

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO
CONSTANT

Benjamin Constant is now widely regarded as a founding father of modern liberalism. *The Cambridge Companion to Constant* presents a collection of interpretive essays on the major aspects of his life and work by a panel of international scholars. Separate sections are devoted to Constant as a political theorist and actor, his work as a social analyst and literary critic, and his accomplishments as a historian of religion. Themes covered range from Constant's views on modern liberty, progress, terror, and individualism, to his ideas on slavery and empire, literature, women, and the nature and importance of religion. *The Cambridge Companion to Constant* is a convenient and accessible guide to Constant and the most up-to-date scholarship on him.

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CONSTANT

Edited by

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Hunter College and the Graduate Center, CUNY



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi - 110025, India
 103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521856461

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First published 2009

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data

The Cambridge companion to Constant / edited by Helena Rosenblatt.

p. cm. — (Cambridge companions to philosophy)

ISBN 978-0-521-67243-6 (pbk.) — ISBN 978-0-521-85646-1 (hardback)

1. Constant, Benjamin, 1767–1830. 2. France — Intellectual life — 19th century.

3. France — Politics and government — 1789–1815. 4. France — Politics and government — 1814–1830. 5. Intellectuals — France — Biography. 6. Novelists, Swiss — 19th century — Biography. 7. Liberalism — France — History. I. Rosenblatt, Helena, 1961– II. Title. III. Series.

DC255.C7C36 2009

944.06092-dc22 2008044606

[B]

ISBN 978-0-521-85646-1 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-67243-6 Paperback

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PREFACE

Interest in the thought of Benjamin Constant has been growing steadily on both sides of the Atlantic. Long recognized as the author of the literary masterpiece *Adolphe*, Constant is best known today for his political thought and, in particular, for his 1819 lecture “On the Liberty of the Moderns Compared with That of the Ancients.” A steady stream of paperback editions of his major political works is appearing in both French and English (also in Italian and soon in Spanish). College textbooks more and more frequently include references to him, and anthologies increasingly contain selections from him. Along with a growing body of scholarship, this renewed interest in Constant is serving to confirm his stature as a founding father of modern liberalism. In fact, many people today regard Constant as *the* most important liberal thinker between Montesquieu and Tocqueville.

As is often the case with great thinkers and historical personalities, Constant’s reputation suffered a decline after his death, but it began to recover during the late nineteenth century and then rose dramatically in the second half of the twentieth century. Karl Marx read Constant carefully, but dismissed him, along with liberals in general, as a mere spokesperson of bourgeois class interests. Thereafter, Constant’s political thought was largely forgotten, as public interest turned to his autobiographical writings and his psychological novel, *Adolphe*. Eventually, however, the reaction against Marxism and the concomitant growth of interest in the origins of liberalism stimulated new research into Constant’s political thought. The collapse of Soviet Communism and the related sea change in French intellectual politics reinforced the trend. In recent years, together with Tocqueville, Constant has emerged as a truly great thinker,

whose subtle and sophisticated defense of individual rights and freedoms are particularly relevant to modern men and women. Indeed, political theorists on both sides of the Atlantic, and as diverse as Isaiah Berlin, Marcel Gauchet, Tzvetan Todorov, and Stephen Holmes, have taken inspiration from Constant's work. They have read Constant in order to gain insights into subjects as varied as the meaning and significance of the French Revolution, the promises and problems of liberal democracy, the roots of totalitarianism, the psychological malaise of modern man, and the dynamics of gender relations. In a significant recent turn of events, two distinguished American jurists, Supreme Court judge Stephen Breyer and Harvard law professor Charles Fried, have taken direct inspiration from Constant in their interpretations of the American Constitution and the meaning of liberty.

Although Constant's definition of modern liberty continues to attract the attention of political theorists and public intellectuals, others are now exploring new and different dimensions of his work. The *Œuvres complètes de Benjamin Constant*, begun in 1988 and led by an international team of experts, is contributing to this trend. The editorial committee has projected a total of fifty-four volumes divided into two series, one devoted to Constant's correspondence and the other to his published and unpublished works. This ongoing publishing event (twenty volumes of which have appeared so far) is facilitating new approaches to him. The Institut and Association Benjamin Constant, established in 1979 in Lausanne, Switzerland, lends its support by collaborating on the *Œuvres complètes*, by sponsoring publications such as the *Annales Benjamin Constant*, and by organizing regular conferences.

