

# Principles of Politics





*Benjamin Constant*



Principles of Politics  
Applicable to  
All Governments

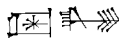


*BENJAMIN CONSTANT*

*Edited by* Etienne Hofmann

*Translated from the French by*  
Dennis O’Keeffe

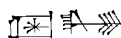
*Introduction by* Nicholas Capaldi



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## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE



*Principles of Politics Applicable to All Governments* (1810) by Benjamin Constant (1767–1830) has never before been translated into English in its entirety. It is hard to judge why it is not better known, why it has been relatively neglected. It is written in graceful and clear prose. It is informed by very wide reading and understanding of philosophy, history, economics, politics, and law. The failure of recent scholarship to pay this enormous work more attention may be attributed to the general demise of liberal thought which began in mid-nineteenth-century France and which itself remains unexplained. Frédéric Bastiat (1801–1850), another significant social scientist, in some ways Constant's heir, has suffered similarly from neglect by posterity. Neither man is included in *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* (edited by Alan Bullock et al., London, Macmillan, 1988) nor in Roger Scruton's *Dictionary of Politics* (London, Macmillan, 1982). Scruton later came to regard the omission of Constant in this first edition as a serious underestimation of a writer now emerging as a formidable figure in the debate on political and economic modernity. Scruton's 1996 edition (London, Macmillan), therefore, while it still omits Bastiat, has included a pithy summary of the main positions of *Principles of Politics*.

This first complete translation into English of *Principles of Politics* is based solely on Etienne Hofmann's 1980 edition. Constant's book in fact appears as Tome II of this 1980 publication by Librairie Droz of Geneva, Tome I of which is a version of Hofmann's Ph.D. dissertation on Constant. I have translated all eighteen books, together with the lengthy Additions which Constant appended to them. The latter are a series of summaries, extensions, and further thoughts on the eighteen books of the main text. My intention throughout has been to retain as much as possible of the general elegance and subtle rhetoric of Constant's writing while seeking to render it in accurate, graceful, and accessible English. Where meaning and aesthetic effect permit, I have not only kept to an English prose as close as possible to the exact sense of the French original but have also striven where the

French vocabulary has close English counterparts to use those counterparts. The only notable exception is the word “liberté” with its two possible translations in English, “freedom” and “liberty.” In most cases I have preferred the word *freedom* as capturing in English a truer representation of *liberté* with its nuanced variations in French.

As far as the English language permits, I have also attempted to retain in translation even the longest of Constant’s very long sentences. There is no disadvantage to exposition and meaning in this, since even within these very long sentences there is a shining clarity to be found. Only where the length of sentence hindered intelligibility in English have I broken the construction. Thus for the most part I have kept the original structure.

This translation does not attempt to reproduce Dr. Hofmann’s elaborate *apparatus criticus*. Most students or even professional teachers of politics do not need to know, when they are working on Constant in English, in which handwritten folio a particular passage appears in the French original. Nor are slight errors or verbal infelicities in the original text of great interest to those whose first wish is to read an accurate English version of Constant’s meaning. Thus, I have kept only those many footnotes which are intended to add to the reader’s understanding of Constant’s thinking and erudition. I have added a few footnotes of my own by way of clarification and commentary. In those instances in which Hofmann uses the French first-person plural, “nous,” I have substituted the word “Hofmann.”

Constant’s text has some errors. Sometimes there are references with inaccurate page or tome details. Sometimes there are mechanical slips in the writing. Hofmann often identifies these. I have mostly corrected them in the translation, so that the text reads more comfortably and fluently. Constant was particularly lax in referring to titles of works (and titles of chapters within works) of Jeremy Bentham. He commonly gives these titles in paraphrased or shortened form. In a work originally constructed with none of the benefits of a technology we now take for granted, it did not seem to me to the purpose that the reader in English be informed of every last little slip of administration or error in vocabulary.

There is one kind of inconsistency to which, however, the attention of readers should be drawn. Sometimes in the main text Constant is not consistent with his chapter titles, which are listed at the front of each book and appear again at the head of each chapter. Sometimes the titles vary between the two locations. I have drawn readers’ attention to these differences as, potentially at least, of some conceptual importance.

