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0521412277 - The Humane Comedy: Constant, Tocqueville and French Liberalism -

George Armstrong Kelly

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This book is the last completed work of one of the most distinguished political theorists and intellectual historians of our time. Focusing on the political ideas and activities of leading French liberals from approximately 1805 into the Second Empire, Professor Kelly presents a distinctive blending of ideological and intellectual history, biography, analysis of French regimes and their changes, and his own reflections concerning the wide and still highly pertinent range of issues and themes considered.

Beginning with a subtle analysis of the complex patterns of agreement and disagreement between the liberalisms of Benjamin Constant and Alexis de Tocqueville, the work offers a sophisticated examination of the attempts of a sequence of liberal thinkers to harmonize their commitments to political and civil liberty with one another, and with their profound desire for a legitimate and stable political order. Giving close but never reductive attention to the intellectual, political, and more closely personal biographies of the figures he considers, Professor Kelly provides nuanced accounts and appreciations of de Staël and Guizot, Royer-Collard and Rémusat, Cousin and Lamartine, Laboulaye, Ollivier, and Baudelaire. A major theme, of great relevance to the current debates about liberalism, is the contrast between the vigor and brilliance of these thinkers as political critics, their inefficacy as political actors, and their ultimate retreat from political life.

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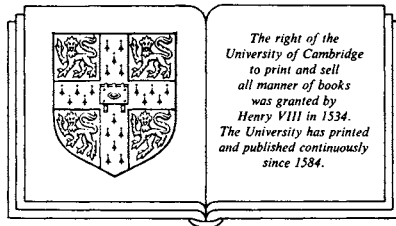
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THE HUMANE COMEDY:
CONSTANT,
TOCQUEVILLE AND
FRENCH LIBERALISM

GEORGE ARMSTRONG KELLY

*Late Visiting Professor of Humanities and Political Science, Johns Hopkins
University*

WITH A FOREWORD BY STEPHEN R. GRAUBARD



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Contents

<i>Foreword: Stephen R. Graubard</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiv
I PORTS IN THE STORM	
I Liberty: last port of call	1
II Benjamin Constant afloat: hospital or pantheon	6
III Royer-Collard: steering by the Charter	17
IV Tocqueville: sailing the open sea	27
2 CONSTANT VERSUS TOCQUEVILLE	
I Social settings of the political self	39
II Ages of the spirit	55
III Ancestral voices	69
3 IN PARTIBUS FIDELIUM	
I Faith in freedom	85
II Protestant protocols: Necker, Madame de Staël, Vinet, Guizot	93
III Catholic submissions: Lacordaire, Montalembert	115
4 PHILOSOPHY AS CIVIL RELIGION	
I How dogmas begin: Jouffroy, Cousin, Damiron	134
II How dogmas develop: Cousin	155
III How dogmas dissolve: the “affaire Pascal”	168

Cambridge University Press

0521412277 - The Humane Comedy: Constant, Tocqueville and French Liberalism -

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Frontmatter/Prelims

[More information](#)

viii	<i>Contents</i>	
5	LAMARTINE, LIBERALISM'S FALLEN ANGEL	
I	<i>Ut poesis politica?</i>	181
II	Another kind of liberty	196
III	Liberalism against liberals	209
6	PARNASSIAN LIBERALISM	
I	Steps to Parnassus	221
II	The sadness of Tocqueville	227
III	The airs of Renan	236
IV	The disgust of Flaubert	245
	<i>Index</i>	256

Cambridge University Press

0521412277 - The Humane Comedy: Constant, Tocqueville and French Liberalism -

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Frontmatter/Prelims

[More information](#)

Foreword by Stephen R. Graubard

The premature and untimely death of an active and engaged scholar is always tragic. In the case of the late Professor George Armstrong Kelly, the tragedy is compounded by his not having witnessed what so few imagined even possible at the time of his death in December 1987 – the sudden and complete collapse of many of the principal Communist regimes of Central and Eastern Europe, and the growth of a new interest in liberal institutions and values. How one wishes that the author of this work had lived to see these events, to comment on them, to place them in a historical frame, to explain why Tocqueville and any number of other nineteenth-century French liberals are again in fashion, not so much with the politicians of our day as with those who are scholars, committed to seeing how the past lives on in the present.

