

# The French Revolution in Germaine de Staël's *Considerations*

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## The paper

This chapter of *Germaine de Staël: a Political Portrait* discusses her work, *Considerations on the French Revolution*, written just before her death in 1817, and published posthumously a year later. It addresses two main points. The first one is historiographical: although frequently cited as the testimonial of a direct witness to revolutionary events, the book has failed to be recognised as an original interpretation of the Revolution both by Staël's contemporaries, and by the subsequent generations of historians. Yet the *Considerations* should be regarded as the first "liberal" history of the Revolution, setting forth a distinctive reading of events from the perspective of the political current to which the author belonged, that shared by constitutional monarchists and moderate republicans. The second point concerns Staël's reading of the Revolution itself: contrary to what it has been sometimes argued, she does not consider the radicalisation of the revolutionary process as the inevitable product of overwhelming circumstances, but rather as the result of a series of errors committed by the different actors, in particular by her own political side: thus her interpretation stresses the role of leadership, of party organisation and of communication in the shaping of political events. These aspects of her analysis are also central to Part VI of her work, a text originally intended to be published separately as *De l'Angleterre* (a complement to the successful *De l'Allemagne* of 1810) and a significant contribution to Staël's political theory.

## The author

Biancamaria Fontana was educated at the universities of Milan and Cambridge. She has been a fellow of King's College, Cambridge, of the Institute for Advanced Studies of the University of Edinburgh and Jean Monnet Fellow of the European University Institute in Florence. Since 1992 she is Professor of the History of Political Ideas at the Centre Walras Pareto in the Faculty of Political Sciences of the University of Lausanne. Her works focus on the history of classical liberalism and the shaping of representative government before and after the French revolution.

Her publications include:

*Rethinking the Politics of Commercial Society: the Edinburgh Review, 1802-1832*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

*The Political Writings of Benjamin Constant*, ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

*Benjamin Constant and the Post-Revolutionary Mind*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991.

*The Invention of the Modern Republic*, ed., Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1994.

*Montaigne's Politics, Authority and Governance in the 'Essais'*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008. Chinese translation, Beijing University Press, 2009; French translation: *Montaigne en politique*, Marseilles: Agone, 2013.

*Du boudoir à la Révolution : Laclos & les Liaisons dangereuses*, Marseilles : Agone, 2013.

«Literary History and Political Theory in Germaine de Staël's Idea of Europe», in Paul Hamilton, ed., *The Oxford Handbook to European Romanticism*, 2016.