

City University of New York (CUNY)

## CUNY Academic Works

---

Publications and Research

CUNY Graduate Center

---

2004

### Why Constant? A Critical Overview of the Constant Revival

Helena Rosenblatt  
*CUNY Graduate Center*

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc\\_pubs/222](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_pubs/222)

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

---

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).  
Contact: [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu)

## Why Constant?

(A Critical Overview of the Constant Revival)

Helena Rosenblatt

Hunter College and the Graduate Center  
City University of New York

Recent years have seen a remarkable renewal of interest in the thought of Benjamin Constant (1767-1830). For long recognized mainly as the author of the literary masterpiece *Adolphe*, it is now Constant's political writings that are increasingly the focus of attention. Paperback editions of his major works are presently available in both French and English, helping to establish his growing reputation as a founding father of modern liberalism. As a seminal liberal thinker, it is certain that Constant's stature has benefited from the recent climate of opinion in the western world and, in particular, from the return to fashion of liberalism as a social and political doctrine. Paradoxically, however, this political climate has also led to some problems, since presentist concerns have left an undeniable imprint on the image we have of Constant.

Philosophers and political theorists, rather than historians, have dominated the Constant revival. By and large, moreover, these high-profile Constant scholars have been a rather gloomy lot. Disillusioned with modern politics and anxious about democracy, they have read Constant as a prophet of all their own doubts and fears. The Constant they admire is someone who criticizes, denounces and lays bare the many problems confronting modernity. Thus Constant has served as a useful tool to theorists and social

commentators with polemical and mainly contemporary purposes in mind. This is why Constant scholarship often seems to say more about the modern scholars who study him than it does about Constant.

Like all great thinkers, Constant spoke in terms that would transcend his immediate historical context. Deeply convinced that he was living on the threshold of a new age, he deliberately addressed himself to the “modern” men and “friends of liberty” he hoped to sway, often using very general, even universalizing, language. Blessed not only with a keen eye for detail, but an uncommon capacity for analytical thinking, he consistently sought to identify and articulate the “big picture,” or what he thought were the broader sociological and political patterns in history. In so doing, he became one of the first to advocate many of the liberal values we still cherish today, from “small government” to individual rights and liberties.

All of this, along with his obvious literary talents, help to explain why Constant’s writings seem so accessible to us today. He strikes a chord with modern readers, who often marvel at his uncanny ability to speak directly to them. It is said, for example, that Constant’s world is one that is very “familiar” to us.<sup>1</sup> So “close” is Constant’s thought that sometimes we even have trouble “seeing” it.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, it is when Constant is being critical and diagnostic that his writings seem to have the greatest resonance. For example, what Plamenatz admired most about Constant was the way he identified things that “moved him *to fear or disgust*.” Moreover, Constant described these fearful things in a way that was “larger than life,” which is why he was able to speak to us across the

---

<sup>1</sup> John Plamenatz, “Introduction” in *Readings from Liberal Writers*, New York, Barnes & Noble, 1965, p. 30.

<sup>2</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *A Passion for Democracy. The Life, the Women He Loved and the Thought of Benjamin Constant*, New York: Algora Publishing, 1999, p. 6 .

centuries. Thus, to Plamenatz, as to many others like him, Constant's value lies not so much in what he has to say about his own times, but in the way "he seems to prophesy rather than describe." When reading Constant, "we think of our own times rather than his." To Plamenatz, it often sounded as if Constant were speaking of Hitler's Germany.<sup>3</sup>

Undoubtedly, it is anti-totalitarianism that has been the most powerful magnet drawing political theorists to Constant. Isaiah Berlin is just one among a prominent and growing group of liberals who worry about the "excesses of democratic politics" and the totalitarian potential lurking within. In his famous essay "Two Concepts of Liberty,"<sup>4</sup> Berlin warned that the connection between democracy and individual liberty was more tenuous than many of his contemporaries believed. He showcased Constant as one of the first thinkers to realize this and who therefore wisely endorsed a "negative," rather than "positive" conception of freedom. In contrast to theorists like Rousseau, to whom freedom meant the possession of a share in the public power, Constant viewed freedom as "non-interference" or lack of coercion. Having witnessed the French Revolution, and the infernal dynamics that led to the Terror, Constant understood that liberty in the Rousseauian, "positive" sense could easily end up destroying many of the "negative" liberties that both he and Berlin held sacred.

Berlin's interpretation of Rousseau was strongly influenced by the theories of Jacob Talmon.<sup>5</sup> Both Talmon and Berlin understood Rousseau's theory of democracy to be proto-totalitarian. In contrast, Constant knew that one should not automatically equate liberty with democratic participation. Through his own life experiences he had imbibed

---

<sup>3</sup> J. Plamenatz, *Readings*, p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1969.

