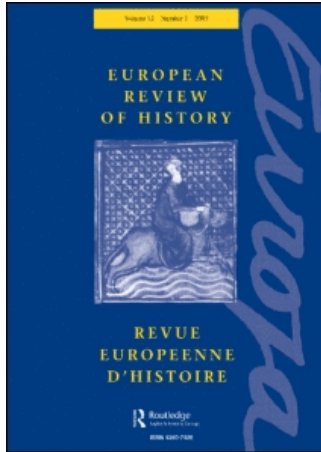


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# Apology of Liberty in *Lettres sur les ouvrages et le caractère de J.-J. Rousseau*: Mme de Staël's Contribution to the Discourse on Natural Sociability

Chinatsu Takeda

*This article analyses Mme de Staël's ideas on liberty as they were expressed in *Lettres sur les ouvrages et le caractère de J.-J. Rousseau* of 1788–1789. *Lettres sur les ouvrages et le caractère de J.-J. Rousseau* was a reaction to highly polemical debates on liberty that originated in the discourse on natural sociability and that existed in the Parisian salon society between the 1770s and 1780s. Staël combined the two opposing philosophical and economic viewpoints, by the philosophes and Rousseau on the one hand and by Necker and the economists on the other, into a set of liberal values applicable to a new political era despite some self-contradictions. As such, Staël sustained the intellectual legacy of the French enlightenment into revolutionary France.*

## I. Introduction: Sociability, Enlightenment and the French Revolution

Mme de Staël is known as the mother of French liberalism.<sup>1</sup> Yet, on what account we might attribute this label to her remains to be seen.<sup>2</sup> This article proposes an answer to the question by analysing Staël's *Lettres sur les ouvrages et le caractère de J.-J. Rousseau*, published in 1788–1789. By doing so, it also addresses some controversial issues in eighteenth-century French studies. My argument is that although historians tend to think that aristocratic sociability embodied by *ancien régime* salons ended with the French revolution, Staël sustained this literary tradition during revolutionary decades by transforming aristocratic sensibility into a liberal political current in the name of sentiment.<sup>3</sup> I will suggest that *Lettres sur Rousseau* responded to discussions on liberty within the discourse on natural sociability that developed out of the late eighteenth-century Parisian salon society. This text, therefore, can be defined as Staël's enlightenment project for revolutionary France.

Habermas considers that along with coffee houses, Masonic lodges and table societies, eighteenth-century Parisian literary salons constitute the social milieu of the 'literary public sphere', a precursor of the 'bourgeois public sphere'.<sup>4</sup> He remarks that it was in this milieu that sociable discussions developed into public criticism in the name of public opinion and attributes the role of initiator to Necker.<sup>5</sup> Inspired by Habermas's theory, Dena Goodman characterises literary salons as the institutional basis of the 'Republic of Letters'.<sup>6</sup> She also places women at the centre of enlightenment public opinion by suggesting that *salonnières* used the rules of polite conversation to control ego-centred male opinions into universal consensus.<sup>7</sup> Daniel Gordon underlines the egalitarian, critical and yet apolitical sociability that prevailed in the *société* and suggests that inhabitants of this privileged and free space practised natural sociability.<sup>8</sup>

Studies of cultural historians are also significant in terms of their relevance to the French revolution. Gooman, Gordon and Roger Chartier suggest that the existence of subversive salons is strictly limited to the enlightenment period and seem to deny either the institutional continuity of salons or the political role of *salonnières* after 1789.<sup>9</sup> This conclusion is stretched to its extreme by Joan Lands, who applies the 'bourgeois public sphere' to revolutionary France, which, to her, is equal to republican politics and concludes that enlightenment *salonnières* eventually disappeared as victims of the gendered egalitarianism that permeated the revolutionary public sphere.<sup>10</sup>

Steven Kale points out Habermas's own ambiguities concerning the historical link between the literary private sphere of the *ancien régime* and the bourgeois public sphere of revolutionary France, which, he thinks, justifies diverging interpretations of the role of *ancien régime* salons in the occurrence of the French revolution.<sup>11</sup> He also refutes the above-mentioned historians by underlining the persistence of salons after 1789 and cites Staël's as a prominent example.<sup>12</sup> One may ask, however, how Staël, as a revolutionary *salonnière*, could have possibly detached herself completely from the enlightenment legacy including the women-centred view of public opinion as Kale seems to suggest.

Meanwhile, Staël has received increasing attention as a liberal political thinker recently in the perspective of a rising interest in French liberalism. This movement is closely associated with the demise of Marxism and, instead, the rise of revisionism in the historiography of the French revolution. Lucian Jaume demonstrates that Staël laid emphasis upon natural rights along with Constant, which made them a minor group of liberals in France.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, Simone Balayé remarks that Staël's ideas on liberty have not been fully exhausted.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, Anglo-American scholars such as William Reddy and Marso Liri Jo have studied the implication of Staël's emphasis upon emotions over reason.<sup>15</sup> To Reddy, emotions are central to the French revolution because he considers that they are political expressions.<sup>16</sup> He interprets Staël's emotive outburst as a socially conditioned reflex to describe something natural and honest, which casts doubt on Staël's sincerity even if he denies it.<sup>17</sup> It is regrettable that Reddy does not analyse what Staël conveyed

politically by these emotional expressions if they were politically relevant. Meanwhile, Marso analyses Staël's pity in her moral reflections. She concludes that, as a woman, Staël began her reflections on citizenship as a subjective self, who was concerned with her attachment to her family and friends and attempted to bring these moral qualities to the public sphere as a good citizen.<sup>18</sup>

It seems that Marso's statement is akin to Goodman's description concerning the altruistic moral disposition of enlightenment *salonnières* to ensure social harmony and peace. This is because both assume a breakdown of the split between the public and private spheres and think that the altruistic female morality sustains social peace.<sup>19</sup> Goodman and Marso's discussions seem to reflect a certain link, from a moral viewpoint, between enlightenment sociability embodied by *salonnières* in the Republic of Letters and Staël's discussion on modern citizenship in post-revolutionary France.

If Rousseau and Staël shared their priority of emotions over reason, it must be asked what their mutual emphasis on emotions implied ideologically in terms of liberty. We must also wonder how this posture of Staël impinged on her unique vision of women and public opinion in the post-revolutionary liberal political order. These questions appear to be linked with discussions on liberty within the discourse on natural sociability that existed in the republic of letters between the 1770s and 1780s. Therefore, after presenting distinct notions of liberty that pertained to the French republic of letters, I will demonstrate Staël's original contribution to the discussion in 1788–1789.

The first part of what follows will be devoted to the implicit philosophical, political and even economic issues that developed out of the discourse on natural sociability. I will suggest that in the discourse on natural sociability that opposed the *philosophes* to Rousseau lay an implicit polemic concerning the status of property. This tacit disagreement became apparent at the eruption of the famous Rousseau–Hume dispute. Out of this dispute emerged more economically and politically oriented discussions on liberty led by Jacques Necker and the economists.

The second half of the article will extract Staël's ideas on liberty, social change and the role of women in public opinion as seen in *Lettres sur Rousseau*. I aim to show how, as a woman *philosophe*, she sought to reconcile two distinct ideological tendencies of the *société*: the *philosophes* and Rousseau on the one hand, and Necker and the economists on the other. At the same time, her conciliatory approach to philosophy also equalised her efforts to constitute a party of *libéraux* in order to defend the *société* in the face of the democratic revolution.

## II. Historical Origins of the Dispute between the *philosophes* and Rousseau

Staël begins her preface to *Lettres sur Rousseau* as follows: 'je ne connois point d'éloge de Rousseau: j'ai senti le besoin de voir mon admiration exprimée.'<sup>20</sup> This statement is not wholly accurate as recent studies on the reception of Rousseau's ideas on the eve of the French revolution indicate that admiration of Rousseau was consistent with the

greatest orthodoxy in both politics and the church and praise of his ideas came from every corner of society.<sup>21</sup> Given this widespread acceptance of Rousseau, one may assume that Staël was reacting against the *philosophes* within the *société*, including Grimm, Diderot and d'Holbach who personally disliked Rousseau and actively promoted a negative view of him from the 1760s to the 1780s.<sup>22,23</sup>

From *le premier discours* of 1751 to *Lettres à d'Alembert* of 1758, Rousseau challenged the very premise of enlightenment philosophy by casting doubts on modern civilisation. His refutation was not taken seriously even among his supporters. As for the *philosophes*, they emphasised that these paradoxes did not at all represent his private beliefs and promoted the idea of him as a sophist.<sup>24</sup> At this stage, the *philosophes'* refutation remained within philosophical boundaries, but their latent aversion to Rousseau crystallised with the eruption of his open dispute with David Hume in 1766.<sup>25</sup>

As a result of a personal skirmish, in his letter to Hume, Rousseau criticised Hume in moral terms and this tone was all the more embarrassing to the Scottish philosopher as Rousseau had an image as a man of great moral sincerity and integrity because of the nature of his publications. And this ultimately turned into an image of a martyr as a result of a series of persecutions conducted by the church, *parlement* and government and his exile from France, Geneva and the canton of Berne to England following the publication of *Emile*.<sup>26</sup> In this circumstance, what Hume feared most was the possible publication of Rousseau's *mémoires* in which, as some contemporaries called him, the eighteenth-century Socrates might attack Hume's own moral integrity.