The Cambridge Companion to Constant is both a reflection of and a contribution to this ongoing Constant revival. Its aim is to introduce interested readers to Constant and to the secondary literature about him. Constant made seminal contributions to diverse fields, from literature, psychology, and political theory to the history of religion. A consequence of this is that scholarship has been scattered in different scholarly disciplines. The resulting problem of accessibility is compounded by the fact that much of this recent scholarship is in languages other than English. One of the aims of this *Cambridge Companion* is to gather into one English-language volume some of the most exemplary recent scholarship from around

the world on the various dimensions of Constant's œuvre. Another is to combat simplistic interpretations of Constant's life and thought by bringing to the foreground its nuances, depth, and even tensions and ambiguities.

OVERVIEW OF THE VOLUME

Dennis Wood's biographical sketch reminds us that Constant's metamorphosis into a successful French politician and renowned political theorist was far from foreseeable at the outset. He had rather inauspicious beginnings – a foreign birth, a highly erratic upbringing, and a complicated family life – and he encountered many hurdles along the way. And yet he managed to carve out for himself a successful career under the wildly fluctuating political circumstances of Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary France. Wood attributes his ability to overcome these obstacles to a steadfast commitment to his political principles and his lifelong attachment to liberalism.

The first, and most substantial, section of this volume is devoted to Constant as political theorist and actor. It begins with a much-celebrated essay by Marcel Gauchet, reproduced here for the first time in English and in slightly abbreviated form. When it originally appeared in 1980, this essay helped to propel the Constant revival. Gauchet, who has since become one of France's most prominent contemporary philosophers, believes Constant's brilliance to lie in the many insights he offers into the contradictions of modernity and the dangers of democracy. Gauchet admires Constant for his prescience in combining certain conservative, essentially monarchical, principles with progressive, emancipatory ones.

The second essay in this section is by the American political theorist Stephen Holmes. In 1984, Holmes's *Benjamin Constant and the Making of Modern Liberalism* also helped to rekindle interest in Constant, especially in the Anglophone world. In his essay for this volume, Holmes offers a fresh reading of Constant, focusing on his forceful denunciation, more than two hundred years ago, of a government's use of informants, secret denunciations, and military tribunals. Holmes finds Constant's steadfast defense of legal procedures and transparency in a time of war particularly relevant to the current political climate in the United States. Constant understood that modern liberty is closely related to, and indeed dependent on,

judicial guarantees. Citizens must feel safe under a system of laws in order to be free.

In the following essay, British scholar Jeremy Jennings focuses squarely on Constant's famous distinction between modern and ancient liberty. He surveys the recent scholarly interpretations of this distinction and, through a careful reading of Constant's principal political works, shows the often underappreciated nuances of Constant's analysis.

The next three essays locate Constant within the liberal debates of his own time, highlighting his originality and distinctiveness. Stefano De Luca discusses Constant's pronouncements on the Terror, evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of his arguments, and how they evolved over time. As Constant grappled with the thought of Rousseau, and seized on the modern/ancient liberty distinction, his argument became more sophisticated and characteristically liberal. Jennifer Pitts's essay broaches a new topic in Constant scholarship, namely, his views on empire and slavery. She notes that although Constant was an outspoken opponent of both imperial expansion and the slave trade, his pronouncements on slavery reveal some not insignificant tensions and ambiguities. In the final essay in this section, Robert Alexander describes Constant's career as a Restoration politician. Liberals have often been portrayed as uninterested in politics, or at least as downgrading the value of political engagement. By contrast, Alexander shows Constant's deep commitment to political *practice*, emphasizing his crucial role as a pragmatic strategist and grassroots organizer for the Liberal Opposition.

The second section of this volume considers Constant as a psychologist and analyst of society. Interdisciplinary perspectives, informed by psychology, literature, and history, are offered on both Constant's own emotional state and his analytical skills. One of the many particularities of Constant is not just that he led an interesting and full life, but that he reflected so deeply on it and wrote so copiously about it. Steven Vincent broaches the topic of Constant's relationships with women. Traditionally, Constant's many love affairs either have been dismissed as irrelevant or have exposed him to ridicule and disdain. Instead, Vincent illustrates how very interesting and varied Constant's relationships with women were and how important they were to his emotional and intellectual development.

Vincent shows that Constant's reflections about love and intimacy informed his thinking about morals and politics.

