursue common goals.

Nonetheless, in Guizot's view, the main value of Staël's book lay in the recommendations it offered for building the institutions of the "new France" and overcoming the strong legacy of despotism which Bonaparte had left behind. The undertaking was daunting, as the whole country was still struggling to rid itself of what Guizot called «*un véritable bonapartisme*»⁴³, the meeting point of all the doctrines founded on the disregard for the human species and of all the interests which strived on the «servitude of individuals and the degradation of the human spirit». In spite of all this, Guizot opined, there were enough reasons to hope that the young generation could fulfill its historical mission. The country needed new passions and institutions along with a novel philosophy of government affirming the indestructible link between politics and morality. Politics, Guizot affirmed, cannot replace morality any more than it can ignore it. Justice and morality are the «first necessities» of a people whose past evils made it all too familiar with the reign of injustice.

If many of the errors and dark moments of the Revolution could be attributed to the reign of unchecked passions and the absence of self-restraint on all sides of the political spectrum, the new society, in Guizot's view, had to encourage opposite passions

⁴¹ Ivi, p. 432.

⁴² F. Guizot, "*Considérations sur les principaux événements de la Révolution française*" (2e article), in «Archives philosophiques, politiques et littéraires», vol. IV, Paris, 1818, p. 69.

⁴³ Guizot was aware of the deep roots of this phenomenon. "Il y a, en effet, en France", he wrote, "un véritable bonapartisme; c'est celui où viennent se confondre toutes les doctrines qui ont pour base le mépris de l'espèce humaine, tous les intérêts qui ont besoin de la servitude des hommes et de l'abaissement de l'esprit humain" (ivi, p. 80).

and values. It should have no place, he wrote, for «*l'allure bruyante et agitée du charlatanisme*» which, during the Revolution, had disregarded the laws of morality and followed the voice of vanity, once all barriers were relaxed or removed⁴⁴. If Napoleon had been able to consolidate his despotism through the uncertainty he shrewdly cultivated and the pernicious incentives he offered to individuals in exchange of their independence of thought, the institutions of the “new France” had to do precisely the opposite in combatting Bonapartism. They had to offer a regular and stable political framework and promote reason, justice, and a set of fixed principles that could not be bent to follow the whims of any political leader. The new institutions, Guizot insisted, had to match and work in tandem with their new leaders; they had to sustain and defend rather than undermine each other. The country, Guizot went on, contained in its bosom «*de trésors de bon sens, de raison droite, ferme et saine*»⁴⁵ that could be put to good use; the only thing it lacked were regular channels through which these «new means of government»—the title of one of Guizot’s later books⁴⁶— could express themselves in an orderly and peaceful manner. Only in this way could the “new France”, freed from its haunting past, become master of its future, only in this way could its bountiful soil receive the seeds that would prepare the future harvest⁴⁷.

5. Rémusat as reader of Staël’s Considerations

Reading Staël’s *Considerations* turned out to be a revelation for another French liberal and younger friend of Guizot, Charles de Rémusat (1797-1875). Ten years younger than Guizot, he was a scion of a distinguished Catholic family from Bordeaux, who had frequented the Parisian salon society under the First Empire. Upon reading Madame de Staël’s *Considerations*, he felt so enthusiastic about its overall message that he wrote a long essay in which he discussed the influence of its main theses upon his younger generation⁴⁸. In his memoirs, Rémusat described the fortuitous circumstances that led to the publication of his essay. He shared it first with his older friend, Prosper de Barante

⁴⁴ F. Guizot, “*Considérations sur les principaux événements de la Révolution française*” (1er article), cit., p. 416. As Guizot remarked, Staël herself had signaled out Mirabeau among the immoral individuals for his boundless egoism and personal ambition; Guizot concurred with her assessment (ibid., p. 423).

⁴⁵ F. Guizot, “*Considérations sur les principaux événements de la Révolution française*” (2e article), cit., p. 84.

⁴⁶ F. Guizot, *Des moyens de gouvernement et d’opposition dans l’état actuel de la France*, Paris, Ladvocat, 1821.

⁴⁷ F. Guizot, “*Considérations sur les principaux événements de la Révolution française*” (2e article), cit., p. 84.