Consequently, Hume sought advice on how to defend his reputation from his French friends in the *société*, who included d'Alembert, Mlle de Lespinasse, Turgot, and l'abbé Morellet, among others.<sup>27</sup> After the dispute between Rousseau and Hume had become well known in the *société*, these members of the Parisian well-educated elite advised Hume to publish a tract displaying objectively all the details of the dispute, and he subsequently published the *Exposé succinct de la contestation qui s'est élevé entre M. Hume and M. Rousseau* in Paris in October 1766.<sup>28</sup>

But the affair did not end there and it re-erupted in the late 1770s. This was because *philosophes* such as Diderot and d'Alembert were in their turn afraid of having their moral credibility damaged by Rousseau in *Confessions*, which they thought might be published immediately after Rousseau's death in 1778. Consequently, they reiterated the criticism of Rousseau as 'un artificieux scélérat coupable de l'ingratitude la plus noire envers ses bienfaiteurs' in their respective works and underlined what they saw as his insincerity.<sup>29</sup> These attacks precipitated a second wave of debate on Rousseau's moral reputation and integrity.

Consequently, Staël's *Lettres sur Rousseau* constituted a third wave of debate on Rousseau's character and moral integrity in the *société* although, in contrast to the two previous waves, Staël's came after the generation of the *philosophes* and Rousseau and she did not know the main protagonists personally. She therefore enjoyed a rather neutral position; she was familiar since childhood with the grievances against

Rousseau heard in her mother's salon from such men of letters as Jean-Baptist Suard and Morellet; owing to her Swiss origins, she had accumulated numerous and unknown anecdotes about Rousseau from his Genevan friends such as Francois Coindet.<sup>30</sup> What interested Staël in the dispute between the *philosophes* and Rousseau was its moral, philosophical and political ramifications relevant to the political circumstances of the late 1780s. In particular, she turned to the discussions on liberty that developed out of the discourse on natural sociability. Therefore, before analysing *Lettres sur Rousseau*, it is necessary to look at the discussions on liberty within the discourse on natural sociability.

### III. The *philosophes* and Their Discussions on Liberty

It is well known that Montesquieu's *l'Esprit des lois* introduced to the *société* 'English liberty'. Nonetheless, what gave French discussions on liberty a distinctive quality, incompatible with those of English liberty, was the influence of Hobbes on the discourse on natural sociability. Hobbes introduced the discussion on natural sociability into his philosophy of natural law.<sup>31</sup> By defining the state of nature as an eternal state of war, he rejected the notion of a natural sociability of humans. He staked that in order to ensure stability and security, man's mutually conflicting wills must be submitted to that of a king by appealing to the social contract. Behind this process lay his implicit assumption that it was possible to ensure social harmony by combining mutually opposing and even matching individual interests with the general interest.<sup>32</sup> Hobbes's argument on man's natural sociability was a significant attraction for the *philosophes*.<sup>33</sup> Gordon remarks that it was in this context that the discourse on natural sociability first appeared in France in the beginning of the eighteenth century.<sup>34</sup>

To start with, the *philosophes* derived from Hobbes's attempt to identify individual interests with the general interest two main conclusions. First, they assumed that the preservation of society went hand in hand with the preservation of the civil government, i.e. the absolute monarchy, and its destruction, the disintegrating of society.<sup>35</sup> Second, as reformers of social mores, the *philosophes* found it essential to submit the conscience of man directly to the civil authority of the state and not to the ecclesiastic authority, whose power and political ambitions were considered at this time a principal source of social disorder.<sup>36</sup> This explains why the *philosophes* denied a natural distinction between the just and the unjust or the good and the bad, which they thought depended ultimately on the unique and arbitrary decision of the civil magistracy. However, what cannot be denied about human nature, in the eyes of the *philosophes*, is that man is naturally sociable. This is where they could not accept Hobbes's definition of a state of nature. They believed that, endowed with natural sociability, selfish man as depicted by Hobbes might be reformed by education.<sup>37</sup>

Consequently, the *philosophes* transformed the discourse on natural sociability into one centred on liberty inherent to the French enlightenment philosophy. In particular, contrary to Hobbes's pessimism, which was influenced by Christianity, the sensationalist *philosophes* emphasised the worldly pleasures of life and implicitly

defined liberty in terms of personal pleasure, good taste and happiness in this world.<sup>38</sup> They admitted the existence of an absolute sovereign provided he imposed good taste, good habits and the pleasures of life on his subjects and contributed to their personal happiness. Helvétius pushed sensationalism to materialism; he suggested that considering that human conduct is derived exclusively from the pursuit of self-interest, the state might stimulate his physical sensation in order to achieve collective and individual happiness. Consequently, although *philosophes* defended man's sociable disposition against Hobbes, they paradoxically agreed with him on the central role of the state as the educator of liberty.

In contrast, Rousseau transposed Hobbes's definition of the state of nature into the social context and suggested that the war of all against all emerged only when men entered society.<sup>39</sup> Rousseau stressed that a self-centred dimension to natural sociability based on the pursuit of one's self-interest was not natural. He assumed that the error of sensationalist *philosophes* such as Diderot and Helvétius consisted of thinking that physical needs contributed to reuniting men while in reality they tended to disperse them.<sup>40</sup> In other words, he rejected the vision of a society bound together by individuals' personal interests—the antithesis of the notion of liberty formulated by the *philosophes*.

The discourse on natural sociability was intricately related with another concept, *doux commerce*. *Doux commerce* implied men's social interactions in its broader sense and designated different forms of social communication such as trade, economic exchange, conversation and sociability. Hume's idea of commercial society as an extension of the *Doux commerce* theory was influential to French discussions on natural sociability.<sup>41</sup> In 1754, the *Journal Etranger* presented a brief summary of Hume's essays on commerce.<sup>42</sup> Hume's idea that 'commerce led to a more just proportion in fortunes, which then would democratise society' ignited vivid reactions in French opinion.<sup>43</sup> Yet, although Hume imagined a gradual progression of commerce would lead to property distribution, he never questioned the moral legitimacy of the social and economic status quo of a given society.<sup>44</sup>

Rousseau was well aware of the article on Hume and reactions in French public opinion.<sup>45</sup> This intellectual circumstance as well as his antipathy against sensationalist *philosophes* led him to deny the moral validity of modern civilisation based on man's natural sociability. Rousseau suggested that what Locke called the state of nature resulted from antagonistic social relations. He then questioned the validity of the social contract that guaranteed property order, considering that it merely served to preserve the social and economic status quo.<sup>46</sup>

It was from this perspective that Rousseau advanced the view that the glorification of the modern civilisation, i.e. the development of arts and science, served to justify the current social and economic status quo.<sup>47</sup> And yet, Rousseau was hostile to commercial society as an alternative solution. This is because he was too conscious of the disastrous social effects of commercial society noted by Hume. The example of Geneva showed him that it did not generate equalisation of property relations but on the contrary led to the monopolisation of wealth by a small number of individuals.<sup>48</sup>

The diametrically opposing positions of the *philosophes* and Rousseau on the modern civilisation politicised discussions on natural sociability. It was then that Hume's opinion, according to which a certain levelling of fortunes would democratise society, departed from its moderate meaning and, in conjunction with the distinctive definition of French liberty, took on a more dogmatic and imperious sense of social change to be initiated by the state. For example, in *De l'esprit*, Helvétius generally refers to education in terms of the acquisition of the arts and sciences. However, in some passages, he implied all kinds of social changes including the form of government and economic and social structure.<sup>49</sup> He then suggested that one possible way of achieving egalitarian 'public education' was 'a certain levelling of fortunes'.<sup>50</sup>

The dispute between Hume and Rousseau emerged from the pre-existing political and intellectual tension described above. The divergence in ideas between the *philosophes* and Rousseau also played a certain role when this private dispute developed into a public debate.<sup>51</sup> Those who did not know the two philosophers started to take sides based on a personal sympathy for their ideas.

One major protagonist in the dispute between Hume and Rousseau was Jean-Baptist Suard as he translated and edited Hume's *Exposé succinct* for the French reading public in 1766. Suard was an assiduous habitué of Mme Necker's salon and shared Necker's anglophile tendencies. Finally, he was the proofreader of Staël's *Lettres sur Rousseau*. This implies that Staël, as a child, was directly exposed to the dispute between Hume and Rousseau in her home. In contrast, Suard and Hume were probably not friends before this dispute began.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, in a letter to Hume in 1766, Suard cited a philosophic reason to justify his sympathy for Hume and to validate his reading of Hume's ideas: 'Votre cause me paraissait celle des honnêtes gens et surtout celle des amis de la philosophie. Il y a longtemps que je regardais Rousseau comme un profond et dangereux charlatan.'<sup>53</sup>

Suard interpreted the dispute as a moral confrontation between an honest and virtuous Hume and a bad-tempered and insincere Rousseau. Such a characterisation of Rousseau contrasts therefore with the general reputation of Rousseau as a man of integrity. In fact, the moral description of the two philosophers by Suard was analogous to another implicit confrontation that interested the French reading public, namely the political disagreement between the landed elite and the *niveleurs* over the moral legitimacy of existing property relations.<sup>54</sup> By appraising Hume's moral virtue, Suard clearly sympathised with his idea that a king's absolute sovereignty was compatible with respect for freedom and property.<sup>55</sup> In this situation, the characterisation of Suard as an idle man of letters, as Gordon described, symbolised not only *le monde* but above all the way of life of its inhabitants, namely, the landed elite who did not have to work as a privileged social class.<sup>56</sup> Consequently, when, in his preface to the *exposé* of Hume, Suard sided with Hume against Rousseau, what had been a personal quarrel was turned into a political dispute between partisans of natural sociability and their adversaries. By supporting Suard, Mme Necker's salon, therefore, championed the cause of natural sociability against Rousseau.