<sup>5</sup> See in particular Jacob Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, New York: Praeger, 1960.

the important lesson that “democracy can still crush individuals as mercilessly as any previous ruler.”<sup>6</sup> Crucially, Constant realized that freedom meant drawing a frontier between the area of a person’s private life and that of public authority. This is what made him a much- admired founder of modern liberalism and, indeed, “the most eloquent of all defenders of freedom and privacy.”<sup>7</sup>

Berlin’s essay obviously had a polemical purpose. He himself admitted that his emphasis on negative liberty was due to his fear of twentieth century dictatorships, in Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and elsewhere in the world. By the time he wrote his essay, the main danger was undoubtedly Soviet-style communism; and his goal in writing it was to defend a liberal conception of freedom against contemporary communist thought. With this aim in mind, Berlin focused on those aspects of Constant’s argument that could shore up his own. He used Constant to warn of the tendencies modern democratic movements have to become totalitarian.

Discerning readers have noted that Berlin’s essay “updates,”<sup>8</sup> rather than elucidates, Constant’s argument. For it is an obvious fact that Constant knew nothing of Nazism or Stalinism when he wrote his famous essay on the liberty of the moderns, so admired by Berlin. Constant of course had Napoleon in mind and not Hitler, Stalin or Marxism. Indeed, treatments of Constant more attentive to his historical context and intended message have shown that he wrote this piece not to denounce positive liberty and political participation, but to warn against their decline.<sup>9</sup> They point, in particular, to the end of the essay, where Constant alerts his contemporaries to the tendency modern

---

<sup>6</sup> I. Berlin, *Four Essays*, pp. 163-4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>8</sup> Claude Galipeau, *Isaiah Berlin’s Liberalism*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, pp. 10 & 140?

<sup>9</sup> James Mitchell Lee, “Doux Commerce, Social Organization, and Modern Liberty in the Thought of Benjamin Constant,” *Annales Benjamin Constant* 25, 2002.

men have “to surrender too easily” their right of participating in political power. In this part of the essay, Constant speaks glowingly of liberty in the positive sense as “the most powerful, the most effective means of self-development that heaven has given us.”<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, readers interested in uncovering Constant’s intended meaning have shown that his lifelong aim was not so much to distinguish positive from negative liberty, but to find ways of reconciling and sustaining them both. Counter-posing Rousseau to Constant is therefore an exercise of dubious value for understanding the latter’s thought. Several scholars have noted how indebted to Rousseau Constant actually was and have determined that his purpose was never to reject Rousseau, but rather to harmonize his thought with that of Montesquieu.<sup>11</sup> But Berlin’s purposes led him to ignore such inconvenient aspects of Constant’s thought. Anticipating a scholarly trend, Berlin also emphasized Constant’s oppositional and critical side while downplaying his more positive contributions to political and social theory, such as his constitutional thought and his lifelong work on religion. Had Berlin acknowledged these more constructive aspects of Constant’s *oeuvre*, he might have uncovered a more optimistic Constant, a man who believed in progress and human “perfectibility,” and who valued both self-

---

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin Constant, “The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns,” in *Political Writings*, p. 327. This does not prevent some fans of republicanism from continuing to caricature Constant’s liberalism as the epitome of the “negative,” laissez-faire type. See, for example, Alain Boyer, “De l’actualité des Anciens Républicains,” in *Libéralisme et républicanisme*, Caen: Presses Universitaires de Caen, 2000, pp. 37-38; Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 17-18; Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 60 & 117, and Richard Whatmore, *Republicanism and the French Revolution: An Intellectual History of Jean-Baptiste Say’s Political Economy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. xiii, 5, 199.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Guy Dodge, *Benjamin Constant’s Philosophy of Liberalism. A Study in Politics and Religion*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980 and, more recently, T. Todorov, *A Passion for Democracy*.

abnegation and sacrifice as forces for good in the world.<sup>12</sup> But this side of Constant was quite irrelevant to Berlin's purposes; moreover, it would probably have displeased him, since Berlin abhorred perfectibilism<sup>13</sup> and subscribed to a type of liberalism that has been described as "agonistic" and anti-teleological.<sup>14</sup>

The liberal and anti-totalitarian turn came later to France, but when it did, it also led to a renewal of interest in the political writings of Benjamin Constant. Recent studies have described "the intellectual sea change"<sup>15</sup> that occurred within the French academic community in the 1970s as intellectuals there abandoned the reigning Marxist paradigm and came to view both communism and revolution as totalitarian. Central to this dramatic shift in French intellectual politics was François Furet's *Penser la Révolution française*, which both drew from, and contributed to, the prevailing anti-totalitarian mood.<sup>16</sup> Denouncing interpretations of the Revolution that he believed were more commemorative than they were analytical, Furet highlighted the Revolution's negative, even pathological, aspects. Deliberately turning away from traditional social history and the question of social causes, he wished to restore to the Revolution what he thought was its "most obvious dimension, the political one."<sup>17</sup> Thus he focused attention on revolutionary ideology, which he argued was key to understanding the Revolution's

---

<sup>12</sup> Helena Rosenblatt, "Commerce et religion dans le libéralisme de Benjamin Constant," *Commentaire* 102 (Summer 2003), pp. 415-426.

