



PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL PASSIONS IN THE WORK OF GERMAINE DE STAËL

A OPINIÃO PÚBLICA E AS PAIXÕES POLÍTICAS NA OBRA DE GERMAINE DE STAËL

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In this paper, I investigate the role of public opinion and De Staël's liberal principles in relation to her psychological image of human nature. De Staël regarded the French Revolution as a new stage of human progress, in which the French people, for the first time, gained a political voice. From her position as a liberal republican, De Staël argues for political progress in the form of civil equality and liberty confirmed by law and political representation, for which public opinion serves as a political tool. I aim to demonstrate that De Staël developed a multi-layered analysis of public opinion as both an emancipatory tool for more equality, justice, and liberty, as well as a discriminating and harmful tool. According to De Staël, human passions play a crucial role in determining the employment and the effects of public opinion, as becomes clear in the case of the trial of Marie-Antoinette.

Keywords: De Staël; French Revolution; public opinion; liberalism; passions.

Neste artigo, investigo o papel da opinião pública e os princípios liberais de De Staël em relação à sua imagem psicológica da natureza humana. De Staël viu a Revolução Francesa como um novo estágio do progresso humano, no qual o povo francês, pela primeira vez, ganhou uma voz política. A partir da sua posição como republicana liberal, De Staël argumenta a favor do progresso político sob a forma de igualdade e liberdade civis, confirmadas pela lei e pela representação política, e em relação às quais a opinião pública serve como ferramenta política. Pretendo demonstrar que De Staël desenvolveu uma análise em camadas da opinião pública como ferramenta emancipatória para uma maior igualdade, justiça e liberdade, mas também como uma ferramenta discriminatória e prejudicial. Segundo De Staël, as paixões humanas desempenham um papel crucial na determinação do uso e efeitos da opinião pública, como é claro no julgamento de Maria Antonieta.

Palavras-chave: De Staël; Revolução Francesa; opinião pública; liberalismo; paixões.

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Introduction

Historian of the French Revolution François Furet wrote: “One thing is certain, and that is that a whole group of liberal Republicans found their best spokesperson in her” (Furet, 1995, p. 206). By ‘her’, Furet refers to Germaine de Staël (1766–1817), a thinker who is nowadays perceived as a precursor of the liberal tradition and is called “the mother of French liberalism” (Takeda, 2007, p. 165). For De Staël, liberal values such as freedom of thought, expression, and belief were of great importance to her political ideas: she believed that these liberties would enable equality before law and would lead to social order in the form of a representative government.²

Valuing public opinion is essential to a liberal political theory that cherishes freedom of expression. Nevertheless, De Staël’s analysis of public opinion also demonstrates that public opinion is not to be regarded as a neutral instrument: political developments result from human actions and since political actors are *impassioned* beings, public opinion can be corrupted and misused, just as it can function as a powerful tool for liberty and progress.

In this paper, I investigate the role of public opinion and the liberal principles of freedom of thought, belief, and expression in relation to De Staël’s psychological image of human nature. I believe that De Staël’s original psychological anthropology provides an insightful account of both the importance and the challenges of public opinion for liberal politics. I will look at her publications *Réflexions sur le procès de la Reine, par une Femme* (1793), *De l’influence des passions sur le bonheur des individus et nations* (1796), and *Considérations sur les principaux événements de la Révolution française* (1818). In these works, De Staël discusses the potential values and the potential risks of public opinion.

I will start my investigation by sketching De Staël’s liberal position. As her political opinions changed over the course of time, I will focus on the political position De Staël held during 1793–1796; the period in which she wrote *Réflexions sur le procès de la Reine* and *De l’influence des passions*. The *Considérations* were written more than two decades later, yet many ideas and passages from this text are still compatible with De Staël’s position between 1793–1796. Next, I will discuss De Staël’s analysis of political passions in *De l’influence des passions* by addressing the passions of love of glory, ambition, and spirit of party, and I will explain how these political passions are connected to the notions of liberty and public opinion.

² Here, ‘equality before law’ does not mean the same as ‘equal laws’.

In the last part of this paper, I will relate to De Staël's theory of political passions, liberty, and public opinion to her defence of the queen in *Réflexions sur le procès de la Reine*, which I shall present as a case-study of De Staël's theory.

1. Shift of Thoughts

In the introduction to *De l'influence des passions*, De Staël writes: "everyone who can write in these times, cannot but feel and think about the revolution in France" (De Staël-Holstein, 1796, p. 41).³ With 'these times' De Staël refers to the French Revolution, and in particular to the 'horrors' that followed in the aftermath of the revolution.⁴ In her own analysis of the events, De Staël incorporated questions of both thinking and feeling. She argues that human beings have a dual nature: both rational and sentimental. Likewise, her reflections on the political events pivot around her ideas on the position of the human passions in moral and political thinking.