In contrast, economists such as Turgot did not reject Rousseau entirely.<sup>57</sup> This sounds somewhat contradictory considering that, as a close friend of Hume, Turgot was directly involved in the making of a plan to defend Hume against Rousseau. Unlike the *philosophes* who disliked Rousseau, Turgot hardly knew Rousseau personally and he was therefore without personal aversion to Rousseau. And yet, when the dispute started to become public, Turgot followed the *philosophes* and repeated that Rousseau's anger was rooted in his ungrateful and arrogant behaviour toward Hume.<sup>58</sup> However, Turgot soon discovered that Rousseau would have been grateful to Hume had the latter not publicly divulged the affair of the pension on his own initiative.<sup>59</sup> This changed Turgot's advice as to how Hume should behave in public since the French economist judged that there was a justifiable reason for Rousseau to refuse the pension after Hume had made it public.<sup>60</sup> After hearing all the details from Hume, in consideration of Hume's initiative in publicising the affair after he had received a letter of accusation from Rousseau and before the latter sent an open letter to a Parisian publishing house, Turgot advised Hume: 'ce tort joint à l'erreur qui a précédé et à la publicité qui a suivi a produit un mal très réel, et ce mal réel et cette publicité confirmeront Rousseau dans ses torts, les justifieront à ses yeux.'<sup>61</sup> Turgot assumed that Rousseau could not be excused<sup>62</sup> but 'sa faute dévient d'un genre différent'.<sup>63</sup> Consequently, rather than accusing Rousseau of arrogance, he invented the idea that Rousseau was driven by fits of madness.<sup>64</sup>

Turgot's idea was agreed to by Morellet and d'Alembert.<sup>65</sup> The idea that Rousseau was mad was spread deliberately at the initiative of these *philosophes* once the dispute between Hume and Rousseau came to be widely known in 1766. And their plan to damage Rousseau's moral integrity seemed successful in view of a subsequent letter from d'Alembert in which he states: 'votre seconde lettre a entièrement perdu Rousseau dans l'esprit même de ses plus zélés partisans; il n'y a absolument qu'une voix aujourd'hui pour dire que c'est un fou et un vilain fou, et un fou dangereux.'<sup>66</sup>

The fact that these *philosophes* called Rousseau mad rather than insincere was significant in its philosophical relevance to the status of passion. A major feature of French enlightenment philosophy was the rehabilitation of passion, contrary to earlier periods in which it was debased in opposition to rationality under the influence of Christianity.<sup>67</sup> Inspired by Locke's empiricism, sensationalist *philosophes* considered man to be the product of sensational stimulation from society and considered a passion as the moral drive of human actions.<sup>68</sup> In particular, Diderot gave a positive characterisation of passion by asserting that a great passion constituted a source of artistic creation and as such constituted a sign of genius.<sup>69</sup>

Nevertheless, Diderot was well aware of the ambiguous nature of passion and did not forget to add that the other extreme consequence of a great passion might be a total alienation in which external sensations would be interrupted by illusions, and that such a state was not far from madness.<sup>70</sup> When Turgot called Rousseau a mad man instead of a sophist, or an insincere or ungrateful individual, his interpretation was not entirely negative since it also implied that Rousseau might be an exceptionally gifted

man susceptible to being moved by a divine passion. This ambiguous view is rationalised in comments such as the following:

... je ne me défend pas d'estimer et d'aimer infiniment les ouvrages de Rousseau, non pas seulement à cause de son éloquence ... je crois, au contraire, que c'est un des auteurs qui a le mieux servi les mœurs et l'humanité. Bien loin de lui reprocher de s'être sur cet article, trop écarté des idées communes, je crois, au contraire, qu'il a encore respecté trop de préjugés. Je crois qu'il n'a pas marché assez avant dans la route: mais c'est en suivant sa route que l'on arrivera au bout qui est de rapprocher les hommes de l'égalité, de la justice et du bonheur.<sup>71</sup>

Although Turgot disagreed with Rousseau's refutation of the modern civilisation,<sup>72</sup> he highly valued *Emile* because of Rousseau's belief in the 'perfectibility of mankind by education'.<sup>73</sup> The other work of Rousseau that gained Turgot's sympathy was the *Contrat social*, as Turgot wrote: 'ce livre se réduit à la distinction précise du souverain et du gouvernement; mais cette distinction présente une vérité bien lumineuse, et qui me paraît fixer à jamais les idées sur l'inaliénabilité de la souveraineté du peuple dans quelque gouvernement que ce soit'.<sup>74</sup> Morellet, another *économiste*, who turned his back on Rousseau in the Hume–Rousseau dispute, had also confessed that he was 'fanatically' attached to Rousseau's ideas.<sup>75</sup>

On the occasion of the dispute between Hume and Rousseau in 1767, some economists partially appreciated Rousseau's thought despite a general tendency among the *philosophes* to despise Rousseau. In particular, Turgot expressed sympathy for such ideas that he saw as expressing the notion of equality, the principle of popular sovereignty, the role of education to regenerate mores, and the belief in man's perfectibility in history, although the economists retained their belief in natural sociability in opposition to Rousseau.

As is often the case with the reception of Rousseau's ideas among his contemporaries, the economists sympathised with Rousseau's political ideas in accordance with their own ideas, known as the physiocratic doctrine. We must therefore look at their appraisal of Rousseau in light of their economic and political ideas.

#### IV: The Economists versus Jacques Necker

Under the influence of Hobbes, the physiocratic school tried to accommodate the personal interest of an absolute sovereign with the general interest of the country in the same manner as did the *philosophes*. But the physiocrats were concerned with doing this from the point of view of increasing the economic growth of the country rather than developing virtuous social mores.<sup>76</sup> A major feature of the physiocratic doctrine is the imposition of laws by the absolute sovereign to transform in a sweeping manner the social and economic conditions of the country, although laws should be no longer arbitrary but based on the application of economic sciences.

The physiocratic school approved the model of a free market economy. However, contrary to Scottish enlightenment thinkers who welcomed wholeheartedly the advent

of a commercial society,<sup>77</sup> the *physiocrats* were hostile to the rise of commercial society, which was manifested in their priority in investment placed in agriculture over manufacturing.<sup>78</sup> Their animosity towards commercial society also impinged on their unique attitude to the public financing; they attributed the surplus generated by agriculture to tax revenues alone and rejected the idea of borrowing public credit from investors and speculators to cushion the state deficit.<sup>79</sup> Rent from land could be the main financial source of the state.

Physiocrats considered society to be composed of three classes, agricultural, artisan and the land-owning classes, and affirmed that free trade in grains was in the interest of all of these social classes. However, their exclusive focus on large-scale agriculture implied that physiocrats were eager to maintain social inequality founded upon the social supremacy of large landed elite over other social groups. Physiocrats legitimised man's submission to the social contract as long as their rights to landed property were guaranteed by the sovereign.<sup>80</sup> In other words, liberty, according to physiocrats, represents the respect for property rights of land-owning class.

The physiocratic ideas spread all over Europe during the 1760s through numerous journals<sup>81</sup> while they benefited from protection by the French monarchy thanks to Mme Pompadour. The physiocratic approach soon provoked strong public criticism. Supporters of state control in terms of the grain trade noted that the rational approach of the physiocrats to social change, in the form of the liberalisation of the grain trade and administrative streamlining, ignored temporary provisions in times of bad harvest. Specifically, they asked what would happen to the labouring poor if the price of grain increased beyond their reach.<sup>82</sup>

The most adamant opponents of the physiocratic school in the *société* gathered at Mme Necker's salon where in 1770 Galiani read his famous *Dialogues sur le commerce des blés*. The antagonism between Necker and the physiocratic school reached its climax when Necker published a tract entitled *Sur la législation et le commerce des grains* (1775) in opposition to Turgot who re-liberalised the grain trade after he was appointed *contrôleur général des finances* in 1774.

Despite personal antagonism between the two groups, Necker shared many of the physiocrats' political assumptions; the Genevan banker linked property with land and aimed at social supremacy for the large-sized landed elite called 'honnêtes gens' without questioning the political supremacy of the absolute monarch.<sup>83</sup> However, Necker was basically opposed to the physiocrats' notion of 'l'esprit du système', meaning their application of economic science as a flawless system or doctrine without paying attention to ad hoc local circumstances.<sup>84</sup> This resulted in two major differences between them.

Necker placed the notion of public opinion at the heart of his solution to the financial problems of the French monarchy.<sup>85</sup> He favoured borrowing money from private individuals to compensate for the deficit of the French state. Such public financing was possible only when European bankers, financiers and private investors assumed that the royal solvency was credible. This system would therefore place moral and financial constraints on the monarch and limit his arbitrary conduct.<sup>86</sup> Necker's

famous act of publishing *compte rendu au roi*, the state budget accounts, was therefore part of Necker's political strategy to regulate the arbitrary nature of the French monarchy through financial means.