<sup>13</sup> C. Galipeau, *Berlin's Liberalism*, pp. 81 & 144.

<sup>14</sup> John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press 1997

<sup>15</sup> Mark Lilla, "The Other Velvet Revolution: Continental Liberalism and its Discontents," *Daedalus* (Spring, 1994) p. 148.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Scott Christofferson, "An Antitotalitarian History of the French Revolution: François Furet's *Penser la Révolution française* in the Intellectual Politics of the Late 1970s," *French Historical Studies* 22, 4 (fall 1999), 557-611. See also Sunil Khilnani, *The Intellectual Left in Postwar France*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993

<sup>17</sup> François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. E. Forster, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 27. On the larger context of this interest in 'the political', see Jeremy Jennings, "The Return of the Political? New French Journals in the History of Political Thought," *History of Political Thought* xviii, 1 (Spring 1997) pp. 148-156

tragic derailment from 1789 to 1794. He determined that this ideology was fundamentally flawed—in its views on democracy and equality, and, most importantly, in its belief in “the illusion of politics”<sup>18</sup>—the poisonous idea that every problem has a political solution. It was this defective ideology that caused the Terror and, perhaps even more ominously, made the French Revolution a founding moment of a proto-totalitarian French political culture.

In his effort to reconceptualize the Revolution, Furet turned to nineteenth century historiography and to the many insights offered by nineteenth century liberals, who had for long been ignored, if not disdained, by Marxists. In particular, Furet appreciated Constant as one of the first to understand the pathology of the Revolution and its proto-totalitarian nature. In Furet’s words, Constant’s “entire political thought” revolved around this question, namely the problem of explaining the Terror.<sup>19</sup> Following Furet, other French scholars have taken a renewed interest in Constant, admiring him mainly as an historian, interpreter and, perhaps above all, a critic of the Revolution. Constant is appreciated as someone who, like Furet himself, understood the revolutionaries’ disastrous overinvestment in the political.

It has been noted that Furet’s version of the French Revolution reflected his desire to forge a “useable history,”<sup>20</sup> one that could explain both his own intellectual trajectory and France’s recent illiberal past. To Furet, studying revolutionary culture became an

---

<sup>18</sup> F. Furet, *Interpreting*, p. 26.

<sup>19</sup> François Furet, “La Révolution sans la Terreur? Le débat des historiens du XIXe siècle, *Le Débat* 13 (June 1981), p. 41.

<sup>20</sup> Steven Kaplan, *Farewell Revolution. The Historian’s Feud: France, 1789/1989*, Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1995.

opportunity to ponder “the ambiguity of modern democracy,”<sup>21</sup> and a way of understanding the democratic “malaise” of contemporary French political culture. In fact, upon careful reading, one can see that Furet’s interpretation of the Revolution reflected not only his own fears about totalitarianism, but even an ambivalence about the democratic project itself. It has been noted that Furet’s work, like that of several of his disciples and colleagues, is permeated by a kind of “pathological vision of democracy” which often seems to suggest that the aim of modern politics should be to contain rather than advance democracy.<sup>22</sup>

To begin, one would have to say that it is rather odd for Constant to be admired by people who dislike the Revolution so intensely, since Constant dedicated his life to both defending its achievements and promoting its fundamental aims. The truth is that for most of his life, Constant worried much more about reaction, or a return to the past, than he did about the future. Moreover, and in contrast to many of his recent French admirers, Constant’s thought was certainly more concerned with advancing democracy than it was with containing it. There is, in fact, little ambivalence about democracy in Constant. He admired Rousseau, was a consistent advocate of popular sovereignty, and looked very favorably upon what he hailed as the “march of equality” throughout history. Constant did not worry so much about the so-called “excesses” of democracy as he did about political hypocrisy—the abuse of words and concepts by despots with the aim of masking self-serving and oppressive regimes. Having observed Napoleon first

---

<sup>21</sup> François Furet, “Revolutionary Government,” in *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, eds. Mona Ozouf and François Furet, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 558.