There would be a greater case for noting, as Hofmann’s text constantly

does, which sentences and paragraphs from *Principles of Politics* also appear verbatim in Constant's earlier or later works. Even these notes, however, seem likely to be of great concern only to those readers who would also be able to consult the French text at will. In the English text they would serve mostly to interrupt the flow of the reading. For this reason I have not included them. I have, however, inserted in the text Hofmann's page numbers in brackets.

The Additions, longer by far than any of the individual eighteen books of the main text, are intended by Constant both to tighten and to extend and elaborate the arguments of the main text. Constant often picks out a phrase or clause from his original text in order to expand on it in his Additions. In the English version of the Additions these key phrases or clauses appear in italics. Where the word order of English translation permits, I have translated the chosen words in the Additions with the same English used to translate the main text. Where the word order of English is different I have merely translated Constant's chosen words in the Additions. Little meaning has been lost; and, indeed, Constant was fairly careless in his own word sequence and self-quotation. His phrases chosen from the main text to be included in the Additions are quite often abbreviated or altered in some ways. For the most part the Additions stand as commentary in their own right.

Constant often emphasized other writers' words and occasionally his own by underlining. In the English text, such underlining is indicated by the use of italics. Where Constant quotes the verbatim words of another writer, those words are shown in the new English text within quotation marks.

The shortcomings of some of the basic vocabulary have simply to be accepted. Constant uses "power," "authority," "government," "the governors," the "governing class," "social authority," and sometimes even "force" more or less synonymously. The important conceptual distinctions which mainstream twentieth-century philosophers and social theorists, guided by Max Weber, have made between the concepts of authority and power are not there in *Principles*, or at least not overtly. The distinction was not new to Weber. It can be found in Machiavelli. Not till Weber, however, does the distinction become important in political writing, and Constant is not privy to it. Modern Western political science tends, under Weber's tutelage, to see authority as a special *kind* of power—legitimated and lawful—above all because it is acceded to by the people over whom it is wielded.

Constant is, however, though not verbally, at least conceptually in tune with the distinction. One might say that his most important adjective is *legitimate*. For him proper government is legitimate government, and illegit-

imate government is despotism. Even one arbitrary (despotic) act is for Constant a step on the road toward despotism. Constant's most repeated theme throughout the book is the disastrous results which flow from the abandonment of the rule of law.

Much of Constant's political life was shaped by his experience of the French Revolution, and his subsequent thinking and writing were in reaction to what he regarded as a republicanism gone catastrophically astray. Constant is, like Machiavelli, whom he much admired, by preference a republican, but he is perfectly willing to admit that monarchy can be a civilized form of government. *Principles of Politics* deliberately eschews all constitutional questions such as republicanism versus monarchy and the various merits of different arrangements of first and second chambers, modes of election, and so on. Instead, Constant is out to construct, as the full title of his work makes clear, a lawful politics "applicable to all forms of government."

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Many scholars have helped the translation on its way. I must especially thank Dr. Simon Green of All Souls College, Oxford, who was first to persuade me of Constant's outstanding intellectual penetration and prescience. Professor David Marsland of Brunel University has been a constant source of encouragement and optimism. I must add that Dr. Sean Gabb has been throughout more than willing to share with me his extraordinary command of the mysteries of information technology whenever I needed advice or when my computer decided to behave eccentrically.

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I must express my particular thanks to Mr. Michael Winterburn for his invaluable and unstinting help and advice. We have spent many hours in concentrated discussion of Constant and *Les Principes de politique*.

Last as well as first in my thanks must come my wife, Mary. As in everything else, her support and advice have been indispensable during this translation.





## INTRODUCTION



Benjamin Constant was the key thinker in the French classical liberal tradition between Montesquieu and Tocqueville. He was born 25 October 1767 in Lausanne, Switzerland, to Henriette de Chandieu and Juste Constant de Rebecque. His mother, who died shortly after childbirth, was a descendant of a French Huguenot family that had sought refuge in Switzerland from religious persecution. The Protestant—or more specifically, Calvinist—heritage remained an important part of Constant’s framework. His father was a professional soldier in a Swiss regiment in the service of the Netherlands. Constant wrote a detailed account of his private life from 1767 to 1787 in *Le Cahier rouge* (not published until 1907); subsequently he maintained a *Journal intime* (published in unexpurgated form in 1952).