Meanwhile, Necker assumed that the free trade of grain was not necessarily an effective means to stimulate agriculture in France. He thought that France was rich enough to develop what he called 'merchandise capitalism' characterised by economic agents who were an intermediary between industrials and merchants although they did not intervene directly in manufacturing techniques as did subsequent industrial capitalists.<sup>87</sup> As a *colbertiste*, Necker believed that diversification of the economy, including manufactured and luxury goods, commerce and finance, constituted an effective means to stimulate the domestic market along with agriculture. He assumed that grain could be exchanged with manufactured goods inside the country.<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, he also thought that the nation's economy should be overseen principally by the landed elite, the prevailing social elite, to improve culture and the arts and to allow the poor access to these economic fruits.<sup>89</sup>

This is where the essential difference in appreciation of Rousseau's ideas between the physiocratic school and Necker is seen. Under the ideological influence of the physiocratic school, the discourse on natural sociability effected a social change by initiating a free market economy, and education and social communication, even though physiocrats were hostile to the advent of a commercial society by making agriculture the principal economic activity and giving the landed elite political and social supremacy over the rest of the population. Economists such as Turgot and Morellet sanctioned Rousseau's ideas of equality, progress and man's perfectibility in history according to these premises, which the physiocrats introduced to the discourse on natural sociability.

In contrast, Necker shifted the physiocrats' economy-centred focus of society into a political one based on the antagonistic and yet static relationship between the wealthy and the poor.<sup>90</sup> In this view, the right to subsistence was the minimum guarantee for the poor to accept political domination by the wealthy. Therefore Necker denied the physiocrats' notion of liberty as landowners' absolute rights to their property in exceptional circumstances;<sup>91</sup> Necker assumed that if grains were to be exported continuously despite the famine within France, as a result of respecting the property rights and applying the *doctrinaire* approach of economic sciences, it would lead to a revolt of the hungry poor and the collapse of the French monarchy. These observations confirm that Necker favoured the pre-capitalistic moral economy founded upon the Christian view of distributive justice and such a position matched the philosophical cause for Suard's sympathy for Hume.

Finally, Necker was fundamentally opposed to the physiocratic tendency to legitimise the pursuit of individual interests—in this case, the absolute right of land-owning class to property—for the sake of increasing economic wealth rather than attenuating the political effect of absolute monarchy.<sup>92</sup> Necker's concern originated in the political culture of the Genevan Republic. In this sense, although Necker was a patrician in opposition to the democratic Rousseau, both shared the basic premises of

the Genevan Republic according to which politics constituted the pre-eminent source of men's virtue.

As the daughter of Necker, Staël was well aware of the antagonistic and yet ideologically close relationship between Necker and the physiocrats at this period.<sup>93</sup> She accompanied Necker to his exile in Switzerland after the latter was dismissed as the *contrôleur général* as a result of his publication of the *compte rendu au roi* of 1781. On the other hand, after her marriage to M. de Staël in 1786, which allowed her access to the court, Staël replaced her mother and opened her salon. In 1788, Necker published *De l'importance de l'opinion religieuse* in which he expresses the view that it is necessary to preserve religion not so much from an ethical point of view as from a utilitarian one.<sup>94</sup> He wrote that people would be rebellious without Christianity, which promised salvation after death. This implies that Christianity would prevent the multitude from provoking social revolts and force them to be politically and morally submissive to the wealthy, an idea which was prevalent among Genevan patricians. At the same time, *De l'importance* was written against the French atheist *philosophes* such as Helvétius who stressed a natural equality of man.

This suggests that Necker's *De l'importance* was also addressed to certain young economists who were habitués of Mme Helvétius's salon, and who, during the late 1780s, began to challenge the political hegemony of a few aristocratic landed elite over the multitude, the idea which constituted a consensus between the physiocrats and Necker. Mme Helvétius's salon attracted sensationalist *philosophes*, prominent Americans of the period such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, and economists such as Turgot and his fellow disciples.<sup>95</sup> Many of *habitués* of her salon were also freemasons, who tended to be wealthy bourgeois rather than aristocratic.<sup>96</sup> Among them, the young generation of economists such as Condorcet and Sieyès, along with future ideologues such as Destutt de Tracy and Cabanis, were to play a significant political role after 1789.

Under the influence of Helvétius, the young economists were above all interested in the democratic consequences of a commercial society. Their optimistic future sustained by the development of commerce contrasted diametrically with the pessimistic view on commercial society held by their spiritual masters, the physiocrats. In addition to their attachment to large-scale agriculture as discussed earlier, physiocrats also feared that commercial society would further an economic inequality between the wealthy and the poor even if the poor would be relatively better off. *Vis-à-vis* this problem posed by Adam Smith, the young economists assumed that the absolute sovereign as the 'arbiter' of the general interests would intervene to correct social injustice. In particular, they favoured investment in manufacturing and industry in addition to agriculture as a catalyst in the change of unequal property relations to a more egalitarian distribution.

Such a posture was already perceptible in Condorcet's *Réflexions sur le commerce des blés* of 1769. In *Réflexions*, Condorcet suggested that the right to property was not absolute and that the greatest happiness of individuals might be sacrificed for the sake of the greatest happiness of society, an idea which was in opposition to the physiocratic school.<sup>97</sup> However, in line with the physiocrats, he stressed the importance of the free

trade of grain domestically and internationally to boost the economy.<sup>98</sup> Finally, Condorcet introduced two sociological notions, the honoured and the honourable, to characterise the country's economy. He suggested that while the military and the magistracy were distinguished and honoured offices, finance, commerce and agriculture were honourable professions.<sup>99</sup> Consequently, he opposed the physiocrats' entrepreneurial approach to large-scale agriculture and endorsed a more democratic form of agriculture occupied by independent farmers in possession of small and medium-sized parcels.<sup>100</sup>

On the eve of the French revolution, another prominent author influenced by the ideas of the young economists was found in *Lettres à M. le comte de M... par M... sur le plan de M. Turgot*. Although the anonymous author linked political rights with land ownership, he insisted that the size of landed property should not be a factor with which to restrict political citizenship, and on this account he criticised Turgot's plan for provincial assemblies because it gave political advantage to large landowners over smallholders, stating 'l'inégale distribution de la terre nourricière est un des maux de la société ... un bon gouvernement sera celui où les institutions, au lieu de favoriser cette inégalité, rapprocheront les hommes le plus possible de l'égalité, qui a été, ça me semble, le premier vœu de la nature'.<sup>101</sup>

As for Roederer, he openly called into question the physiocratic idea of liberty as possession of landed property in *Observations sur les intérêts des trois évêchés et de la Lorraine* of 1787 and in *Etats généraux* of 1789. According to Roederer, landed property is not a unique source of wealth since it requires mobile property such as labour and capital in order to produce wealth.<sup>102</sup> By framing the discourse on natural sociability in the economic perspective, Roederer conceived a new social order in which self-interest, manifested in an economy organised around division of labour, constituted the basis of political participation.<sup>103</sup> By attacking the core idea of the physiocratic school as an economist, Roederer paradoxically gave a political connotation to the notion of liberty. This is because his inclusion of capital and labour along with land in the definition of property, contrary to Turgot who stated that land was the only source of property, is meant to justify the political participation of more diverse economic interests of society in the forthcoming Estates-General.<sup>104</sup>

Like Roederer, Sieyès was also hostile to the preservation of a specific social and political status for the landed elite. He therefore published in 1788 *Qu'est-ce que le tiers état?* in opposition to Necker's reformist policies. The contribution of Sieyès to discussions on liberty is his inclusion of natural sociability within a juridical setting of the sovereign nation; he defines liberty above all as the nation's liberty. Consequently, he assumed that even the status of property depended on the will of the nation in a new political order.<sup>105</sup>

Thus far, we have seen how the discourse on natural sociability evolved with a changing notion of liberty that took place in the *société*, and how the dispute between Rousseau and the *philosophes* during the 1760s overlapped with, and was overtaken by, the political and economic dispute between the economists and Necker during the 1770s and 1780s. The latter part of this article will look at Staël's

reaction to French discussions on liberty, which evolved within the discourse on natural sociability.

### V. *Lettres sur Rousseau* in Reaction to the *philosophes*

Staël finished *Lettres sur Rousseau* around 1785, had it edited by Suard, and published it in December 1788. She revived the dispute between Rousseau and the *philosophes* that had declined after the former's death in 1778 during an unprecedented financial and political crisis for the French monarchy. This section will suggest that with *Lettres sur Rousseau* Staël intervened in French discussions on liberty on the eve of the gathering of the Estates General.