Gerald Izenberg argues that from the very beginning of his political career, Constant displayed deep ambivalence toward the self-interested motivations that he simultaneously saw as the foundation of modern liberty. Constant spent a lot of time thinking about the needs of "individuality" – what Izenberg refers to as the "Romantic self." Patrick Coleman highlights the close connections that exist between Constant's literary and political works, once again refuting any reduction of his thought to the mere protection of private interests. He examines the distinctive meaning Constant attached to "literature" and how Constant's literary productions related to his broader commitments. The final essay in this section, by Etienne Hofmann, analyzes the key concept of "perfectibility" in Constant's thought. It is a notion that spanned multiple disciplines, including literature, moral philosophy, and history. As Hofmann explains, the concept also had definite political resonances that Constant was keen to exploit.

The *final section of this volume* turns to a long-neglected, but now recognized as central, aspect of Constant's oeuvre: his thoughts on religion. It is a well-known fact that Constant began research on a history of religion at the age of eighteen and continued working on it throughout his life, until he finally published it as the five-volume *De la religion considérée dans sa sources, ses formes et ses développements* (1824–31). In the meantime, he wrote other pieces on religion, some of which he published and some of which he did not. It is also known that Constant himself regarded his research into religion as his most important undertaking and, as Tzvetan Todorov reminds us, it was for *De la religion* that he most wished to be remembered. Against those who have dismissed this book as somehow irrelevant and outdated, Todorov insists that it continues to convey a valuable and enduring message: far from disappearing over time, Constant shows why religion is here to stay. Moreover, Todorov believes that Constant's approach to religion, pathbreaking for its time, makes him one of the founders of religious anthropology.

The essays by Laurence Dickey and Bryan Garsten show how wrong it is to compartmentalize Constant's writings on religion. They highlight the fact that Constant's liberalism was always

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imbued with religious values and that his view of liberal politics depended on such values. Garsten argues that despite Constant's advocacy of state neutrality in religious matters, he favored a particular kind of religion, namely, a privatized, sentimental, and anticlerical religion close to the liberal Protestantism of his lifelong partner, Madame de Staël. Dickey shows Constant to have been heir to a long tradition of "philosophical theism," which guided his thinking throughout his life.

Finally, as a conclusion to the volume, my own piece surveys Constant's posthumous reputation, emphasizing the very different reception his ideas encountered in France and America, and how perceptions of Constant evolved over time.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am delighted to recognize the friends and colleagues who have helped bring about *The Cambridge Companion to Constant*. First and foremost is Cheryl Welch, who encouraged me to undertake this project and who offered invaluable advice and guidance along the way. The contributors to this volume have been a pleasure to work with, and I thank them all. I was very fortunate to have Ed Parsons as editor, and I have much appreciated the enthusiasm and professionalism with which he has guided me through the whole process.

A generous grant from the Florence Gould Foundation made it possible to include three essays originally submitted in French and one in Italian. I was very pleased and honored when Art Goldhammer agreed to translate them for us, and I thank him for his outstanding work here.

The Institut Benjamin Constant, with its incomparable Anne Hofmann, has been unfailingly helpful to me. Anne has cheerfully answered questions, tracked down citations, proofread texts, and been a wonderful general sounding board. She is a main reason why the Institut Benjamin Constant is such a wonderful resource, and I am most grateful to her.

Finally, I thank my colleagues in the Hunter College History Department, and especially my chair, Barbara Welter, for encouragement and help of all kinds. Last, but not least, the steadfast support and good humor of my husband sustain me always.

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ABC</i>	<i>Annales Benjamin Constant</i> , 1980. Lausanne: Institut Benjamin Constant/Geneva: Slatkine.
<i>AML</i>	Benjamin Constant, "The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with That of the Moderns," in <i>PW</i> .
<i>DLR</i>	Benjamin Constant, <i>De la religion, considérée dans sa source, ses formes et ses développements</i> . Edited by Tzvetan Todorov and Etienne Hofmann. Arles, France: Actes Sud, 1999.
<i>EP</i>	Benjamin Constant, <i>Ecrits politiques</i> . Edited by Marcel Gauchet. Paris: Gallimard, 1997.
<i>Mélanges</i>	Benjamin Constant, <i>Mélanges de littérature et de politique</i> , in <i>EP</i> , 623–755.
<i>OCBC/Œuvres</i>	Benjamin Constant, <i>Œuvres complètes</i> . Edited by Paul Delbouille, Kurt Kloocke, et al. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1993–. Série I, <i>Œuvres</i> .
<i>OCBC/CG</i>	Benjamin Constant, <i>Œuvres complètes</i> . Edited by C. P. Courtney, Paul Delbouille, et al. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1993–. Série II, <i>Correspondance générale</i> .
<i>Œuvres</i>	Benjamin Constant, <i>Œuvres</i> . Edited by Alfred Roulin. Paris: Gallimard, 1957 (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade).
<i>PoP</i> (1806)	Benjamin Constant, <i>Principles of Politics Applicable to All Governments</i> . Edited by Etienne Hofmann. Translated by Dennis O’Keeffe. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2003.
<i>PoP</i> (1815)	Benjamin Constant, <i>Principles of Politics Applicable to All Representative Governments</i> , in <i>PW</i> .

