

剑桥政治思想史原著系列（影印本）

CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT

# 贡斯当政治著作选

## Constant Political Writings

Edited by

BIANCAMARIA

FONTANA

中国政法大学出版社

BENJAMIN CONSTANT

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HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT



BENJAMIN CONSTANT  
*Political Writings*

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# 剑桥政治思想史原著系列

## 丛书编辑

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在政治理论领域，“剑桥政治思想史原著系列”作为主要的学生教科丛书，如今已牢固确立了其地位。本丛书旨在使学生能够获得从古希腊到20世纪初期西方政治思想史方面所有最为重要的原著。它囊括了所有著名的经典原著，但与此同时，它又扩展了传统的评价尺度，以便能够纳入范围广泛、不那么出名的作品。而在此之前，这些作品中有许多从未有过现代英文版本可资利用。只要可能，所选原著都会以完整而不删节的形式出版，其中的译作则是专门为本丛书的目的而安排。每一本书都有一个评论性的导言，加上历史年表、生平梗概、进一步阅读指南，以及必要的词汇表和原文注解。本丛书的最终目的是，为西方政治思想的整个发展脉络提供一个清晰的轮廓。

本丛书已出版著作的书目，请查阅书末。

CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE  
HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT

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## Acknowledgements

Etienne Hofmann's work on Constant's early political manuscripts has been of great assistance in preparing the annotation to this volume. My greatest debt, in completing this translation of Constant's political writings, is to John Dunn, who first encouraged me to undertake this project and assisted me throughout its realization; and to George St Andrews, whose patience, literary skill and sensibility have proved invaluable in disentangling the most intricate passages of Constant's prose. I am very grateful to Anthony Pagden, Pasquale Pasquino, Quentin Skinner and Sylvana Tomaselli who read and commented on the Introduction. Finally, I wish to thank Jimmy Burns, John Burrow, Judith Shklar, Gareth Stedman Jones and Salvatore Veca for their help and encouragement during the preparation of this work.



'Pourquoi, je vous prie, m'accuser d'un caractère faible? C'est une accusation à laquelle tous les gens éclairés sont exposés, parce qu'ils voient les deux, ou pour mieux dire, les mille côtés des objets, et qu'ils leur est impossible de se décider, de sorte qu'ils ont l'air de chanceler tantôt d'un côté, tantôt de l'autre.'

Constant to Mme Nassau

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## Introduction

It is surprising that this should be the first English translation of Benjamin Constant's political writings – indeed of any of his writings with the exception of the novel *Adolphe*.<sup>a</sup> It is surprising if only because Constant is one of the few continental thinkers to have gained admission to the eminently Anglo-Saxon sanctuary of the fathers of modern Western liberalism. It is even more surprising since Constant himself, who was educated in Scotland and spoke excellent English, was greatly influenced by, and felt deep affinities with British culture. His friend Madame de Staël mockingly immortalized this Anglophilia when she cast him in the role of the admirable, if somewhat splenetic, Lord Oswald Nevil in her novel *Corinne*.<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Adolphe* was first translated into English during Constant's lifetime by his Edinburgh friend Alexander Walker: *Adolphe: an anecdote found among the papers of an unknown person, and published by M. Benjamin de Constant* (London, 1816). For a modern translation see: *Adolphe*, translated by L. Tancock (Harmondsworth, 1964), repr. 1980.

Some of Constant's pamphlets were translated into English in the early 19th century:

*The Responsibility of Ministers* (*De la responsabilité des ministres*), London, 1815 (*The Pamphleteer*, vol. 5)

*On the Liberty of the Press* (*De la liberté des brochures*), London, 1815 (*The Pamphleteer*, vol. 6)

*On the Dissolution of the Chamber of deputies* (*De la dissolution de la Chambre*), London, 1821 (*The Pamphleteer*, vol. 18)

<sup>b</sup> 'At 25 he despaired of life. His spirit judged everything in advance, and his wounded sensibility was dead to the illusions of the heart. Nobody was kinder and more devoted to his friends than he was, whenever he could be of assistance to them. But nothing caused him any pleasure, not even the good he did to others. He sacrificed readily and easily his tastes to those of others. Yet generosity was not the only explanation for his total lack of egoism. This was rather due to a kind of sadness that prevented him from taking any active interest in his own fate.' A. L. G. de Staël, *Oeuvres complètes* (17 vols., Paris, 1820), vol. 8, p. 4. See also the portrait in *Delphine* of Henri de Lebensei: 'a Protestant gentleman from the Languedoc', who 'had been educated at Cambridge and had undoubtedly been spoiled by English manners.' *Ibid.*, vol. 5, p. 287.