Staël emphasised above all else the sincerity of Rousseau in his work.<sup>106</sup> She excused his ungracious behaviour including his attitudes to the *philosophes* and abandonment of his children, considering that, as a genius, a divine spirit and passion had moved him.<sup>107</sup> Her depictions of Rousseau, therefore, accord with the positive nature of passion as a source of artistic creation, as defined by Diderot and Turgot. At the same time, Staël rejected the view that the overflow of passion had affected Rousseau and driven him mad, as was advanced by Turgot and other *philosophes*. To refute the *philosophes*, she suggested that Rousseau turned to sentiment as a moral guide for his reason.<sup>108</sup> Moreover, by indicating that Rousseau never denied the progress of modern civilisation but only decried its consequences, she justified Rousseau's status as a man of the enlightenment.<sup>109</sup>

The main point of this argument is that Staël contests the classical dichotomy between reason and emotion, which was firmly established in the minds of well-educated Frenchmen. From Rousseau, she learned that sentiment constitutes a moral basis of reason, as opposed to rational and scientific reasoning that is completely cut off from emotion.<sup>110</sup> At the same time, Staël's definition of sentiment contradicts the view of passion as constituting the pursuit of self-interest central to the discourse on natural sociability advanced by sensationalist *philosophes* and economists. Neither is it in accord with Scottish enlightenment philosophers such as Shaftesbury, Hume and Smith, who elevated the status of emotions like sympathy and pity to a superior moral quality of altruism and friendship.<sup>111</sup> Smith defines altruistic feelings such as pity and compassion as spontaneous feelings, although he does not escape sensationalist philosophy when he sees virtue as being derived from pleasure and pain.<sup>112</sup> In this respect, Staël wrote against Smith, stating 'l'inconvénient . . . est de resserrer la pensée qui faisait naître le mot qu'on a défini . . .'.<sup>113</sup>

According to Staël, sentiment constitutes a psychological mechanism for preventing the overflow of a passion and its negative consequence. It is a moral state where both reason and emotion are applied to making an instinctive moral judgement on human conduct. Staël's definition of sentiment points to the ethical foundation of individuals, acknowledging the good intentions that individuals naturally possess, including an altruistic and disinterested attitude towards others. Sentiment encompasses the emotions of ordinary individuals, the sources of artistic and intellectual impetus, and

the aesthetic sensibility of a genius such as Rousseau, although she stresses that a rigorous definition of the term is always elusive.<sup>114</sup>

Staël turns to Rousseau's moral authority as *Helvétique* to define sentiment. She transforms Rousseau's 'return to nature' into a return to the Swiss countryside:

La nature en Suisse est si bien d'accord avec les grandes passions: comme elle ajoute à l'effet de la touchante scène de la Meillerie!: comme l'on sent vivement que le cœur serait plus ému, s'ouvrirait plus à l'amour près de ces rochers qui menacent les cieus, à l'aspect de ce lac immense . . . .<sup>115</sup>

What Staël underlines here is the purity and goodness of sentiment of Swiss country men and women in opposition to the corrupted mores of modern civilisation that pervaded upper-class Parisian society. Purity of heart, passion and sentiment are seen as analogous to the visual impact of natural scenery or the Swiss countryside. In fact, Staël refers to the Christian faith that she and her father shared with Rousseau as Genevan Calvinism in opposition to French atheist *philosophes* such as Diderot, d'Holbach and Helvétius. She therefore underlined that religion and philosophy were compatible from the point of view of a Genevan Calvinist<sup>116</sup> and sympathised with Rousseau's description of *Vicaire Savoyard's* profession of faith:

Rousseau croyait à l'existence de Dieu, par son esprit et par son cœur. Qu'elle est belle sa lettre à l'archevêque de Paris. Quel chef d'œuvre d'éloquence dans le sentiment, de métaphysique dans les preuves, que la Profession de foi du vicaire savoyard. Rousseau était le seul homme de génie de son temps qui respectât les pieuses pensées, dont nous avons tant de besoin.<sup>117</sup>

However, Staël does not defend Rousseau unreservedly since she also suggests that sentiment is compatible with modern civilisation. This is where the breakdown of the dichotomy between reason and emotion leads to the elimination of another artificial division, nature and society, which constitutes a major philosophical axis of enlightenment philosophy. And this is where, along with her parents, Staël champions the viewpoint of the *philosophes* in opposition to Rousseau.

Staël suggests that Rousseau's paradox of opposing nature to society derives more from a heuristic wish to clarify and criticise the present state of society than to glorify the savage state of humans for its own sake.<sup>118</sup> At the same time, she disagrees with Rousseau's dichotomy between good nature and bad society and replaces it with a dichotomy between a natural society and institutional society.<sup>119</sup> In contrast to Rousseau, Staël asserts that primitive goodness might be preserved among civilised men by means of a proper education of sentiment.<sup>120</sup> The fusion between nature and society is possible because she assumes that nature intervenes in modern life via Providence and the cultivation of one's intellectual aptitude is, in itself, an exploitation of nature, contrary to what Rousseau suggested.<sup>121</sup> This is why Staël emphasised that the education of sentiment (religious education) should be started earlier than Rousseau suggests in *Emile*.<sup>122</sup>

The moral implication of Staël's emphasis on sentiment in the context of modern civilisation is that in the division between absolute monarchists and atheist



*philosophes*, both of whom accept the imposition of a social doctrine from the sovereign state in the manner of Hobbes, Staël places the individual's faculty of judgement above the temporary political and religious authority in the name of sentiment. She therefore acclaims the validity of the free will of individuals against the *philosophes* who submit man's conscience to the civil authority. This is where Rousseau, as a Genevan Calvinist, stands as an emblematic figure for individual liberty.<sup>123</sup>

Moreover, the fusion between reason and emotion in the name of sentiment was politically significant in the historical context of 1788–1789. Staël asserts that sentiment characterises the virtuous moral disposition of the political elite and it is exemplified by Necker.<sup>124</sup> She links Rousseau to Necker within an ethical perspective and asserts that the profession of faith of *vicaire savoyard* was a mere forerunner of Necker's book entitled *De l'importance des opinions religieuses*.<sup>125</sup> In addition, she judged that Necker was superior to Rousseau because he was a pragmatic policy-maker and not a speculative *philosophe*.<sup>126</sup> She therefore concluded that Necker was 'le plus grand administrateur de son siècle, le génie le plus clair et le plus juste'.<sup>127</sup>

Finally, Staël emphasised that, in the name of sentiment, Necker's virtuous moral disposition was synonymous with his capacity to reunite moderate political groups against political extremism despite their differences:<sup>128</sup> 'il me semble que l'âme n'a toute sa force qu'en s'abandonnant, et je ne connais qu'un homme qui ait su joindre la chaleur à la modération, soutenir avec éloquence des opinions également éloignées de tous les extrêmes, et faire éprouver pour la raison la passion qu'on n'avait jusqu'alors inspirée que pour les systèmes'.<sup>129</sup>

At this stage, Staël's hagiography of Necker functions as an invitation to the group of economists to rally to Necker in order to constitute a political force of aristocratic sensibility against democratic sensibility. From this perspective, her adamant negation of the overflow of a passion can be interpreted as analogous to her political purpose of constraining the economists within the boundary of the *société* in the name of sentiment.

A major theme of *Lettres sur Rousseau* is Staël's evaluation of Rousseau's character and his life. She takes up the debate on whether or not Rousseau's real character corresponded to his definition of virtue; a debate that had preoccupied Rousseau's contemporaries up to his death in 1778.<sup>130</sup> As I mentioned earlier, the crucial point of this debate that excited the generation of Staël's parents and the *philosophes* was whether or not to justify the social and economic status quo of French society, and pre-existing property relations, or to imagine that it might be changeable.<sup>131</sup>

Although Staël denies that Rousseau was mad, she appears to be making a qualitative distinction between sentiment and passion as well as a fragile border which separates them when she makes the statement that Rousseau committed suicide.<sup>132</sup> To account for his allegedly voluntary death, she offered two reasons: first, she suggested that the adultery of his wife, who was from a lower social class, caused him great chagrin,<sup>133</sup> and second, she emphasised that his complete physical and intellectual isolation from the *société* led him to melancholic thoughts.<sup>134</sup> Staël's account of

Rousseau's suicide implies that in addition to her hostility to the lower social classes, Staël clearly refutes the moral legitimacy of Rousseau's rejection of modern civilisation.