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Jainchill and Samuel Moyn, “French Democracy between Totalitarianism and Solidarity: Pierre Rosanvallon and Revisionist Historiography,” *Journal of Modern History*, 76, 1, 2004.

hand, Constant was concerned not principally about the power of the people, but of those who claimed to be acting in the name of the people. Finally, it is ironic that those who, like Furet, admire Constant also dislike social history so much. As Larry Siedentop argued some time ago, one of the great innovations of French liberals like Constant was their sociological approach to both history and political theory. It was they who first emphasized socio-economic change and invented the concept of a social revolution.<sup>23</sup> To enlist Constant in an effort to attack the Revolution, question the viability of democracy, and dismantle social history, hardly makes any sense at all.

Nevertheless, it is anxiety about modernity, democracy and totalitarianism that fuels Marcel Gauchet's interest in Constant, first expressed in a remarkable essay published in 1980. Gauchet has since revealed that his ideas on the Revolution were formed in a generally "pessimistic atmosphere." In his recent autobiographical reflections, he explains that his first readings on the subject were inspired by the same question that animated François Furet, namely that of the relationship between democracy and Terror. Gauchet recalls that he learned a good deal about this from Jacob Talmon, whose views on Rousseau, Jacobinism and "totalitarian democracy" had a great "subterranean influence" in France. Like Furet, Gauchet thought that studying the Revolution was crucial since it called attention to "the ambivalent nature of democratic principles" and, more specifically, to "the peril of tyranny potentially inscribed in popular sovereignty."<sup>24</sup> Hence the importance of Constant. Gauchet hails him as "one of the most

---

<sup>23</sup> Larry Siedentop, "Two Liberal Traditions," *The Idea of Freedom. Essays in Honour of Isaiah Berlin*. Alan Ryan, ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, pp. 153-174.

<sup>24</sup> Marcel Gauchet, *Condition historique. Entretiens avec François Azouvi et Sylvain Piron*, Paris: Stock, 2003, pp. 26 & 264.

important and penetrating interpreters of the legacy of the Revolution.”<sup>25</sup> Not surprisingly, this legacy is described by Gauchet in predominantly negative terms. He praises Constant for having understood the Revolution’s various failures, problems and even “evil”.<sup>26</sup> And much like Furet, Gauchet claims that the “tyrannical derailment of the Revolution” constitutes “the center” of Constant’s thought.<sup>27</sup>

Explaining his own approach to history and political theory, Gauchet recounts that he “explicitly tries to relate an interrogation of the past with the problems of the present.”<sup>28</sup> He describes his intellectual project as essentially “philosophical”: His goal is to understand the present, and he does so by making a “detour through history.”<sup>29</sup> Studying the thought of liberals like Benjamin Constant is important to him because of how very relevant it remains. Gauchet believes that “we find ourselves in a position hardly different”<sup>30</sup> and that “Constant’s diagnosis is remarkable for its continuing validity.”<sup>31</sup> Constant helps us to understand the various “totalitarian derailments” that followed the French Revolution. But more than that, he enlightens us as to the “devastating contradictions of modernity”<sup>32</sup> and “the democratic problem [le mal démocratique]”<sup>33</sup> itself. Constant’s “remarkable prescience” made him uniquely able to

---

<sup>25</sup> Marcel Gauchet, “Constant,” in *Dictionnaire critique de la Révolution française*, eds. François Furet and Mona Ozouf, Paris: Flammarion, 1988, p. 951.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 959

<sup>27</sup> Marcel Gauchet, “Benjamin Constant: l’illusion lucide du libéralisme,” in Benjamin Constant, *Ecrits politiques*, ed. Marcel Gauchet, Paris: Gallimard, 1997, p. 28

<sup>28</sup> M. Gauchet, *Condition historique*, p. 8.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10

<sup>30</sup> M. Gauchet, “Illusion,” p. 27 and, similarly, *Condition*, p. 266.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 54; 62

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

“anticipate intellectually”<sup>34</sup> the difficulties modern men face. This is why he can serve as an “one of the best guides”<sup>35</sup> to our own self-understanding.

Constant seems to have appealed to Gauchet in an almost touchingly personal way. To him, Constant is someone who not only saw the dangers of totalitarianism but who, like Gauchet himself, felt a profound revulsion for the power of the state. Gauchet’s anti-totalitarianism is nurtured by an underlying anti-statism, a residue of youthful anarchist sympathies, and a likely result of his early engrossment in the thought of anthropologist Pierre Clastres.<sup>36</sup> These personal preoccupations help to explain why Gauchet seems at times to present Constant’s liberalism as a reworking and refinement of essentially pro-anarchist sentiments. Indeed, it appears that Gauchet not only projects his own worries and tastes onto Constant, but even ascribes to Constant his own intellectual trajectory, at one point speculating, for example, that one of Constant’s “authors of reference” on his way to becoming a liberal was Thomas Paine.<sup>37</sup>