The great intellectual event of Constant’s life occurred when he was sent to Edinburgh to study between 1783 and 1785. There he learned to speak flawless English; he read William Blackstone, David Hume, Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, and Dugald Stewart, as well as Edward Gibbon, Edmund Burke, and William Godwin. The Scottish Enlightenment remained the formative influence on his thought. In a manner not unlike Montesquieu’s, throughout the rest of his life, Constant sought to introduce the principles of British classical liberalism into French political life.

From 1788 until 1794, Constant served in the court of the duke of Brunswick, and in 1789 married a lady of the court, Wilhelmine von Cramm. In 1793, Constant began a relationship with Charlotte von Hardenburg, to whom he was secretly married fifteen years later. This relationship was depicted in a novel, *Cécile*, which was not discovered and published until 1951. In 1794, he met Mme. Germaine de Staël (1766–1817), divorced his then-wife Wilhelmine, and returned with Mme. de Staël to Paris in 1795.

Thus began the stormy intellectual and political relationship between Constant and Mme. de Staël. Germaine de Staël, daughter of the statesman and financier Jacques Necker, was herself a leading intellectual and later the author of important works of literature as well as works on literary theory,

romanticism, and the thought of Rousseau. She was the center of Paris's most brilliant salon and a political activist. Her political model, also influenced by Montesquieu, adhered to British constitutional monarchy, and her political sympathies in France were with the Girondist faction. She has been described as perhaps the most brilliant and influential woman in Europe in her time. Constant, in his novel *Cécile*, described a Mme. de Malbée (i.e., Mme. de Staël) as follows: "Her intellect, the most far-ranging that has ever belonged to any woman, and possibly to any man either, had, in serious discussion, more force than grace, and in what touched the emotional life, a hint of sententiousness and affectation. But in her gaiety there was a certain indefinable charm, a kind of childlike friendliness which captivated the heart and established for the moment a complete intimacy between her and whoever she was talking to." Constant may have fathered her third child, a daughter, Albertine.

Although not originally a French citizen and not present during the dark days of the Revolution, Constant, through his association with Mme. de Staël, became a supporter of the Directory. Within that group, Constant identified not with those who wanted a restored but constitutional monarchy, but instead with those who were working for a republic with citizenship based on the ownership of property. Constant became a French citizen in 1798. Following the coup d'état of 18 brumaire (1799) he was appointed to the new Tribunate, but by 1802 his classical liberal views and association with Mme. de Staël and the classical liberal economist Jean-Baptiste Say had alienated Napoleon. In 1803, he accompanied Mme. de Staël into exile in Germany and Switzerland. During this time they met Goethe, Schiller, and the von Schlegel brothers, and both Constant and Mme. de Staël became imbued with German romanticism. Constant began working on his religious writings, some of which constitute *On Religion Considered in Its Source, Its Forms, and Its Developments* (published in five volumes between 1824 and 1831).

For the next twelve years, until 1815, Constant was an implacable enemy of Napoleon. One result was a classic critique of authoritarianism, *The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation and Their Relation to European Civilization* (1814). Constant was also an adviser to Jean Baptiste Jules Bernadotte, a former Napoleonic general, then Prince Royal of Sweden, and an aspirant to the French throne. When Napoleon briefly returned to power and seemed on the verge of accepting the British model of constitutional monarchy, he, along with Constant's then-mistress Madame Récamier, a friend of Mme. de Staël and reputed to be the most beautiful woman in Europe, met with and persuaded Constant to become *conseiller d'état*. During this "Hundred

Days” period, Constant even drew up a new constitution known as the “Benjamine.” It was under this inspiration that Constant completed and published his longtime work in progress, *Principles of Politics Applicable to All Governments*. This is to be distinguished from the longer 1810 version, edited in 1980 by Etienne Hofmann, on which the 2003 Liberty Fund translation is based. Clearly there is a huge affinity of subject matter, often explicably so. Even so, where the 1815 version is short and pointed, the 1810 is long and discursive. Where the 1815 version focuses repeatedly on constitutional questions and in particular on the civilizational possibilities of constitutional monarchy, the 1810 version explicitly eschews constitutional issues, cleaving instead to a search for the philosophical, economic, and jurisprudential principles which undergird any free society. And in 1810, the bias, if there is one, is slight, but leans all the same towards a republicanism somewhat akin to that of Machiavelli, whom Constant much admired.