⁴⁸ Rémusat’s article, entitled, *De l’influence du dernier ouvrage de Mme de Staël sur la jeune opinion publique* was published in «Archives philosophiques, politiques et littéraires», vol. V, 1818, pp. 1-21.

(1782-1866), who then brought it to the attention of Guizot. The latter chose to publish it in the fifth (and last) issue of the *Archives*, accompanied by a short explanatory note. Three decades later, Rémusat revised the text and added a final section; the enlarged version was published under a new title, *La Révolution française*, in his important book, *Passé et Présent* (1847)⁴⁹.

For Rémusat, the encounter with the ideas of *Considerations* was a momentous event. As he confessed in a letter sent to her mother in May 1818, he was confident that the book could serve as a «touchstone»⁵⁰ and foundational text for his own generation. «I have read the book with avidity, enthusiasm, and emotion», he wrote in his memoirs.⁵¹ Although not entirely original or profound, and without being properly speaking a history of the French Revolution, Staël's book had, in his view, the great merit of accurately presenting the fundamental ideas and initiatives of the main actors who occupied the political scene of France from 1789 to 1794 and beyond. Above all, Rémusat believed that she did an excellent good job justifying the legitimacy of the principles of 1789, while separating them from subsequent events that risked discrediting them in the eyes of many. Yet, if Rémusat enjoyed and agreed with the spirit of the book, he did not always agree with its details. As a Catholic, he may not have been fully convinced by Staël's Protestant reading of the past. Nonetheless, as a whole, he believed—and agreed with Guizot in this regard—that her account was particularly valuable because it emphasized the inevitability and legitimacy of the Revolution, still a highly contested topic during the first phase of the Bourbon Restoration.

Not surprisingly, Rémusat began his essay by stressing this crucial point. Far from being an accident, the Revolution was the outcome of deep historical trends and forces at work in the history of France and Europe in general. While public opinion made its voice heard during the last decades of the Old Regime and publicity and the spirit of critique made progress during this period, political institutions lagged behind and remained unreformed. A grave imbalance emerged between, on the one hand, the country's government, laws, and institutions, and, on the other hand, the spirit of the age and the social condition. While true patriotism was ignored or derided in the public realm,

⁴⁹ Ch. de Rémusat, *Passé et Présent*, vol. I, Paris, Ladrance, 1847, pp. 92-116. The text was republished in *La Pensée politique doctrinaire sous la Restauration. Charles de Rémusat- Textes choisis*, ed. D. Roldán, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2003, pp. 39-61.

⁵⁰ Rémusat's letter to her mother from May 27, 1818 as quoted in S. Tribouillard, *Le Tombeau de Madame de Staël*, p. 145.

⁵¹ Wrote Rémusat: «Je lus l'ouvrage avec avidité, enthousiasme, émotion. Peu de livres ont plus agi sur moi. L'ouvrage a plus de mérite que de réputation, cependant il n'a ni originalité, ni profondeur, ni même grand éclat; mais [...] il rend saississable et sympathiques toutes les idées fondamentales et les tentatives honnêtes de la Révolution. La cause de 1789 y est bien plaidée, séparée avec justesse et franchise de ce qui l'a compromise et souillée» (*Mémoires de ma vie*, cit., vol. I, p. 343).

cynicism and disregard for the common good slowly spread throughout the entire society. This was another way of saying that the Revolution was in the end both inevitable and necessary, in spite of its dark moments.

As a result, Rémusat claimed, the French nation was not as imprudent as some thought: it did what it had to be done in 1789. It began creating a new government on the ruins of the Old Regime⁵². But while the French knew quite well what they had to destroy to achieve this goal, they were less sure about what exactly they had to build or how they should do it. «Unfortunately», Rémusat claimed, «the party of the Revolution, that is, France, also made mistakes»⁵³. Some of these errors, he claimed, could be attributed to inexperience, others to vanity, the quintessential French passion, or to the stubbornness and blindness of the champions of the past. Furthermore, the revolutionaries were often obliged to improvise under the pressure of unforeseen circumstances, which explains why they drafted many imperfect laws and flawed constitutions. In some ways, the Terror was the culmination of all these small and major mistakes. Yet, Rémusat insisted, the Terror was an accident rather than the logical outcome of the principles of 1789. Far from being inevitable and necessary, the events of 1793-94 were caused by circumstances which «might not have happened»⁵⁴ if other better choices had been made. In the end, the Revolution as a whole paved the way for the appearance of figures such as Bonaparte who used its legacy in order to undermine the energies of the nation and corrupt its ethos.