But viewing Constant through an anarchist lens is just as historically incorrect as using an anti-totalitarian one. Etienne Hofmann’s important work on Constant’s early political manuscripts presents a much more accurate picture of his early intellectual development and preoccupations. It convincingly shows that Constant’s route to liberalism had little if anything to do with anarchism. Constant came to liberalism not

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 26

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> For Gauchet’s juvenile anarchism and interest in Clastres, I am indebted to Samuel Moyn, who generously shared with me his article “Savage and Modern Liberty: Marcel Gauchet and the Origins of New French Thought,” prior to its completion and publication. On Clastres, see also Samuel Moyn, “Of Savagery and Civil Society: Pierre Clastres and the Transformation of French Political Thought,” *Modern Intellectual History* 1.

<sup>37</sup> M. Gauchet, “Illusion,” p. 60. That Gauchet came to liberalism from a prior infatuation with anarchism is the argument of Samuel Moyn.

from a youthful anarchist sentiments,<sup>38</sup> but from an early sympathy for both democracy and republicanism.<sup>39</sup> Once again, Gauchet's picture of Constant says more about the anti-statist and anti-totalitarian concerns of a certain group of French intellectuals than it does about Constant.

Stephen Holmes' work on Constant reflects another intellectual environment entirely. As a politically engaged American scholar living in the United States, Holmes' concern is quite obviously not with totalitarianism. Nor is he particularly worried about Marxism. He has no sympathy at all for anarchism and, interestingly enough, does not even try to engage the work of French interpreters like Marcel Gauchet. Rather, Holmes' intellectual project is to defend his own version of democratic, strong-state liberalism against its non-Marxist American critics.<sup>40</sup> He criticizes his opposition for being bad historians and for misrepresenting liberalism. It is in an effort to set the record straight that he revives the thought of Benjamin Constant.

According to Holmes, it is quite wrong to assume a fundamental contradiction between democratic and liberal values. It is also misleading to depict liberalism as essentially antistatist. In Holmes' depiction, Constant emerges as an advocate of efficacious government at the service of liberal and democratic values. For example,

---

<sup>38</sup> It is true that Constant read Godwin carefully and even went to the trouble of translating him; but Constant's precise intentions in doing so are far from clear, as are the reasons for his abandonment of the project. But it is likely that Constant's interest in Godwin had more to do with his optimism about human perfectibility than it did with pessimism about the state.

<sup>39</sup> Etienne Hofmann, *Les "Principes de politique" de Benjamin Constant. La Genèse d'une oeuvre et l'évolution de la pensée de leur auteur (1789-1806)*, vol 1, Geneva: Droz, 1980. On Constant's early life and intellectual development reliable sources are also Kurt Kloocke, *Benjamin Constant. Une biographie intellectuelle*, Geneva: Droz, 1984 and K. Steven Vincent, "Benjamin Constant, the French Revolution, and the Origins of French Romantic Liberalism," *French Historical Studies*, 23, 4 (fall, 2000).

<sup>40</sup> Holmes' political commitments are most evident in his *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993, but see also his *Passions and Constraint: On the Theory of Liberal Democracy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Holmes is anxious to argue that Constant was never hostile to the concept of sovereignty itself. In fact, he locates Constant in the tradition of French *politique* reformers, going so far as to argue that in some ways, Constant was “closer to Voltaire and Turgot”<sup>41</sup> than he was to Montesquieu. Moreover, Holmes insists that Constant was never against democracy so much as he was against democratic “pretexts”, “deceitful rhetoric” and “communitarian cant.”<sup>42</sup> Here Holmes’ own distaste for modern American communitarians surfaces. Elsewhere Holmes admits that his book’s aim is quite “philosophical.”<sup>43</sup> He believes that reading Constant is useful because “[t]aken seriously, Constant’s insights suggest a major reassessment of the categories that still dominate the debate about liberalism.”<sup>44</sup> It is the contemporary debate about liberalism that interests Holmes the most.

This is also what leads Holmes to make some misstatements of his own about Constant’s liberalism. An important lesson Holmes wants to impart to his readers is that politics should remain instrumental and not moralizing. He is committed to refuting the notion that a “disbelief in the objectivity of values, or in the knowability of objective values”<sup>45</sup> weakens liberalism as a force for good in the world. To this end, he enlists Constant, describing him as a “true skeptic,”<sup>46</sup> who lacked moral certainty and yet whose very skepticism nourished “a willingness to fight”<sup>47</sup> for liberal and egalitarian reforms. Once again, this argument about Constant’s supposed skepticism says more about

---

<sup>41</sup> Stephen Holmes *Benjamin Constant and the Making of Modern Liberalism*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984, p. 10.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Stephen Holmes' distrust for contemporary "communitarian cant" than it does about Constant. It is based on a shallow reading of Constant's religious writings<sup>48</sup> and a profound ignorance of his indebtedness to an important tradition of Protestant thought.<sup>49</sup>