## Introduction

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We have to turn to the current French editions of Constant's works to realize that being considered a prominent political theorist does not in itself constitute a claim on the reader's attention. During Constant's life, and in the decades following his death, the changing political landscape, combined with his heirs' and survivors' anxieties, kept from the public various segments of his *oeuvre* and correspondence. In the 1950s Constant won a place amongst the classics of the Pléiade. But he was promoted mainly in virtue of his literary gifts, and the political writings in the collection are poorly annotated.<sup>4</sup> More than a hundred and fifty years after his death, there is still no proper French edition of his collected works: a recent move in this direction is due to Swiss scholarship rather than to a French national or celebratory initiative.

The reasons for this unsatisfactory presentation of Constant's writings to the French reading public are apparent enough. They are connected with the highly controversial nature of the historical reflection on the French revolution of 1789 and its impact upon French politics to our day. As François Furet has vividly suggested, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the revolution has remained the mirror and the constant point of reference for French political debate. It has been impossible at any particular moment in the history of modern France to talk about Jacobins and Girondins, legitimists or Thermidorians, without committing oneself to some current doctrinal cause: revolution or reform, socialism or catholicism, the empire, the Commune or the presidential republic.<sup>5</sup>

In this obsessive re-enactment of the drama of 1789, with its heavily ideological and celebratory atmosphere, Constant could hardly be expected to find a comfortable place. Perhaps his having changed sides in at least one crucial historical circumstance – when he turned from being a vociferous opponent of Napoleon to being his constitutional adviser during the hundred days – may have been forgiven; and even

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Constant, *Oeuvres*, ed. by Alfred Roulin (Paris, 1957). Roulin's edition uses, for the *Principes de politique*, the nineteenth century annotation by Édouard Laboulaye. On the unsatisfactory presentation of Constant's work to the French reading public, see Marcel Gauchet, 'Benjamin Constant: l'illusion lucide du libéralisme', Preface to: *De la liberté chez les modernes* (Paris, 1980), pp. 9–91. There are on the other hand several good editions and translations of Constant's works both in German and Italian. See in particular: Benjamin Constant, *Werke*, ed. by A. Blaschke and L. Gall, trs. by E. Rechel Mertens (4 vols., Berlin, 1970–2). *Benjamin Constant*, ed. by C. Cordié (Milan, 1946). Benjamin Constant, *Conquista e usurpazione*, trs. by Carlo Dionisotti, Preface by Franco Venturi (Turin, 1944), repr. 1983.

<sup>5</sup> François Furet, *Penser la révolution française* (Paris, 1978); English trs., *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1981).

his consistent political moderation, though somewhat lacking in charm, could have been tolerated, as the distinctive feature of the 'liberal mind'. But the peculiar combination of his sceptical pessimism, mistrust for ideology and genuine cosmopolitanism inevitably placed Constant on the margins of the competition for a French national political identity.

Throughout the nineteenth century the historiography of Constant resembled an ongoing trial, in which his advocates caused at least as much damage as his accusers, withdrawing or manipulating documentary evidence in an attempt to extract from the records either the final proof of his betrayal or some incontrovertible declaration of his faith.<sup>4</sup> Even when the age of the Sainte-Beuves was over, and intellectual historians got out of the habit of constructing political arguments out of people's personal eccentricities or temperament, the literature on Constant retained its accusatory or justificatory tone, while his supporters persevered in their painstaking exercise of ironing out all suspected inconsistencies and contradictions.