Finally, Staël presented her personal view of the ongoing political crisis in a vague manner in discussing Rousseau's *contrat social*.<sup>135</sup> She was content with citing Rousseau's idea that a legitimate government would necessitate the nation's consent to be governed.<sup>136</sup> She also repeated the prevailing opinion according to which the ideas of the *Contrat social*, as applicable to small countries, were not a realistic solution to the political and financial crisis of a large empire such as the French monarchy.<sup>137</sup>

At the same time, Staël wrote: 'l'enthousiasme est permis dans le sentiment mais jamais dans le projet'.<sup>138</sup> She then continued: 'il [Rousseau] voulait ramener les hommes à une sorte d'état, dont l'âge d'or de la fable donne seul l'idée, également éloigné des inconvénients de la barbarie et de ceux de la civilisation. Ce projet sans doute est une chimère'.<sup>139</sup> At this stage, Staël is again repeating her hostility to Rousseau's idea of the state of nature and questioning of the social and economic status quo. She also equates Rousseau with the young generation of economists in terms of the principle of equality. Having objected to the economists' *doctrinaire* approach to change society in a sweeping manner that was to be implemented during revolutionary France, Staël was opposed to giving political power to the common people because she believed it would eventually destroy modern civilisation.<sup>140</sup>

Finally, it must be asked how Staël's discussions fit in with the discourse on natural sociability. In this respect, she accepted the coexistence of two diverging ideas on natural sociability, mirroring her care in combining the two competing viewpoints of Rousseau and the *philosophes*. I have already suggested that Staël turned to Rousseau as a paragon of liberty in opposition to the *philosophes*. In the name of sentiment, she appealed to the cosmopolitan tradition of Genevan Calvinism and attributed the moral and spiritual root of individual liberty to the fusion between reason and emotion. She perceived Rousseau as the forerunner of Necker in terms of his fostering of the spiritual current of Swiss cosmopolitanism in the *société*.<sup>141</sup>

Staël's rejection of Rousseau's glorification of the state of nature is founded upon two reasons: one, already discussed, is based on her opposition to Rousseau's questioning of the social and economic status quo; the other reason derives from her gender. The importance of this, seen in her view of natural sociability, is inevitably based on women's reproductive functions, as opposed to male thinkers such as Rousseau who, as a man, consider that man's complete autonomy from society is possible.<sup>142</sup>

Although Staël championed the discourse on natural sociability in opposition to Rousseau and in line with the *philosophes*, what distinguished her from the *philosophes* was that, in the name of sentiment, she forwarded the spiritual quality of the human bond in opposition to the materialistic and utilitarian bond that was supposed to unite men and women according to the *philosophes*. In this sense, her emphasis on religion as a Genevan Calvinist matches her gender.

Staël allocated women to the private sphere of the home, which reflected the moral and social constraint of her family background. She associated natural sociability with romantic love<sup>143</sup> and underlined that the climax of romantic love was marriage.<sup>144</sup> In addition, in discussing Rousseau's opposition to establishing theatres in Geneva, she agreed with the total separation of men and women in social life.<sup>145</sup> In other words, she basically accepts Rousseau's domestic vision of women in the name of sentiment.<sup>146</sup> By way of sentiment, domestic women are to govern their men in the private sphere and exhort them to become active citizens in line with Rousseau and the Genevan middle-class social habits.

At the same time, Staël suggests that the moral inspiration of Swiss cosmopolitan culture should be combined with the cultural and social practices of the *société*. This is why, not content with women's exclusively domestic roles as wives and mothers, Staël suggests that the moral influence of womanhood might extend into the public sphere through salons and literary culture. However, even in these cases, her perception of women as primarily agents of social and moral regeneration remains unchanged because she learned from her predecessors, and her mother in particular, that women who opened salons had a moral mission to civilise men out of a pragmatic concern to pacify society.<sup>147</sup>

At this point, as far as women of the salons were concerned, Staël welcomed the *philosophes'* standpoint since the definition of women of the salons as moral exemplars for their male counterparts is central to their discourse on natural sociability. Some *philosophes* described women of the salons as embodying modern civilisation.<sup>148</sup> As Dena Goodman demonstrates, women of the salons occupied a specific function in the enlightenment project after the 1750s; they maintained order in the Republic of Letters by enforcing the rules of polite conversation and shaped public opinion in their salons.<sup>149</sup> Female rule and governance as represented by Mme Necker were indispensable to shaping public opinion out of the particularistic interests of male participants.<sup>150</sup>

In this context, Rousseau attributed the moral root of corrupted civilisation to the influence of women of the salons over French culture and over men of letters. In his view, men lowered themselves to earn women's admiration in salon culture.<sup>151</sup> Disagreeing with Rousseau in many respects, sensationalist *philosophes* and economists started to glorify domestic women.<sup>152</sup> For example, Helvétius linked marriage with love founded upon sexuality, which he considered an indispensable component of happiness.<sup>153</sup> His view of women was then adopted by his disciples, including the young generation of economists of the late 1780s to the point that love, including physical relations, became an important political issue that justified women's exclusion from the public sphere.<sup>154</sup> Consequently, although passions were central to ideas of ideologues, Cabanis depreciated women's passion, which he considered was unfit for intellectual achievement or active citizenship.<sup>155</sup>

When Staël opened her salon, after her marriage in 1786, the political influence of women of the salons in producing public opinion had largely declined. By then, the consensual nature of public opinion had been replaced by the controversial and

disputatious tones of political tracts written by men from a larger section of society. Moreover, men of a democratic temperament, including economists, started to meet without the presence of women.<sup>156</sup>

This motivated Staël to revive women's role in salons and came to assert a women-centred vision of public opinion. Staël suggests that women should shape public opinion in the modern era by transmitting the civilizing and prescriptive force of salon culture to literary culture, and that a woman of the salons in modern times could simultaneously be a woman author. She permits women to publish their opinions so far as to sustain the moral and cultural mission to civilise men and to prevent open violence in society. Accordingly, she questioned some aspects of Rousseau's opinions on women.

Above all, Staël contested Rousseau's idea that women were incapable of writing with sentiment and passion.<sup>157</sup> Moreover, she pointed out that men's virtue was degraded under a despotic monarchy, meaning that, according to the Republic, men were supposed to develop virtue by practising liberty.<sup>158</sup> In contrast, she maintained that women remained domestic slaves under any political regime and their moral quality was, therefore, not so much affected by despotism as by men.<sup>159</sup> Consequently, Staël asserted that women should preserve their moral influence in public opinion in France where only public opinion could open a breach in the absolutist system.<sup>160</sup> Finally, Staël believed that if women were to maintain moral independence from men, they needed to be educated, and she attacked one of the most conservative aspects of Rousseau's thinking about women. In opposition to Rousseau, Staël suggested that education was necessary for upper-class women on the whole because it would give them a sense of moral independence.<sup>161</sup> Consequently, they would confine themselves to domestic subservience deliberately rather than through ignorance.<sup>162</sup>

Staël's contradictory description of women's social roles reflects her complex personal circumstances: she came from a Genevan Calvinist family background, yet she was born and brought up at the height of the *société*. Because of her family background, Staël was exposed to the double standard regarding women's social role inherent in Rousseau's Genevan middle-class and the *philosophes'* Parisian upper-class perceptions of women inherent to the discourse on natural sociability. Her characterisation of women's social roles derives from a delicate equilibrium between Paris and Geneva, society and nature, or the philosophical discussions of the *philosophes* and Rousseau, and she perceived their combination in her mother.<sup>163</sup> In this respect, historians tend to depict their relationship entirely as Staël rejecting her mother.<sup>164</sup> Such an interpretation, which is compatible with their notorious antagonistic relations, is also convenient to justify a break between enlightenment and revolutionary France.<sup>165</sup> And yet, Mme Necker undeniably influenced Staël in moral terms.<sup>166</sup>

Susan Necker originated from a typical Swiss middle-class family background. She was the only daughter of a pastor in Lausanne. She had to support herself as a governess of a wealthy Swiss family in Paris until she met her future husband. Nevertheless, owing to her liberal-minded father, she was exceptionally well- educated,

which distinguished her from the average middle-class Swiss woman. Her contacts with Voltaire and Gibbon and her participation in theatrical plays in Lausanne indicate that she was simultaneously exposed to the social life of the upper class. This explains why she had no difficulties opening a literary salon in the *société*. Although her Parisian contemporaries criticised her lack of manners and elegance, she was appreciated by her masculine guests such as Diderot for her natural disposition, which derived, in fact, from her Swiss middle-class background.<sup>167</sup>

Her personal background also formed her religious and spiritual ideas. Despite the success of her literary salon, Mme Necker remained above all a pious and devoted wife, unlike unfaithful French upper-class women.<sup>168</sup> She engaged in a wide range of charity activities, while sustaining her salon to promote her husband's political career. The example of her parents, coupled with the Swiss middle-class family tradition, reinforced Staël's idealised view of marriage. In contrast, her own marriage to M. de Staël which, according to the prevailing French upper-class standard, was founded exclusively upon mutual material interests, proved to be disastrous to her personal happiness. Such an experience must have increased her critical view of family relations among the upper-class French.

Staël broke down the dichotomy between reason and emotion on an individual level. However, she preserved this same binary opposition on a social and biological level, in line with the social and mental framework of her time, which allocated women to the domain of emotion, religion and the domestic sphere. Such a seemingly positive gender bias favouring women is in fact a negative trap, preventing them from achieving substantial equality with their male partners. It also reflects Staël's notion of women as essentially historical, reflecting the uncritical acceptance of unequal social values attributed to women. Consequently, she adopted an ad hoc attitude with regard to women's social role. On the one hand, she does not question Rousseau's view that women should remain devoted wives and mothers. On the other, she approves of the legitimacy of women publishing their opinions and engaging in public discourse to function as moral and political arbiters of the same public discussions in which their male counterparts engaged. She assumes that the moral and spiritual influence of women via sentiment would flow into society either through the domestic sphere of the salon or the public sphere of the literary world. She appeals to the role of women as guardians of social mores and agents of social and moral change.

In suggesting this, Staël transposed the social and cultural practice of the *société* into the revolutionary period. At the same time, the fact that she claimed the right to publish her opinions contradicts the self-effacing role of women of the enlightenment salons such as her mother. Staël must have defined her future role when she wrote: 'si les femmes, s'élevant au-dessus de leur sort, oseraient prétendre à l'éducation des hommes, si elles savoient dire ce qu'ils doivent faire, si elles avoient le sentiment de leurs actions, quelle noble destinée leur seroit réservée'.<sup>169</sup>

*Lettres sur Rousseau* was re-edited and exerted a continuous influence until 1815, and as a woman author Staël certainly embodied the moral and political arbiter of society by publishing political and literary essays whose aim was to promote

a *rapprochement* between monarchists and republicans.<sup>170</sup> And yet, in her two novels, she expressed frustrations and deceptions about being a liberal woman in revolutionary France.