Another modern commentator who dwells on Constant's supposed "skepticism" is Biancamaria Fontana, although her purposes for doing so are less easy to determine. Calling him not only "a natural sceptic," but also "essentially pessimistic,"<sup>50</sup> she turns Constant into an almost tragic prophet of doom and gloom. Fontana especially appreciates what Constant has to say about the "difficulties of the modern condition." She likes the way he denounces "the falsity, sufferings and moral impoverishment of the modern age."<sup>51</sup> She admires him for having realized that the progress towards modern democracy is "a long march through a dark and insidious labyrinth," and for knowing that the journey "would prove more and more adverse as the game went on."<sup>52</sup> To Fontana, Constant's theories are useful because they are "capable of reminding us of our own unsolved problems, present failings or impending disasters."<sup>53</sup> They strike a chord with all those "who have doubts" about the capacity of political theory to cure society's problems.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Holmes gets Constant's views on religion quite wrong. See H. Rosenblatt, "Commerce et religion," p. 422.

<sup>49</sup> Kurt Kloocke is the expert on Constant's connections with German Protestant thought. Start with "Benjamin Constant et l'Allemagne: Individualité – Religion – Politique," *Annales Benjamin Constant* 27 (2003) pp. 127-171, which also contains references to his other writings. See also J. Lee, referenced in fn 59 below.

<sup>50</sup> B. Fontana, *op. cit.*, pp. xvi, xvii

<sup>51</sup> "Introduction," in Benjamin Constant, *Political Writings*, Biancamaria Fontana transl. and ed., New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 19.

<sup>52</sup> B. Fontana, *Post-Revolutionary*, p. xiv

<sup>53</sup> B. Fontana, "Introduction," p. 41.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

Such an extraordinarily pessimistic reading of Constant is truly baffling. Once again, it can only be the result of ignoring and/or misreading large portions of Constant's work, in particular, his abundant writings on religion. It seems to betray the influence of an earlier historiographical tradition, one that overemphasized the importance of Constant's novel *Adolphe* and erroneously equated Constant with its fictional protagonist. Why such a skeptic and pessimist should dedicate himself to a life of public service is hard to fathom. The point is, once again, that the real, historical Constant was not as gloomy and pessimistic as his many of his modern commentators seem to be.

On the contrary, George Armstrong Kelly, an unusually perceptive reader whose work on Constant has been strangely neglected, noted quite some time ago that he was both pragmatic about politics and optimistic about the future. Moreover, in Kelly's estimation, Constant was actually "an eloquent advocate, but a poor prophet." He was "wrong on a number of things" and even suffered from a "long-range blindness."<sup>55</sup> It is worth pointing out, for example, that there is very little about poverty, class antagonism or social welfare in Constant's writings. This *lack* of prescience is what led Kelly to the realization that "Constant hardly saw or projected the problems of modern liberty in democratic ages."<sup>56</sup> Adopting a more rigorously historical perspective on Constant, one that judged him against thinkers of his own time, Kelly concluded that Constant was positively "Panglossian"<sup>57</sup> in his views about the future.

How might one account for this very different reading of Constant? Unlike the other scholars surveyed in this essay, Kelly approached Constant from a historical and

---

<sup>55</sup> George Armstrong Kelly, "Constant Commotion: Avatars of a Pure Liberal," *Journal of Modern History* 54, 3 (Sept 1982), p. 517.

<sup>56</sup> George Armstrong Kelly, *The Humane Comedy: Constant, Tocqueville and French Liberalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 46.

<sup>57</sup> G. Kelly, "Constant Commotion," p. 517.

comparative perspective. He avoided the question of contemporary relevance and restored Constant to his own political and intellectual context. Moreover, Kelly's personal interest in religion and inter-disciplinary inclinations drew him to investigate the connections between religion and politics in Constant's thought. Thus he could not help but notice Constant's unflagging faith in progress and human "perfectibility" at a time when many Frenchmen were not so optimistic. Kelly determined that Constant's real contribution to political theory lay not in any prophetic abilities regarding the "excesses" or problems of modern democracy, but rather in his innovative attempt to "spiritualiz[e] liberalism."<sup>58</sup> Kelly invited people to pay some attention to the interaction of religion and politics in Constant's thought, a suggestion that has yet to be followed.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, the other scholars reviewed in this essay ignored this side of Constant altogether, leaving us with a picture of Constant that is both dark and distorted.<sup>60</sup> In the case of French scholars like Gauchet and Manent, the neglect of religion is all the more remarkable given the importance attributed to religion in their own theoretical writings.<sup>61</sup>

It is a matter of some consequence that early nineteenth century France witnessed not a decline in religious belief, or a popular "disenchantment", but rather a strong

---

<sup>58</sup> G. Kelly, "Constant Commotion," p. 516.