According to De Staël, the French Revolution was an inevitable event. As a firm believer in human progress, the turn of the political events was in line with the historical development of ideas:

The Revolution of France is one of the grand eras of social order. Those who consider it as the result of accidental causes have reflected neither on the past, nor on the future; they have mistaken the actors for the drama; and, in seeking a solution agreeable to their prejudices, have attributed to the men of the day that which had been in a course of preparation for ages (De Staël-Holstein, 2008, p. 17).

In this fragment, De Staël explains that the events of the French Revolution should be judged in relation to the intellectual, political, and moral development of human beings.

In the early days of the French Revolution, De Staël judged the turn of the political events in positive ways. In the introduction to his translation of De Staël's *Considérations*, Aurelian Craiutu describes how De Staël believed that the early revolutionary events were in line with the "political progress of European civilization" (De Staël-Holstein, 2008, p. 17). Furthermore, according to Craiutu, De Staël held that the actors "displayed sincere patriotism, and commitment to the public good, combining enthusiasm for ideas with sincere devotion to a

³ All translations from *De l'influence des passions* are mine.

⁴ In referring to the negative excesses of the French Revolution as 'horrors', I follow the jargon and interpretation of De Staël. The 'horrors' indicate the bloodshed during the reign of Terror.

noble cause that made a lasting impression on all true friends of liberty in France” (De Staël-Holstein, 2008, p. xv).⁵

In the first chapters of the *Considérations*, De Staël writes that the worst political system is the despotic one. Therefore, in the historical development of political periods, the feudal system of the *Ancien Régime* should not turn into despotism, but into a representative government—which is a government that can be guided by liberal principles (De Staël-Holstein, 2008, p. 17). De Staël understood the French Revolution as an enlightened moment in time, which formed part of a process of political progress and could lead to furthering emancipation and the cause of liberty for the people of France.

This enthusiasm may come as a surprise to readers of De Staël’s earlier work, particularly of *De l’influence des passions*, in which De Staël vividly described the *horreurs* of fanatic revolutionaries. De Staël herself was a first-hand witness of the violence of the early days of the revolution and of the horrors during the following years of Terror. She started writing *De l’influence des passions* during the Reign of Terror, the extremely violent period in the aftermath of the French Revolution. De Staël’s personal traumatic experiences shed a specific light on the revolutionary events and actors. As a result, her account is forthrightly negative when it comes to assessing the political outcomes under the wings of Robespierre. Yet, despite her aversion, these outcomes did not diminish her initial approval of the revolution itself.

As the daughter of Jacques Necker, the minister of finance under Louis XVI from 1777 to 1781 and from August 1788 until September 1790, De Staël belonged to one of the richest families in France. Despite the fact that she herself was not born into aristocracy, De Staël was very much familiar with these circles (Fairweather, 2005, p. 56). She was raised in such a way as to develop a political awareness that may be labelled ‘progressive’ and close to the moderate liberal theory of her father.⁶ Until the beginning of 1790, De Staël was in favour of the monarchy, yet more critical than her father and other royalist liberalists about the amount of influence a monarch should be allowed to have. One year later, in 1791, De Staël argued in favour of constitutional monarchy, stating that the silent majority of the people would always be in favour of both freedom and equality, as well as order. In her essay *A quels signes peut-on connaître quelle est l’opinion de la majorité de la nation?* De Staël takes up the concepts of the

⁵ Craiutu notices that De Staël shares this enthusiasm with Tocqueville: “Who can deny that a change was necessary, either to give a free course to a constitution hitherto perpetually infringed; or to introduce those guarantees which might give the laws of the state the means of being maintained and obeyed?” (De Staël-Holstein, 2008, p. 111).

⁶ For an insightful analysis on the influence of Necker on De Staël’s moderate liberalism, read Takeda’s chapter ‘Invention of the Political Center as an Ideal: Staël and the Constitutional Monarchy (1789–1795)’ (Takeda, 2018, pp. 23–43).

‘silent majority’ and of ‘public opinion’, and stresses the necessity of intermediary bodies that represent the voice of the majority. The concept of the silent majority is also discussed in De Staël’s *Considérations*.

Unlike the republicans, De Staël proposed that the intermediary bodies are to be ruled by the aristocracy. Being in favour of this so-called bicameral theory, after the British model, De Staël follows Montesquieu, who developed a similar view in *De l’Esprit des Lois*. Yet, as Chinatsu Takeda points out, constitutional monarchism does not rule out moderate republicanism for De Staël. When both political movements are based on the concepts of moderation and liberty, they are perfectly compatible. Moreover, depending on the political tidings, either position could be favoured. This demonstrates De Staël’s diplomatic, pragmatic, and flexible way of thinking.