George Kelly had many distinctions – not the least being his capacity to “trespass” intellectually on many fields, ignoring many of the conventional disciplinary boundaries, making each of the ones he entered his own, without ever appearing to be aggressive or aggrandizing. His interests were legion, his capacities for empathy and understanding so wide-ranging that it seemed as natural for him to be concerned with Hegel as with the French twentieth-century colonial imbroglio in Algeria, with the problems of the American university as with the more cosmic issues raised by the French Revolution, with religious and political consciousness in the United States as with what he chose to call “mortal politics” in eighteenth-century France.

The titles of his books are invariably arresting; they suggest a feeling for language, a concern with those qualities that another age called “belles-lettres,” rarely encountered in many who today see themselves as political theorists when they are not aspiring to the even more grandiose claim of being recognized as political scientists.

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0521412277 - The Humane Comedy: Constant, Tocqueville and French Liberalism -

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Frontmatter/Prelims

[More information](#)

x

Foreword

George Kelly, who occupied academic posts with various highly descriptive titles, held at least one that came close to defining at least some of his major interests. He was, for a time, Professor at Brandeis University of Politics, Philosophy, and the History of Ideas. When, at a later date, at Johns Hopkins University, he became for the last years of his life Visiting Professor of Humanities and Political Science, his attributes and interests were even more precisely stated. Had he also borne the title of Professor of History – perhaps even of Intellectual History – and had that title suggested his capacity to place the subjects covered by that amorphous (and very American) discipline in a political and social frame, which was always his prime intention, his scholarship might have been seen for what it was, a continuing exploration of subjects that belonged to no single academic discipline, that took their unity mostly from the fact that they all engaged him.

The last of his books, incomplete at the time of his death, was sufficiently advanced to be more than a collection of discrete chapters or essays. Though they may lack the final polish that he would have insisted on, they are in no sense a fragment of a larger work whose major contours are undiscernable by the tragedy of the book being unfinished. *The Humane Comedy: Constant, Tocqueville and French Liberalism* emerges at a time when the interest in liberalism has never been higher. 1989, the year that George Kelly did not live to see, was an *annus mirabilis* as important in its own way as any of the others that he reflected on and wrote about. It is, in every respect, a year as unpredictable in its long-range consequences, in its mysterious and obscure beginnings, as any of those others that generated the liberal nineteenth-century intellectual systems which, in George Kelly's memorable phrase, chose to "put liberty first." The fact that liberalism is today a subject of world-wide interest, that it comes almost as a political gift – with all of its obvious ambiguities and hazards – to a number of European societies politically and intellectually submerged for decades, makes for the new and very substantial scholarly interest in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century origins of a movement that at many times in our century seemed relegated to that "ash heap of history," that Marxists were so fond of describing.

For many of our contemporaries, preoccupied, by choice or necessity, with political and social doctrines that boasted very different intellectual origins, whose mythic structures embraced

Cambridge University Press

0521412277 - The Humane Comedy: Constant, Tocqueville and French Liberalism -

George Armstrong Kelly

Frontmatter/Prelims

[More information](#)*Foreword*

xi

quite distinctive and unique concepts of freedom, though in forms massively uncongenial and unwelcome to those who continued to believe in other kinds of liberty, 1989 can never simply be 1848 *redux*. On the contrary, despite all the talk of “free markets” and the like, with the suggestion that there is a new European capitalism in the making, there are many, and not only among the more prominent of the Central, Eastern European, and Soviet intelligentsia, who are focusing today on quite other questions, those insistently and imaginatively posed over many decades in the wake of Napoleon’s own failed imperial ambitions. To ask those questions, in whatever form, is to have affinity with those who lived in the long shadow cast by Napoleon and the French Revolution.

George Kelly would have found preposterous the idea that we are witnessing today circumstances fundamentally like those that followed on Waterloo. Yet, the conditions in early nineteenth-century France, that led whole generations, with or without personal experiences and memories of revolution, to reflect anew on the meaning of liberty has contemporary meaning and significance in ways that would not have been nearly so obvious even a few years ago. On one level, *The Humane Comedy* may be read as a work of history, even of French history; on another, it needs to be seen as a more analytic work, which deals with politics and religion – with belief more generally – which seeks to restore not only intellectual reputations that had all but disintegrated, but to revive memories of political debates and conflicts that were ignored precisely because they were so recently thought to be inconsequential, irrelevant.