Things have considerably improved for Constant since 1945. The experience of the war and the return of despotic and conquering regimes into the heart of Europe revived the significance of his defence of liberty and representative government. More recently, in the last fifteen years or so, the crisis of socialist and liberal ideologies alike has given new meaning to his warnings against the deceptions of revolutionary cent on the one hand and excessive confidence in the resources of market society on the other. Constant's own doubts and oscillations have seemed less the sign of exceptional individual volatility than a reasonable response to the tormented present and uncertain future of modern democracies. As a result of this shift in general political perspective, Constant has been turned into the true representative of 'modern' liberalism, not the simple-minded, crudely utilitarian ideology of triumphant nineteenth-century capitalism, but a

<sup>4</sup> Sainte-Beuve, who was close to the de Broglie circle (Mme de Staël's family) and to the *doctrinaires* group, was chiefly responsible for popularizing a damaging private and public image of Constant. See: Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, 'Benjamin Constant et Belle de Charrière, Létres inédites', *Revue des deux mondes*, 14 NS, vol. 6 (15 April 1844), pp. 193–264; 'Benjamin Constant, son *Cours de politique constitutionnelle*' in *Nouveaux lundis* (13 vols., Paris, 1863), vol. 1, pp. 408–34; 'M. Coulmann, *Réminiscences*', vol. 9, pp. 135–60. See also: Pierre Deguise, *Benjamin Constant méconnu: le livre 'De la religion avec des documents inédits* (Geneva, 1966): 'Comment on crée une légende: Sainte-Beuve et Constant', pp. 3–37.



subtle, sophisticated and sceptical version of that ideology, better suited to the stagnation and gloom of the late twentieth century.<sup>a</sup>

This new picture, if more sympathetic to Constant and his work, proves on closer inspection no less artificial, no more historically plausible than that of the pathologically Hamlet-like libertine depicted by Sainte-Beuve. From being the defender of the nebulous and eternal values of 'liberty', 'individual rights' and 'public opinion', Constant has become the symbol of the puzzled and impotent good will of some democrats of our days, unable to understand the world (let alone change it) but determined to uphold their own political respectability. Thus flattened out to a benevolent and ineffective stereotype, prophet by hearsay, Constant's position has considerably improved as far as documentary evidence is concerned. Some losses of course (like his correspondence with Mme de Staël, destroyed by her daughter, Albertine the Duchesse de Broglie, to protect her mother's respectability) will never be repaired. But in the 1970s significant additions have been made by the Constant family to the Lausanne archives. Etienne Hofmann's work on Constant's early political manuscripts offers us a much clearer and more complete picture of his intellectual development and pre-occupations.<sup>b</sup> Moreover, the study and understanding of the French revolution of 1789 and its aftermath has been enriched in the last few years by a series of stimulating new insights and interpretations.

On the whole we are probably better equipped to read Constant than historians have ever been before, with perhaps the sole exception of his own contemporaries: it is a privilege which ought in itself to justify the exercise of our intellectual sympathy.

'I was born on 25 October 1767 at Lausanne, in Switzerland, to Henriette de Chandieu, who was from an old French family that had sought refuge in the region of Vaud for religious reasons and to Juste Constant de Rebeque, colonel in a Swiss regiment in the service of Holland. My mother died in childbed eight days after my birth.'<sup>c</sup> With these words Constant began the account of his life in the famous autobiographical sketch known as the 'Red Notebook'. While Lau-

<sup>a</sup> See for example: Larry Siedentop, 'Two liberal traditions' in Alan Ryan (ed.), *The Idea of Freedom, Essays in Honour of Isaiah Berlin* (Oxford, 1979), pp. 153-74; Stephen Holmes, *Benjamin Constant and the Making of Modern Liberalism* (New Haven, 1984).

<sup>b</sup> Etienne Hofmann (ed.), *Les 'Principes de Politique' de Benjamin Constant* (2 vols., Geneva, 1980).

<sup>c</sup> B. Constant, *Le cahier rouge* in *Oeuvres*, pp. 85-133, 87. For a list of biographical studies on Constant see below, pp. 335-6.