Rather than being an ideologue, De Staël focused on concrete historical circumstances. This enabled her to change political positions and to find a way to solve the problem of the broken monarchic and aristocratic hegemony in the light of a risen public awareness. The public shift that De Staël made in 1795 from constitutional monarchism to moderate republicanism, should also be understood in this light.⁷

2. Liberal Values

By the time De Staël met Benjamin Constant in the fall of 1794, she had already been converted to republicanism. Nowadays both De Staël and Constant are seen as the representatives of modern liberalism, promoting the idea of a representative government. De Staël reworked the republican model of government and came up with an ‘aristocratic’ liberal republicanism, which put great emphasis on the necessity of an intermediate body aimed at ‘conserving power’, and which De Staël herself explicitly described as an ‘aristocratic institution’.

De Staël developed her views on liberal republicanism in close cooperation with Constant—who became her intellectual and romantic partner and co-writer and editor of many publications. According to Helena Rosenblatt, De Staël and Constant together formulated “the

⁷ De Staël already understood in 1793 that republicanism was a political reality that should be endorsed. In the spring of 1795, De Staël publicly affirmed her conservative republican allegiance (Takeda, 2018, p. 62).

cluster of ideas that collectively came to be known as ‘liberalism’” (Rosenblatt, 2018, p. 50).⁸ These ideas consisted of a package that aimed to restore political stability and order and to avoid another reign of terror or a counterrevolution. Thus, it became De Staël’s as well as Constant’s aim to find the right balance between freedom and stability. For Constant, this led to a plea for a minimal government, whereas De Staël “attached more importance to [the] checks and balances” of the British model (De Dijn, 2020, p. 255).

The liberal principles that Constant and De Staël presented entailed, first of all, to come to a republican government with representative institutions that are supported by the rule of law. De Staël writes that “liberty confirmed by law” can alone “ensure to a people peace, emulation, and prosperity” (De Staël-Holstein, 2008, p. 27). These laws needed to prevent arbitrary power—as was the case under the hereditary rule of the *Ancien Régime* and in a later stage Napoleon’s despotic form of government—and to promote civil equality.

Other liberal principles were freedom of expression, thought, and belief, which all needed to be included in the law as liberal rights. In a chapter on the *History of France*, De Staël emphasizes the importance of freedom of the press and freedom of religion. In respect to freedom of religion, De Staël’s own Protestantism, which was a suppressed religion at the time in France, plays a crucial role. She puts a strong emphasis on the relation between her liberal principles and the Reformation:

Far from concealing that liberty of conscience is closely linked to political liberty, the Protestants ought, in my opinion, to make a boast of the alliance. They always have been, and always will be, friends of liberty; the spirit of inquiry in religious points leads necessarily to the representative government and its political institutions. The proscription of Reason is always conducive to despotism, and always subservient to hypocrisy (De Staël-Holstein, 2008, pp. 32-33).

In this passage, a link is made between intellectual progress (“the spirit of inquiry” vs. “the proscription of Reason”) and liberty in the form of representative governments and institutions.

Regarding freedom of the press, De Staël noticed that this freedom enabled enlightened political leaders to limit arbitrary and unstable forms of power, like heredity and despotism: “A

⁸ Rosenblatt notes that liberalism as we currently know and use the term is different from the liberal ideas of De Staël and Constant. Also, both authors never used the concept “liberalism” themselves, as the term “had not yet been coined” (Rosenblatt, 2018, p. 51).

spirit of enlightenment, according to the nature of the age, must find its way to all public men of the first rank by the influence either of reason or of feeling” (De Staël-Holstein, 2008, p. 32).

It is not entirely clear what De Staël means by “all public men of the first rank”. She seems to include comedians; men that “may teach us some useful truths” (De Staël-Holstein, 2008, p. 32). It is thus not only the intellectual elite or the nobility that is regarded as “first rank”. However, in other texts, like *Letters on the works and character of J.J. Rousseau* and *On Literature*, De Staël explicitly—and surprisingly, since she was a publishing author herself—excludes women from contributing to the public debate. Women should not write, in her opinion, let alone publish their work and enter into competition with men. Because liberty of the press was a new phenomenon, she believed the time was not ripe for this kind of rivalry.

Equal voting rights for all human beings were neither included in De Staël’s package of liberal principles. Within this stage of historical, political, and intellectual progress, both De Staël and Constant did not believe that France was ready for a democracy. The representative government and its institutions were a new phenomenon in France and in the *Considérations* De Staël argues that this political change already had a large enough impact on the representatives at the Constituent Assembly and the public.

In De Staël’s opinion, these representatives were still primarily driven by the political passion of ambition and the personal passion of vanity. She wrote: “The habit of living at court, or the desire of getting there, forms their minds to vanity; and in an arbitrary government, people have no idea of any doctrine but that of success” (De Staël-Holstein, 2008, p. 179). As I shall explain in more detail below, ambition is a problematic passion, according to De Staël, because it always connects egoism to power.