<sup>59</sup> But see Etienne Hofmann, "Histoire, politique et religion: essai d'articulation de trois composantes de l'oeuvre et de la pensée de Benjamin Constant," *Historical Reflections* 28, 3 (Fall 2002), pp. 397-418. Also an important step in the right direction is James Lee "Benjamin Constant: The Moralization of Modern Liberty," Ph. D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2003, but more work needs to be done.

<sup>60</sup> Guy Dodge is an exception to the rule, but his treatment is disappointingly short and does not live up to his book's title.

<sup>61</sup> In his *The Disenchantment of the World. A Political History of Religion*, transl Oscar Burge, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997, fn. 21, p. 213, Marcel Gauchet calls *De la religion* "[o]ne of the best books on the subject and undeservedly forgotten," but he treats it dismissively as only a contribution to the history of religion and not as an integral part of Constant's liberalism. See also Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, transl Rebecca Balinski, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995, whose chapter on Constant overemphasizes his "skepticism".

religious revival. Constant was, of course, not the only liberal of his time to notice this. In fact, the relationship between religion and politics became a pressing issue to theorists across the political spectrum. People as divergent in outlook as Lamennais, Cousin and Constant agreed in the importance of religion to society. Reacting to the devastation suffered by the Church during the Revolution, and profoundly troubled by the egoism, materialism and social fragmentation they observed all around them, many Frenchmen on the left worried that their country was in the midst of a spiritual crisis needing immediate attention. Some placed their hopes in a “new Christianity” that would morally regenerate, unite and stabilize France.<sup>62</sup> Constant, however, went further than most in believing not only that a free society needed religion to survive, but that religion itself, if it was to play its positive and designated role in history, needed freedom as well. To his mind, liberty and religion reinforced each other and together fostered the moral improvement of individuals. The key to the spiritual and moral “crisis” France was facing was more, not less, freedom.

It is in this context that one should consider Constant’s religious writings, and in particular his five-volume treatise *De la religion considérée dans sa source, ses formes et ses développements* (1824-1831). It is worth noting that Constant himself regarded this work as his most important undertaking and achievement. In it he addressed the religious and political concerns of nineteenth century Frenchmen and wrote constructively about the power of unobstructed “religious sentiment” to save France. Scholars need to take

---

<sup>62</sup> Edward Berenson, “A New Religion of the Left: Christianity and Social Radicalism in France, 1815-1848,” in *The French Revolution and the Transformation of Modern Political Culture*, vol III, Francois and Mona Ozouf, eds. New York: Pergamon Press, 1989. See also Helena Rosenblatt, “Re-evaluating Benjamin Constant’s liberalism: industrialism, Saint-Simonianism and the Restoration years,” *History of European Ideas* 30 (2004), pp. 23-37.

these views on religion seriously if they wish to understand what his personal brand of liberalism was really about.

Recent signs indicate that scholarship is moving in the right direction. Overturning the negativity of previous approaches to Constant, Tzvetan Todorov's short but insightful book emphasizes those aspects of Constant's work that are nourishing rather than critical of democracy. Todorov hails Constant as both a "*humanist*" and "the first great thinker of liberal democracy."<sup>63</sup> Interestingly, Todorov's autobiographical reflections reveal a personal history that is in some ways similar to that of other prominent admirers of Constant. A Bulgarian by birth and upbringing, Todorov recounts that his own vision of the world "was structured by the experience of totalitarianism" and a concomitant loss of faith in Marxism.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, like the others, Todorov would not define himself as an intellectual historian. His methodology does not involve a reconstruction of Constant's historical context. Rather, Todorov tries to engage in what he calls a "dialogical history of thought,"<sup>65</sup> which draws on the "veritable sympathy" and "almost personal attachment"<sup>66</sup> he feels for Constant. Todorov hopes that by simply reading Constant "attentively," he will not misinterpret him.<sup>67</sup> Although the result has a very personal flavor, Todorov does arrive at a more positive and constructive reading of Constant. He accomplishes this by taking a broader interest in Constant as both a person and as a theorist. Perhaps most importantly, Todorov is sensitive to what he identifies as

---

<sup>63</sup> T. Todorov, *Passion for Democracy*, pp. 83 & 5.