Staël's first novel, *Delphine*, can be described as being a novel about public opinion and its injustice; *Delphine* 'charmingly civilised and yet almost savage by her moral qualities' is indeed Staël's idealised figure of the liberal incarnated in a woman's body.<sup>171</sup> *Delphine* exercises independent thinking in terms of moral judgements and even approves of divorce, a controversial issue in 1802 when the novel was published. However, Staël demonstrates that such a character would not lead women to happiness since the barrier in terms of 'préjugés', meaning 'opinions' (Léonce) and liberty (Delphine) that pertains to the amorous couple, eventually leads to their tragic end.<sup>172</sup> The novel shows that male-centred public opinion prohibited women from using critical reason in revolutionary France. Therefore, it was from an ironic perspective that Staël adopted from her mother the following maxim:<sup>173</sup> 'Un homme doit savoir braver l'opinion, une femme s'y soumettre' and condemned the tyranny of opinion.<sup>174</sup>

Finally, Staël's second novel, *Corinne*, might be interpreted as a double refutation of *Lettres sur Rousseau*. *Corinne* is a poet and actress, whose quality is, according to Marso, 'the most subversive' to the masculine public sphere.<sup>175</sup> Beyond the role of moral arbiters, *Corinne* is indeed a self-asserting woman who expresses her passion in love and art, which apparently transgressed Staël's own boundary of liberal women in *Lettres*. However, 'opinion' again plays against her. Such a figure is too frightening to her lover and, torn between love and liberty in terms of creativity, *Corinne* can never find happiness. And yet, more docile and conventional women cannot be happy either because it is difficult to find love in marriage.

## VI: Conclusion

*Lettres sur Rousseau* was a reaction to highly polemical debates on liberty that originated in the discourse on natural sociability engaged in by the *philosophes* and Rousseau and that led to the debate between Necker and the economists during the 1770s and the 1780s. I have suggested that Staël combined the two opposing viewpoints of the *philosophes* and Rousseau on the one hand and of Necker and the economists on the other into a set of liberal values applicable to a new political era, despite some self-contradictions. Staël emphasised that sentiment was a moral source of individuals' ethical autonomy regardless of time, space and gender. This is her ultimate definition of individual liberty as a Swiss Calvinist in opposition to that of the *philosophes*. By suggesting this, she objected to French discussions on liberty inherent in the discourse on natural sociability because it was utilitarian and based on self-interest. Moreover, she was opposed to *Hobbisme*, according to which the role of the absolute sovereign in the form of law was essential to shaping the liberty of his or her subjects via education, social communication, or economic exchange. Nonetheless, Staël partially supported the discourse on natural sociability along with the

*philosophes*. She suggested that liberty was possible in the midst of modern civilisation, and approved the moral legitimacy of the social and economic status quo of French absolute monarchy, contrary to Rousseau.

Although Staël seemed to agree to endow the nation with an institutional means of controlling the royal government, she considered that the economic interests of those privileged members that were instrumental in the continuing development of the arts and sciences, or the *société*, should be protected in a new political order. Her specific concern to preserve modern civilisation reveals that her view of society was essentially static and socially limited to the *société* of the *ancien régime*. She was reluctant to accept wider social and economic change as was advanced by the young generation of economists who originated from Mme Helvétius's salon. In this light, Staël's *Lettres sur Rousseau* represented a political call to rally the young generation of economists who were situated at the margin between aristocratic sociability and democratic sociability to Necker, whose political opinions were confined to aristocratic sociability. By so doing, she tried to establish a party of liberals in the face of the democratic revolution.

Ultimately, Staël distinguished herself from influential male thinkers of her time in terms of her insistence on female-centred social and moral change. With regard to women's social role, she defined a double standard that resulted from a synthesis between Rousseau and the *philosophes'* viewpoints on natural sociability. She suggested that women should initiate the moral and social regeneration of the French monarchy by exercising an indirect moral influence over their men in the private sphere of homes and salons on the one hand and in the sphere of public opinion through literature on the other. Her view of women's indirect moral influence with an aim to pacify society reflects that, at this stage, the private sphere of home still exerted a certain public influence. At the same time, the fact that Staël published her opinions allowed her to enter the public sphere, speaking to a larger reading public.

In conclusion, Staël's approach to philosophy and politics was characterised by a constant effort to synthesise mutually opposing groups and ideas, which originated in the *société* of the *ancien régime*. Women of the salons tried to bring men of different opinions towards a common moral and cultural disposition. Staël tried to pass on the social and cultural practice of the *ancien régime* salons to the writing culture of revolutionary France.<sup>176</sup> This indicates clearly that public opinion was central to Staël's political thought; she transformed the enlightenment concept of female-centred aristocratic sociability into sentiment and initiated a liberal political current during the revolutionary period.<sup>177</sup>

## Notes

- [1] Jaume, *L'individu effacé ou le paradoxe du libéralisme français*, 25.
- [2] Delon, "Madame de Staël dans les dictionnaires du bicentenaire", 112. Godechot, Jacques. Foreword, 29.
- [3] Goodman, *The Republic of Letters*. Chartier, Roger. *Les origines culturelles de la révolution française*. Gordon, *Citizens without Sovereignty*.

- [4] Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 30.
- [5] Habermas, *Structural*, 69–70.
- [6] Goodman, *Republic*, 3.
- [7] Goodman, Dena. “Men and Women of Letters.” Vol. 3 of Kors, A. C. ed. *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003: 57.
- [8] Gordon, *Citizens*.
- [9] Goodman, *Republic*. Chartier, *Cultural*. Gordon, *Citizens*.
- [10] Lands, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*.
- [11] Kale, “Women, the Public Sphere, and the Persistence of Salons”. Habermas, *Structural*, 23–30. Furet recognises the continuity between *ancien régime* salons and Revolutionary clubs. Furet, François. *Penser la révolution française*. Paris: Gallimard, 1978.
- [12] Kale, “Women”, 133.
- [13] Jaume, *L'individu*.
- [14] Balayé, Simone. “Staël and Liberty: An Overview”, 13.
- [15] Reddy, “Sentimentalism and its Erasure: The Role of Emotions in the Era of the French Revolution”.
- [16] Reddy, “Sentimentalism,” 111.
- [17] Reddy, *Navigation*, 170.
- [18] Marso, *(Un) Manly Citizens Jean-Jacques Rousseau's and Germaine de Staël's Subversive Women*, 91.
- [19] Goodman, *Republic*, 85.
- [20] Mme de Staël. “Lettres sur les ouvrages et le caractère de J.-J. Rousseau.” In *Œuvres de Jeunesse*. Paris: Desjonquères, 1997: 35.
- [21] Taylor, B. *Rousseau's Contemporary Reputation in France*.
- [22] Barny, *Prélude idéologique à la Révolution Française; Le Rousseauisme avant 1789*, 14–17.
- [23] Kors, A. C. “The Myth of the Coterie Holbachique”.
- [24] Taylor, “Rousseau's”, 1548–49.
- [25] See d'Alembert's letter to Hume on July 21, 1766. Hume, *The Letters of David Hume*, Vol. 2, 412–15. Goodman. “The Hume–Rousseau Affair. Gordon, *Citizens*, 161–3. Hulliung, *The Autocritique of Enlightenment: Rousseau and the Philosophes*.
- [26] Taylor, “Rousseau's”, 1558.
- [27] Hume, *Letters*, 413.
- [28] It was translated and edited by Suard. Gordon, *Citizens*, 129–76.
- [29] Taylor, “Rousseau's”, 1569–70. Diderot wrote so in *Mémoires Secrets* for 20 July 1778. See similar passages in *Essai sur les Règnes de Claude et de Néron* in the same year.
- [30] Staël, “Lettres”, 85. Kohler, Pierre, *Staël et la Suisse*, 92–115.
- [31] Gordon, *Citizens*, 54–55.
- [32] Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph*, 38–39.
- [33] Gordon, *Citizens*, 59–61.
- [34] *Ibid.*, 56.
- [35] “Hobbisme.” In *L'Encyclopédie de Diderot et d'Alembert, CD-Rom PC*. Redon: Paris, 2002.
- [36] Ida, Hisashi. *Genèse d'une morale matérialiste*, 249. See, for example, d'Holbach, *Le système social*. Vol. 3. Paris: Hachette, 1971: 87–89.
- [37] “Hobbisme”.
- [38] The most representative *philosophes* were d'Holbach, Helvétius and to a lesser extent Diderot.
- [39] Derathe, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et la science politique de son temps*, 100–19. Nemours, P. et al., *De l'origine et des progrès d'une science nouvelle*, 17.
- [40] Derathe, *Jean-Jacques*, 144.
- [41] Rosenblatt, *Rousseau and Geneva*, 58–60.