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- PW* Benjamin Constant, *Political Writings*. Edited and translated by Biancamaria Fontana. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- SCU* Benjamin Constant, *The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation and Their Relation to European Civilization*, in *PW*.

CHRONOLOGY¹

- 1767 Benjamin Constant is born in Lausanne on October 25. His mother dies on November 10. He is raised by his grandmothers and then, from 1772 on, by a series of tutors.
- 1783 Constant is briefly enrolled at the University of Erlangen (February 1782–May 1783) and then at the University of Edinburgh, where he spends almost two years studying hard and participating in student life.
- 1785 Constant visits Paris and stays with the Suards (May–August), where he is introduced to intellectual celebrities.
- 1787 He meets Isabelle de Charrière.
- 1788 At the behest of his father, Constant goes to Brunswick to take up a position as chamberlain. There he meets and marries Minna von Cramm. The couple is divorced in 1793. In January of the same year, Constant meets Charlotte von Hardenberg, who eventually becomes his second wife (in 1808).
- 1794 On September 19, Constant meets Germaine de Staël.
- 1795 In May, Constant accompanies Madame de Staël to Paris, where he throws himself into politics.

¹ In composing this chronology, I have found particularly useful those in *EP*, *OCBC*, and Kurt Kloocke, *Benjamin Constant: une biographie intellectuelle* (Geneva: Droz, 1984).

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- 1796 Constant publishes his first major pamphlet, *De la force du gouvernement actuel de la France et de la nécessité de s'y rallier*.
- 1797 In March, he publishes *Des réactions politiques*, followed by *Des effets de la Terreur* at the end of May.
On June 8, Albertine de Staël, the presumed daughter of Constant and Madame de Staël, is born.
On November 5, the Directory designates Constant president of the Administration of Luzarches.
- 1798 He works on a translation of Godwin and publishes *Essai sur la contre-révolution d'Angleterre en 1660*.
- 1799 On December 24, Constant is nominated to the Tribunal, where he immediately makes his opposition to the regime clear. He is placed under police surveillance.
- 1802 On January 17, Constant is expelled from the Tribunal along with other prominent opponents of Napoleon.
- 1803 Constant begins his first journal, *Amélie et Germaine*.
Madame de Staël is exiled by Napoleon and Constant accompanies her to Germany.
- 1804 He begins a new journal.
- 1805 Constant is deeply saddened by the deaths of Julie Talma and Isabelle de Charrière.
- 1806 He begins to write his *Principles of Politics*.
- 1807 Visiting Lausanne, Constant frequents a pietist sect called the Ames intérieures.
He works on an adaptation of Schiller, *Wallstein*, which is published in 1808.

Chronology

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- 1808 Constant secretly marries Charlotte von Hardenberg.
- 1811–13 On an extended trip to Germany, he works on his book on religion.
- 1812 Constant writes *Ma vie (Le cahier rouge)*.
 He is made a corresponding member of the Royal Society of Sciences of Göttingen.
- 1813 On October 17–19, Napoleon is defeated at the Battle of Leipzig.
 On November 6, Constant meets Bernadotte in Hanover. Later that month, Constant writes *De l'esprit de conquête et de l'usurpation*.
- 1814 Constant arrives in Paris on April 15, where he prepares a new edition of *De l'esprit de conquête et de l'usurpation*.
 He publishes *Réflexions sur les constitutions, la distribution des pouvoirs et les garanties dans une monarchie constitutionnelle* on May 24.
 On July 6, he publishes *De la liberté des brochures, des pamphlets et des journaux considérés sous le rapport de l'intérêt du gouvernement*.
 On August 18, he publishes *Observations sur le discours de S.E. le Ministre de l'Intérieur en faveur du projet de loi sur la liberté de la presse*.
 Constant falls in love with the legendary beauty, Juliette Récamier, who does not return his affections.
- 1815 On February 2, Constant publishes *De la responsabilité des ministres*.
 On March 5, news of Napoleon's landing in Golfe-Juan reaches Paris.