In a time when intellectual fashions change rapidly, it may be useful to be reminded that the restoration of interest in someone even as important as Alexis de Tocqueville is largely a matter of the new European and American scholarship of recent decades. The same, in a much less conspicuous way, may be said of Benjamin Constant. Not the least of the many accomplishments of George Kelly is to be able to give the minds, ambitions, and accomplishments of these men a wholly new dimension. With that, he does something which may be no less important, to give new life to intellectual figures like Royer-Collard, Lamartine, Lamennais, Laboulaye, and even Renan, nineteenth-century giants who had been thrown from their once-lofty French pedestals. Few, in recent decades, have seen them as European pilgrims on an unmarked and largely untravelled road, which bore the name Liberty, compelling them to engage in

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Frontmatter/Prelims

[More information](#)

constant combat with forces ranged under banners as different as those of Authority, History, and Anarchy.

Kelly's capacity to make these and many others seem very contemporary – it is best to avoid the somewhat shopworn phrase “relevant” – is achieved not by taking them out of their historical periods but precisely by insisting that they must be seen in the context of the politics and intellectual life of their day. They are not “disembodied theorists,” part of a twentieth-century “canon”; rather, even as we understand their relevance today, they are individuals engaged in deliberate and desperate attempts to understand the age they are living in, the society that is at that very moment being formed. Almost none of them, in recent years, during the period when Marx and Marxism were regnant in so many intellectual quarters, had been able to gain very much of a hearing. One need not be accused of engaging in what is today a new and rather vulgar intellectual sport – conducting yet another requiem for Marx and Marxism – when one suggests that liberalism has revived today in a way that few expected it to do even as recently as the time of George Kelly's death.

The revival of Tocqueville had of course started much earlier; it owed a great deal to French scholars, including, most obviously, Raymond Aron, and, more recently, François Furet, but also a number of other distinguished French, American, and British researchers. Not the least of George Kelly's achievements, however, is that he makes Tocqueville's conceptual principles come alive in ways that makes his nineteenth-century concern with the “stabilization of modern liberty” meaningful, recognizing how integral his religious views were to a system that called for a “new political science,” suited to a new age. He does much the same with Benjamin Constant, giving his views on war and commerce, on the destructiveness of the “spirit of conquest,” a meaning that few others had thought to consider. Indeed, in the very comparison of the two men, Kelly achieves an understanding of the multiple spiritual sources of the liberal experiment. Again, this was a subject that few scholars were inclined to reflect on in a more secular age, so superficially self-confident and assertive. Kelly writes about both in ways that would have been almost unthinkable in the nineteenth century, inconceivable in the 1960s and 1970s.

The measure of Kelly's achievement with all of those whom he treats so imaginatively is precisely that what he says about them is

Cambridge University Press

0521412277 - The Humane Comedy: Constant, Tocqueville and French Liberalism -

George Armstrong Kelly

Frontmatter/Prelims

[More information](#)*Foreword*

xiii

novel, intended to be provocative. More than any number of others who have surveyed many of the same liberal traditions, Kelly has established links and affiliations, unperceived by others, that help to explain why intellectual families are as complex and convoluted as they seem to be. To have written a new kind of late-twentieth-century history of nineteenth-century liberalism without simply extolling those whom he correctly and selectively admires for lucidity and insight is to show the passion appropriate to the committed scholar. His purpose was neither to write “puffs” for deceased great minds nor to prepare a new defense of liberalism. Knowing the intellectual strengths and weaknesses of his characters, recognizing them not least in what he in one instance calls their “complacency and social blindness,” his is a tale of failure even more than of success.

1848, though only briefly treated, is given a new meaning as Kelly considers how it went off its tracks, why it generated the “mediocrity” that soon became the hallmark of the age. This work, brilliantly descriptive of the politics and intellectual life of the age of Louis XVIII, Charles X, Louis Philippe, and Napoleon III, is in fact an extended essay on the Enlightenment, but even more, on the ways in which the twentieth century has chosen to interpret the period. But beyond all this, Kelly raises questions about whether all his subjects were not essentially “men of letters,” and whether the arts of statesmanship are within the compass of individuals formed by such training, having those ambitions. That issue may be even more alive in the 1990s than it was when he was preparing his manuscript in the 1980s. Indeed, George Kelly’s *The Humane Comedy* raises the question of whether the preparation for politics, for a political career in the largest sense, does not have to be reconsidered again. This time, however, even a fundamental revision of twentieth-century history may be at hand.

Acknowledgements

George Armstrong Kelly's too-early death left me his literary executor. My first task has been to see that his final masterwork, *The Humane Comedy: Constant, Tocqueville and French Liberalism*, be published. To this end, Richard Fisher of Cambridge University Press has been unfailingly generous with his time and effort.

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James Chace