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Biancamaria Fontana, *Germaine de Staël: A Political Portrait*, Princeton, NJ and Oxford, UK: Princeton University Press, 2016, 296 pp., bibliography and index. \$35 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780691169040.

Review by Patrick Bray, The Ohio State University.

The bicentennial of Germaine de Staël's death in July of 2017 resulted in numerous books reassessing her enormous impact on modern history, literature, and politics. Few men and women had her influence, yet her thought has been undervalued, or cast as inseparable from her exceptional life. Earlier scholarship on Staël focused on her biography or exclusively on her literary work, but a few new studies now seek to trace her political thought and affirm that it stands up on its own. Of the books that have come out this year, most have sought to publish annotated editions of her works (some of which have been out of print and many untranslated into English), minimizing the biographical context. Besides Catriona Seth's Pléiade edition of Staël's three main works (that it took Gallimard this long is astounding), we can name as other examples Michel Aubain's *Madame de Staël ou l'intelligence politique* and the anthology *La Passion de la liberté: Madame de Staël*, edited by Laurent Theis [1].

Though the publication of all of Madame de Staël's texts, literary and political, are worth celebrating, Biancamaria Fontana's book, *Germaine de Staël: A Political Portrait*, takes a daring and refreshing approach that analyzes Staël's coherent political thought and situates it in its historical context. What emerges is, as the title announces, a "political portrait" – not a biography, but rather a genealogy of her political thought that traces how her ideas as well as her tactics developed over the course of the Revolution and First Empire. Fontana gives us for the first time an account of Staël as a political actor and as a theorist, refusing to separate the categories of theory and practice, avoiding the pitfalls of the hagiographic tendency in Staël studies. Appropriately, Fontana's approach combines history, political theory, and literary analysis to paint her political "portrait." The result is a meticulously researched book that is also an engaging and clear account of Staël's complex political thought.

In her introduction, Fontana lays out, and refutes, the reasons historians have discounted Staël as a political actor: her gender, her political orientation as a moderate, and her supposedly unoriginal contribution to political theory. As Fontana shows, too much emphasis has been given to how Staël's relationships to various men in her entourage may have influenced her political positions. Her work stands on its own. As a moderate, Staël was neither a victim of the revolution nor a radical figure, and so she can't be cast as an icon or an ideologue. Instead, she was portrayed as "a somewhat overambitious and hyperactive salon hostess" (p. 3). According to Fontana, "The main purpose of this book, then, is to provide an account of Staël's approach to politics that brings out the independence and originality of her contribution. [...] Asserting the originality of Staël's contribution does not mean denying that she was close to or influenced by other thinkers who shared a set of common values; rather, it means recognizing the distinctive mark of her approach to politics, the intimate relation she established between theory and practice, her unwillingness to separate principles from their application." (p. 4). Staël insisted upon the pragmatics of governing in the face of the volatile upheavals of the French Revolution and First Empire.

The book is not structured around major episodes in Staël's life, but rather each of the nine chapters focuses on one of Staël's publications and its relevant historical and political context. While the chapters follow chronological order, Fontana doesn't overplay the idea of a coherent progression of Staël's ideas, but rather demonstrates how these evolved in response to the surprising events of the Revolution. The first three chapters cover the period between 1789 and 1793, from the beginning of the Revolution until the Terror. Here, Fontana explains Staël's insistence on determining the opinion of the majority of the nation. Staël's thinking on popular opinion shifted from an idealized view of what a majority opinion might be to an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the workings of parliamentary partisanship, as she experienced while working behind the scenes of the Constituent Assembly. The problem of popular opinion comes to a head in Staël's (unsuccessful) defense of Marie-Antoinette, as she attempted to understand how the French public could have shifted opinion so radically and abruptly about the former Queen.

Chapters four to seven address the publications between 1794 and 1799, when the immediate dangers of the Terror were replaced by prolonged political uncertainty. Her main preoccupation was the restoration of order to Europe in a way that would ensure the stability of the French Republic and peace in Europe. The challenge was to appeal to the reason of foreign ministers, like William Pitt, while also taking account of the fluctuations of public and partisan opinion in the French Republic. Her thought in these years revolved around the influence of the passions, the establishment of political equality, and the ideal form a Republic should take.

Chapters eight and nine follow Staël's political trajectory after Napoleon's arrival to power, when she was forced into exile. Although this is the period of her most celebrated works of literature, her influence on the politics of France diminished. Her feelings about Napoleon were mixed from the beginning, as she had hoped for a strong leader to continue the Republic. As Fontana notes, her subsequent exile and the fall of the Empire retroactively colored her memories of the rise of Bonaparte. Given the end of the Republic and an uncertain future in 1800, Staël's *De la littérature* attempted to theorize the idea of progress in Europe; in this work and in her novels *Delphine* and *Corinne*, Staël shifted away from a direct discussion of politics to a politics of the intellectual and artistic sphere, where her influence proved far greater and long lasting.

The conclusion examines Germaine de Staël's influence on modern politics. Throughout the book we are given hints as to how Staël's political ideas may or may not inform current affairs, but the conclusion is rather disappointing. Fontana only spends a few paragraphs offering us questions Staël posed in her day that are still unanswered today, but these questions are too vague and general to be of interest. For example, "What sort of persons do we want to represent us, and what should we expect from them?" (p. 235). After two hundred pages of Staël's political writing and maneuvering, we are not left with much of a response.

In some ways, born into privilege and intent on maintaining it in the face of Revolutionary change on the left and reactionary forces on the right, Staël is the ancestor of modern-day technocratic centrists like Obama, the Clintons, and Macron. While always finding the reasonable center, appealing to the silent majority of public opinion, and championing the meritocratic elite, makes for a pragmatic politics in the short term, centrism hides its own ideology by claiming to reject extremism. But its antidemocratic tendencies, its shoring up of wealth and power for the intellectual elite, make of centrism or "moderation" a formidable political force. While Staël's positions seem moderate compared to the *ancien régime* or some forms of Jacobinism, they can seem very problematic today (for example, she didn't support women's suffrage). This isn't to discount the importance of studying Staël's relationship to politics, but the limitation of Fontana's book is that it often takes Staël's tactical positions at face value as political theory. Fontana's writing style, fluid and clear, occasionally lacks the distance from her subject necessary to properly contextualize events, especially when Staël expressed strong opinions (on the Jacobins, notably).

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However, this is a minor flaw in that Fontana offers us a view of the French Revolution from Staël's fascinating perspective.

*Germaine de Staël: A Political Portrait* is a valuable contribution to Staël studies and to our understanding of the complexities of French thought at the turn of the nineteenth century, not just for historians of the Revolution, but also for literary scholars and scholars of political history.

#### NOTE

[1] Madame de Staël, *Oeuvres*, Cariona Seth, ed. Paris: Gallimard, 2017; Michel Aubain, *Madame de Staël ou l'intelligence politique*. Paris: Omnibus, 2017; Laurent Theis, ed. *La Passion de la liberté: Madame de Staël*. Paris: Bouquins, 2017.

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