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On March 11 and 19, Constant publishes violent articles against Napoleon in the *Journal de Paris* and *Journal des débats*.

On March 23, Constant leaves Paris; he returns on March 27.

On April 14, 15, and 18–19, Constant meets Napoleon and agrees to work with him.

On April 20, Constant is made Conseiller d'Etat.

A version of the *Principles of Politics* is published on May 29.

On June 18, Napoleon is defeated at the Battle of Waterloo. Four days later, he abdicates.

On July 19, Constant receives a royal order to leave France. The order is revoked five days later, after Constant explains his behavior in his *Mémoire apologétique*.

On October 31, Constant nevertheless leaves Paris for Brussels.

1816 On January 27, Constant and Charlotte travel to London, where they stay until the end of July.

In the spring, Constant publishes *Adolphe*.

In September, he returns to Paris.

In answer to Chateaubriand's *De la monarchie selon la charte*, Constant publishes *De la doctrine politique qui peut réunir les partis en France*.

1817 Constant revives the *Mercure de France*.

Elected deputy from Sarthe, he becomes an important participant in debates.

On July 14, Madame de Staël dies in Paris.

In September, Constant fails to get elected to the Chamber.

Chronology

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- 1818 The *Minerve française* is launched by Constant and others.
 Constant fails, once again, to get elected.
 In February, he delivers his first lecture on religion at the Athénée royal.
- 1818 Constant publishes his *Collection complète des ouvrages publiés sur le gouvernement représentatif [...] formant une espèce de Cours de politique constitutionnelle*.
- 1819 In February, Constant delivers at the Athénée royal his famous lecture “De la liberté des anciens comparée à celle des modernes.”
 On March 25, he is elected to the Chamber. He is very active there.
 On June 15, Constant and friends found the daily newspaper the *Renommée*.
 In September, Constant’s *Mémoires sur les Cent-Jours* begin to appear in the *Minerve*.
- 1820 The Duc de Berry is assassinated on February 13. Constant plays an important role in the debates that follow.
- 1820–22 Constant delivers major speeches on the freedom of the press and on the slave trade.
- 1821 Constant makes more than thirty-five speeches in the Chamber.
- 1822 Constant makes more than thirty speeches in the Chamber.
 In January, Constant publishes the first part of *Commentaire sur l’ouvrage de Filangieri*; the second part comes out in 1824.
 On November 3, he loses the election in la Sarthe.

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- 1824 On February 26, Constant is elected from Paris. He grows in stature, eventually becoming the recognized leader of the liberal opposition.
- The first volume of *De la religion* comes out at the end of May.
- Louis XVIII dies on September 16.
- Constant is seriously ill in October–December.
- 1825 In April, Constant's article "Christianisme. (Causes humaines qui, indépendamment de sa [sic] source divine, ont concouru à son établissement)" comes out in the *Encyclopédie moderne*.
- In September, Constant publishes the *Appel aux nations chrétiennes en faveur des Grecs*, and in October, the second volume of *De la religion* comes out.
- On December 3, Constant delivers his lecture "Coup d'œil sur la tendance générale des esprits dans le XIX^{ème} siècle" at the Athénée royal.
- 1826 Constant publishes an important review of Charles Dunoyer's *L'industrie et la morale considérées dans leur rapport avec la liberté*.
- He publishes an article on the "Développement progressif des idées religieuses" in the *Encyclopédie progressive*.
- 1827 Volume 3 of *De la religion* comes out.
- Constant delivers important speeches on freedom of the press.
- 1827–28 The *Discours de M. Benjamin Constant à la Chambre des Députés* are published.
- 1829 Constant publishes his *Mélanges de littérature et de politique*.
- He writes many articles for the *Courrier français*.

Chronology

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His “Réflexions sur la tragédie” appear in the *Revue de Paris*.

1830 On July 25, the Four Ordinances are issued, triggering “The Glorious Days” of July 27, 28, and 29.

On November 19, Constant delivers his last speech in the Chamber. He makes his last appearance there on November 26.

On December 8, Constant dies.

On December 12, Constant is given a state funeral. The services take place at the Protestant church of the rue Saint-Antoine, and the burial at the Père-Lachaise cemetery.