On learning of Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo, Constant fled to England and published what many consider to be the first romantic novel, *Adolphe* (1816). He also wrote an apologia that was acceptable to Louis XVIII, paving the way for a return to Paris. During the remainder of his life, Constant was a prolific author and journalist. In 1819, he published the classic essay “The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with That of the Moderns.” The core of the argument is prefigured in Book XVI of the 1810 edition of *The Principles*, which deals with the differences between ancient (political) and modern (civil) freedom. He was to repeat this argument in a famous speech, but this book is the locus classicus. As François Furet has argued, every subsequent French thinker, including Constant, is judged by his interpretation of the Revolution. Constant, like Mme. de Staël, sought to explain how Rousseau’s notion of the general will had been used by Robespierre and others to transform the French Revolution into the Reign of Terror. Constant argued that it was the attempt to institute ancient liberty in a modern context that led to this perversion. Constant went on to argue that representative government was the system the moderns had devised for preserving liberty. His persistent defense of freedom of the press and vociferous opposition to the slave trade are representative of the stands he took on a number of issues.

Constant subsequently served in the Chamber of Deputies, being elected as a deputy for Paris in 1824 and from the Lower Rhine in 1827. Despite failing health, he supported the July Revolution of Louis-Philippe and served as *conseiller d’état* again until his death on December 8, 1830. Like so many other great French thinkers and authors, he is buried in Père-

Lachaise cemetery in Paris, and also like so many others, he had persistently been denied membership in the Académie Française. At the time of Constant's death, Louis Blanc and others tried unsuccessfully to have him entombed in the Panthéon. One of the things that distinguished Constant from other classical liberals of his time, whether French or British, was his recognition of the importance of the spiritual dimension for the sustenance of liberal culture. This view is reflected in *On Religion* and a massive amount of unpublished religious speculation that accumulated over his lifetime.

Constant's *Principles of Politics* is a microcosm of his whole political philosophy and an expression of his political experience. As far back as the period between 1800 and 1803, Constant had begun a project of both translating and commenting on Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*. This evolved into an 1806 draft commentary on Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, and finally, in 1815, during the Hundred Days, into an essay on the *Acte additional aux constitutions de l'empire*—the “Benjamine.” Out of embarrassment over its Napoleonic association, Constant did not include it in his *Cours de politique constitutionnelle* of 1818–20. It was included in the 1861 edition of the *Cours* edited by Édouard Laboulaye.

The *Principes de politique* in all its versions reflected the immense impact of the French Revolution on Constant's thinking. The 1810 edition, however, expresses in purest form the ideas which Constant believed universally applicable to all civilized government. Unlike the 1815 edition, it is in no sense a manual of applied politics. It does not focus on constitutional monarchy or the constitutional balancing of powers and the control of ministers. Despite Constant's gently apparent republicanism, it readily accepts that republics can be despotic and monarchies decent.

Constant, like Tocqueville and Mill afterward, was obsessed with the dangers of popular sovereignty. As he pointed out, where there are no limits on the legislature or the representative body, the representatives (e.g., the Convention during the French Revolution) become not the defenders of liberty, but the agents of tyranny. Constant was focused above all on liberty. The Revolution had destroyed the ancien régime and all its constituent intermediary institutions. Without intermediary institutions, a society of atomized individuals faced an all-powerful state. In order to restore and preserve liberty, new intermediary institutions needed to be established. Prime among these was the free press. It was the free press that provided a context not only for public discussion, but for calling attention to governmental (ministerial) abuse.

In the *Principles* Constant reasserts his lifelong commitment to individual and institutional freedom and the absence of arbitrary power. He affirms