<sup>64</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *Devoirs et délices. Une vie de passeur. Entretiens avec Catherine Portevin*. Paris: Seuil, 2002, p. 347.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

Constant's "spiritual aspirations."<sup>68</sup> In fact, Todorov has recently collaborated with Etienne Hofmann in bringing out a new edition of Constant's *De la religion*, which Todorov celebrates in his preface as a "forgotten masterpiece."<sup>69</sup>

Finally, the work of Lucien Jaume is shedding light on Constant's more positive contributions to social, political and constitutional thought. Of all recent French theorists, Jaume also comes the closest to adopting a truly historical and contextual approach to Constant. In the introduction to his *L'Individu effacé ou le paradoxe du libéralisme*, Jaume acknowledges his debt to the work of François Furet, respectfully paying tribute to "the irreplaceable master." This intellectual affinity helps to explain why Jaume's book has an essentially negative point. Jaume wishes to call attention to the illiberalism of French liberalism and hence its ultimate *failure*. In doing so, however, he uses Constant as an effective foil. Jaume shows that in contrast to French liberalism, which retained a fundamentally statist orientation, Constant's variety, much like Mme de Staël's, was more individualistic, reflecting its Protestant and Swiss milieu.<sup>70</sup> Jaume's approach and interests have thus helped to call attention to the important contributions to liberalism of the "Coppet group," the friends and collaborators of Mme de Staël, who met at her father's chateau near Geneva. He has also shown interest in Constant's legal and constitutional thought, a relatively underexplored but important field.<sup>71</sup> Perhaps most

---

<sup>68</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, "Un chef-d'oeuvre oublié," Benjamin Constant, *De la religion considérée dans sa source, ses formes et ses développements*, Etienne Hofmann and Tzvetan Todorov eds., Arles: Actes Sud, 1999, p. 18.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> On Constant's individualism, see the important remarks of Gerald Izenberg, "Reconciling Individuality and Individualism in European Liberalism," *Intellectual History Newsletter* 24 (2002) and E. Hoffman, "Histoire, politique et religion," art. cit., pp. 413-418.

<sup>71</sup> See for example, *Coppet, creuset de l'esprit libéral. Les idées politiques et constitutionnelles du groupe de Mme de Staël*, Lucien Jaume ed, Paris: Economica, 1999; Lucien Jaume, "Droit, Etat et obligation selon Benjamin Constant," *Commentaire* 22, 87 (fall 1999) and "Le concept de

significantly, Jaume's work as a whole suggests that there is much of positive and constructive value in Constant's thought, something that bodes well not only for Constant scholarship, but perhaps even for contemporary French political theory.

It has been noted that, in France, intellectual history as a discipline is still "in the process of construction."<sup>72</sup> Recent Constant scholarship certainly bears this assessment out. In the main, this field has been the province of political theorists who have treated Constant more as an analytical tool for their own polemical purposes than as a historical subject in his own right. Moreover, these high-profile admirers of Constant suffer from anxieties about modernity and democracy, producing work that tends to be more diagnostic and pessimistic than constructive or promotional. This helps to explain why Constant, although he has certainly benefited from the French "return to politics," has also suffered from a skewed and partial reading. It can only be hoped that new discussions of methodology, already under way in France,<sup>73</sup> will lead to broader and more nuanced treatments. Then perhaps scholars will have a fresh reason to read Constant—they will read him to gain insights into *his* thought and *his* world, and not just to see a rather sad reflection of their own.

Present-day theorists need not fear that recovering the historical Constant will somehow diminish his relevance. In fact, I believe the opposite to be true. Others before me have argued convincingly that restoring a thinker to his own context and rhetorical

---

responsabilité des ministres chez Benjamin Constant," *Revue française de droit constitutionnel* 42 (2000).

<sup>72</sup> Olivier Mangin, *Face au scepticisme (1976-1993): les mutations du paysage intellectuel ou l'invention de l'intellectuel démocratique*, Paris: La Découverte, 1994, p. 55.

<sup>73</sup> Perhaps Rosanvallon's "Towards a Philosophical History of the Political" in *The History of Political Theory in National Context*, eds. Dario Castiglione and Iain Hampsher-Monk, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001 will provoke further debate and clarification about the right relationship between the present and the study of the past.

circumstances will actually *enhance* rather than diminish his present usefulness.<sup>74</sup> It does this by enriching the quality of the dialogue we can have with him or her and by sensitizing us to the broad range of arguments and choices available to us at any given time. More to the point, the careful reconstruction of a world that is in fact quite *foreign* to us allows us to gain a better perspective on our own. In conclusion, therefore, there is indeed much for us to learn from Constant, but we should begin by approaching him in the context of his own times.

---

<sup>74</sup> See, in particular, Quentin Skinner, "A Reply to My Critics," in *Meaning & Context. Quentin Skinner and his Critics*, ed. James Tully, Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1988, esp pp. 286-288 and Peter Janssen, "Political Thought as Traditionary Action: The Critical Response to Skinner and Pocock," *History and Theory*, 24 (1985), pp. 115-46.