- [42] Rosenblatt, *Rousseau*, 59.
- [43] *Ibid.*, 59. *Journal Etranger* (April 1754), 55.
- [44] Miller, David. "Hume and Possessive Individualism".
- [45] Rosenblatt, *Rousseau*, 59.
- [46] Dent, *A Rousseau Dictionary*, 232–35.
- [47] Rosenblatt, *Rousseau*, 185–91.
- [48] Rousseau, "Economie politique", in *L'Encyclopédie de Diderot et d'Alembert*.
- [49] Helvétius, C. A. *Treatise on Man*, 128.
- [50] *Ibid.*, 143.
- [51] Goodman, "Hume", 177.
- [52] *Ibid.*, 161.
- [53] Hume, *Letters*, vol. 2, 445.
- [54] Suard, Foreword to David Hume, 3.
- [55] Gordon, *Citizens*, 168.
- [56] Gordon, *Citizens*, 168.
- [57] Contemporaries called the physiocrats *economists*. In this article, *economists* refer generally to those who were influenced by the physiocratic school. They include Turgot and his younger disciples such as Condorcet, Sieyès and Roederer.
- [58] Hume, *Letters*, vol. 2, 422.
- [59] *Ibid.*, 426.
- [60] *Ibid.*, 426.
- [61] *Ibid.*, 426.
- [62] *Ibid.*, 426.
- [63] *Ibid.*, 425.
- [64] *Ibid.*, 425.
- [65] *Ibid.*, 430.
- [66] *Ibid.*, 431.
- [67] Ida, *Genèse*, 19–20.
- [68] See Helvétius, *Treatise* (Section III, Chapter 9).
- [69] "Génie", in *L'Encyclopédie de Diderot et d'Alembert*.
- [70] *Ibid.*
- [71] Turgot, Jacques, *Ecrits économiques*, 224.
- [72] *Ibid.*, 224.
- [73] *Ibid.*, 225.
- [74] *Ibid.*, 225.
- [75] See the letter from Morellet to Hume on 8 September 1766. Hume, *Letters*, vol. 2, 443–44.
- [76] Hirschman, *Passions*, 97.
- [77] Hont and Ignatieff, "Needs and Justice in the *Wealth of Nations*, 1–44. Whatmore, "Adam Smith's Role in the French Revolution".
- [78] Scurr, Ruth. "The Social Foundation of the Modern Republic", Ph.D. diss., 26–28.
- [79] Sonenscher, "The Nation's Debt and the Birth of the Modern Republic: the French Fiscal Deficit and the Politics of the Revolution of 1789", 89–103.
- [80] Nemours, *l'Origine*, 17.
- [81] *Journal d'agriculture, du commerce et des finances*, for example.
- [82] Hont and Ignatieff, "Needs", 13–26.
- [83] Necker created two provincial assemblies in Berry and Haute Guyenne in 1780. In 1788, he opened assemblies of notables. Egret, Jean. *Necker*, 125–40.
- [84] Necker, *Eloge de Jean-Baptist Colbert*, 69.
- [85] Prault, *L'Esprit de Necker*, 44.
- [86] Sonenscher, "The Nation's Debt and the Birth of the Modern Republic, Part 2, 303–04.

- [87] Grange, *Les idées de Necker*, 157–61.
- [88] Necker, *Eloge*, 20–21.
- [89] *Ibid.*, 21.
- [90] Necker, Jacques. *Sur la législation et le commerce des grains*, 278.
- [91] Necker, *Sur la législation*, 278.
- [92] Hirschman, *Passions*, 67–114.
- [93] For example, both groups promoted public opinion.
- [94] Necker, *De l'importance de l'opinion religieuse*.
- [95] Renauld, *Antoine Destutt de Tracy*.
- [96] Jardin, André. *Histoire du libéralisme politique*, 136–61.
- [97] Condorcet, *Réflexions sur le commerce des blés*, 2.
- [98] *Ibid.*, 2.
- [99] *Ibid.*, 11.
- [100] *Ibid.*, 11–12.
- [101] Anon. *Lettres à M. le comte de M... par M... sur le plan de M. Turgot*.
- [102] Scurr, Ruth. "The Social Foundation of the Modern Republic and Social Equality in Pierre-Louis Roederer's Interpretation of the Modern Republic, 1793".
- [103] Scurr, "Social", 28–30.
- [104] *Ibid.*, 29.
- [105] Sonenscher, "Nation's Debt, Part 2", 306.
- [106] *Ibid.*, 83.
- [107] *Ibid.*, 87.
- [108] *Ibid.*, 22, 26, 41–48.
- [109] *Ibid.*, 62.
- [110] Staël defined sentiment as "un composé de sensations et de pensées que vous ne faites jamais comprendre qu'à l'aide de l'émotion et du jugement réunis". Madame de Staël, *De l'influence des passions suivi de réflexions sur le suicide*, edited by Chantal Thomas. Marseille: Rivages Poche, 2000: 242.
- [111] Ida, *Genèse*, 246–50.
- [112] Staël, "Lettres," 242.
- [113] *Ibid.*, 242.
- [114] *Ibid.*, 242.
- [115] *Ibid.*, 60.
- [116] *Ibid.*, 73.
- [117] *Ibid.*, 73.
- [118] *Ibid.*, 42.
- [119] *Ibid.*, 85.
- [120] *Ibid.*, 67.
- [121] *Ibid.*, 43.
- [122] *Ibid.*, 72.
- [123] *Ibid.*, 77.
- [124] *Ibid.*, 78.
- [125] *Ibid.*, 73. Domenach, Jacques. "L'éloge de Rousseau prétexte à l'hagiographie de Necker chez Madame de Staël", 79.
- [126] Domenech, "L'éloge", 79.
- [127] Staël, "Lettres," 73.
- [128] Domenech, "L'éloge", 77.
- [129] Staël, "Lettres", 43 (emphasis added).
- [130] Taylor, "Rousseau", 1545–1574. Barny, *Prélude*, 14–17.
- [131] Taylor, "Rousseau", 1566–1567.

- [132] After Rousseau's death, some assumed that he committed suicide. Staël revived this rumour. Barny, *Prélude*, 38.
- [133] Staël, "Lettres", 94.
- [134] *Ibid.*, 94.
- [135] Tatin-Gourier, J–J. *Le contrat social en question*, 90–95.
- [136] Staël, "Lettres", 75.
- [137] *Ibid.*, 42, 75–76. Rousseau, "The Social Contract" and Other Later Political Writings, 76–81.
- [138] Staël, "Lettres", 43.
- [139] *Ibid.*, 42.
- [140] *Ibid.*, 77.
- [141] *Ibid.*, 73–74.
- [142] Schwartz, *The Sexual Politics of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*.
- [143] Staël, "Lettres", 51.
- [144] *Ibid.*, 55.
- [145] *Ibid.*, 46.
- [146] *Ibid.*, 47.
- [147] Goodman, *Republic*, 1–11, Tenenbaum, S. "The Coppet Circle", 454–55. Lougee, Carolyne C. "Le Paradis des Femmes".
- [148] Goodman, *Republic*, 8.
- [149] *Ibid.*, 91.
- [150] *Ibid.*, 90–135.
- [151] *Ibid.*, 54.
- [152] Hulliung, *Autocratique*, 137–45.
- [153] Helvétius, *Treatise on Man* (Section VIII, Chapters X and XI): 220–23.
- [154] Fraisse, *Muse de la raison*. Hulliung, *Autocritique*, 137–45.
- [155] Staum, Martin, S. "Ideologues." In *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*, Vol. III: 248.
- [156] Goodman, *Republic*, 242.
- [157] Staël, "Lettres", 47.
- [158] *Ibid.*, 46.
- [159] *Ibid.*, 46.
- [160] *Ibid.*, 46.
- [161] *Ibid.*, 69.
- [162] *Ibid.*, 69.
- [163] On Susan Necker, see Kohler, *Madame de Staël et la Suisse*, 1–29. D'Haussonville, *Le Salon de Madame Necker*.
- [164] D'Haussonville, *Le Salon*, vol. 2: 30. Gutwirth, M. *Madame de Staël, Novelist: The Emergence of the Artist as Woman*. Urbana–Chicago–London: University of Illinois Press, 1978: 35. Goodman, "Filial Rebellion in the Salon: Madame Geoffrin and Her Daughter." *French Historical Studies* 16, no.1 (Spring 1989): 28–47.
- [165] Goodman, "Filial". Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment*.
- [166] Roussel, "La critique de Madame de Staël", 315–58.
- [167] Glotz and Madeleine, *Salons du XVIIIe Siècle*, 295–338.
- [168] Glotz and Madeleine, *Salons*, 295–338.
- [169] Staël, "Lettres", 63.
- [170] Takeda, Chinatsuj. "Madame de Staël." In *Encyclopedia of the Nineteenth-Century Thought*, edited by G. Claeys. London: Routledge, 2004: 455–58.
- [171] Madame de Staël, *Delphine*, edited by S. Balayé and L. Omacini. Vol. II. Geneva: Droz, 1990: 1003–04.
- [172] Balayé, *Lumières et liberté*, 127.
- [173] Balayé, *Mme de Staël*, 70.

- [174] Staël, *Delphine*, vol. I, 1.  
 [175] Marso, *Unmanly*, 108–09.  
 [176] Takeda, “Staël”, 458.  
 [177] Takeda, Chinatsu. “Deux origines du courant libéral en France”.

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