To some, Napoleon may have appeared as the «necessary man»⁵⁵ of the times, but in the end, he astutely exploited the two main principles of the revolution: liberty and equality. He shrewdly availed himself of the latter while replacing the first with the passion for military glory and conquest. «Equality», Rémusat pointed out, «served as compensation, and glory as a decoration for servitude»⁵⁶. In the end, Napoleon violated even equality and ruled over a country made of docile and frightened subjects and docile soldiers rather than citizens. Such a system could not have benefitted from the support of public opinion; it was poised to self-destruct itself in the medium-run because it lacked fixed principles and vital moral resources.

Today, Rémusat argued, *la France nouvelle* knows what it wants and what it must do: it ought to defend the conquests of the Revolution. If it does not see all its desires

⁵² Wrote Remusat: “La nation ne fut donc pas alors aussi imprudente qu’on l’a répétée. Elle fit ce qu’elle avait à faire; elle marcha avec sa force dans son espérance. Jamais plus vaste carrière ne s’ouvrit devant une réunion d’hommes; il s’agissait de créer une nouvelle France” (*De l’influence du dernier ouvrage de madame de Staël in La Pensée politique doctrinaire sous la Restauration*, cit., p. 42).

⁵³ Ivi, p. 43.

⁵⁴ Ivi, p. 45.

⁵⁵ Ivi, p. 46. Ironically, it was no other than Necker who had called Napoleon “l’homme nécessaire” in *Dernières vues de politique et de finance* (1802).

⁵⁶ Rémusat, *De l’influence du dernier ouvrage de madame de Staël*, cit., p. 47.

fulfilled yet, it does not ignore the fact that the most difficult task has already been accomplished⁵⁷. The Revolution had opened the gates to the future. The many challenges the new generation to which Rémusat belonged was facing did not frighten him and his colleagues, nor did the sophisms used by the factions of the day seduce them. The young liberals, Rémusat wrote, were confident and patient; they knew that the future belonged to them and were determined to fulfill their historical mission against their opponents. They found themselves situated between a bygone past and an uncertain future, but they were confident that they could prevail over the forces that would have liked to turn back the clock of history. Rémusat concluded his essay by claiming that there was no better model his fellow liberals could follow in this regard than Madame de Staël's *Considerations*, «a memorable book, eloquent profession of faith of the enlightened France». He expressed his hope and wish that her work would be read one day to the assembled French much «as Herodotus' *Histories* were read during the Olympic games»⁵⁸. Her work, he insisted was «*un livre vrai*», a true book which spoke not only to the minds of its readers but also to their hearts. It was a book that touched and enlightened at the same time, and as such, one that was destined to be read with great profit by subsequent generations of liberal-minded readers in France.

Madame de Staël's writings remained a major reference for the young liberals who contributed to the *Globe*, a major journal published in Paris from 1824 until 1830. Some of them openly recognized themselves as Staël's disciples and shared her cosmopolitanism and appreciation of the English political system; they admired her belief in progress and were inspired by her theories of literature and passions. At the same time, they were not shy to acknowledge the limitations of their hero and took some distance from her. As Victor Cousin put it, «passionate and enthusiastic», Madame de Staël did not always possess the unbiased and «cold judgment» that would have allowed her to find the right solutions in all situations⁵⁹.

Today, two centuries after the publication of *Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution*, Madame Staël's political ideas seem to be making a long overdue comeback in both France and abroad. A Pléiade edition of her literary works has finally been published in 2017, along with an excellent collection of her main political works in a popular collection (Bouquins), marking the bicentenary of her death. One can only hope then that future historians of political thought will give her *Considerations* and her political writings in general the prominent place that they deserve in the Pantheon of liberal thought.

⁵⁷ Ivi, p. 50.

⁵⁸ Ivi, p. 51.

⁵⁹ Cousin as quoted in J.-J. Goblot, *La jeune France libérale: Le Globe et son groupe littéraire, 1824-1830*, Paris, Plon, 1995, p. 218.