No more than the new politicians was the public itself used to such new phenomena as freedom of the press and freedom of representation. De Staël described the general public as being ‘ignorant’ in the sense that they had experienced a long period of oppression and that their education had been neglected (De Staël-Holstein, 2008, p. 141). The majority of the population was illiterate—let alone educated in debate-culture or in basic constitutional knowledge. For these practical reasons, De Staël believed that a moderate stance better suited the public demand for political influence, which is why she argued that voting should primarily be a right of property owners—thereby excluding a large part of the French population from having a seat in the government. De Staël’s concept of civil equality should also be understood

in this light.

3. Political Passions

De Staël's emphasis on both moderation and liberty stems partly from Necker, who also stressed the importance of liberal values and the instrumental role of private property.⁹ In line with this, De Staël's political theory has a materialistic outlook. The most fundamental aspect of De Staël's definition of individual liberty, however, focusses on the importance of individual autonomy in moral thinking and action, both in respect of rationality and of sentimentality. Here, individual liberty is intertwined with the social and the collective order.

De Staël was inspired by Rousseau and the *philosophes* who incorporated a notion of natural sociability in their thinking about liberty. She underwrites the idea that in every society certain forms of institutional control are necessary in order to provide the necessary conditions for people to have personal freedoms. These liberties are important for both individual and collective happiness. Individual happiness includes aspects like expressing your own personality, emotions, ideas, and beliefs. Such happiness is connected to both the intellectual and the sentimental sides of one's nature as a human being (De Staël-Holstein, 1796, p. 323). Collective happiness consists of general well-being, a stable political climate, and the earlier mentioned "peace, emulation and prosperity" (De Staël-Holstein, 2008, p. 27).

De Staël is of the opinion that human passions form the greatest threat to both levels of happiness; in particular the type of individual passions that potentially lead to a negative outcome on the collective level.¹⁰ Therefore, De Staël believes that in every society, excesses of negative passions—and theories that are extracted from lived experiences that sprout from negativity—should be repressed, both on the level of the individual and on the level of the state. The moderate liberalism of De Staël precisely combines the notion of personal liberty with the social need for order. How this precarious balancing act should be understood and be realised in practice, is the central theme of *De l'influence des passions*.

By excesses of negative impulses, De Staël refers to negative influences of our

⁹ To read more on this moderate position, I recommend *A Virtue for Courageous Minds, Moderation in French Political Thought, 1748–1830* by Aurelian Craiutu (2012).

¹⁰ Passions can also be understood as emotions, affects, or feelings. Like many of her contemporaries, De Staël used these terms interchangeably.

impassioned nature, and by excesses of negative theories, she refers to negative influences of our cognitive nature. Because human beings have a dual rational and sentimental nature, immoral actions may result from both the rational and the sentimental faculties. In *De l'influence des passions* De Staël develops a theory of the complex psychology of human beings in which she explains negative moral behaviour in two ways: it is either caused by egoistic and/or anti-social impulses that have not been held in check by rational judgement, or it is caused by calculative reasoning that leaves out deeply compassionate, empathetic, and humane emotions. In the next part of this paper, I will focus on the first group (egoist and/or anti-social impulses), which I will refer to as political passions. De Staël does not use this term herself, but since passions in general potentially have a social dimension, and only some passions (which I shall elaborate on below) lead to grave societal and political consequences, I coin them as political passions. In the discussion of De Staël's *Réflexions sur le procès de la Reine* in the last part of this paper I will relate the influence of political passions to the more humane type of passions, like compassion, pity, and empathy.

Despite the fact that the political passions are grounded in egoistic motives and can lead to anti-social results, De Staël does not believe that these passions are inherently negative. As a private person, it might be good to be self-interested in certain ways. Though De Staël probably did not understand ambition or vanity in this way, one could imagine that ambition is a great personal motivator, or that vanity involves having self-respect. What is problematic about these passions is that when they are acted upon in the public sphere, they can have negative collective and political consequences in the form of political and social destabilization, limitation of personal liberties, and public outbursts of violence. These passions are, thus, characterised by the fact that they take root in individuals, but can gain a collective force and have political consequences. In *De l'influence des passions*, De Staël discusses the political passions of *l'esprit de parti* (spirit of party), *l'amour de la gloire* (love of glory), and *ambition*. In the next part, I will discuss the notion of public opinion in relation to these three political passions. First, I will discuss the relation between the positive social and humane type of passions and liberty.

According to De Staël, order can only be reached and liberties can only be guaranteed, when negative human impulses are held in check. It is, therefore, no surprise that liberal principles are closely connected to “moral and civil values”, as Helena Rosenblatt mentions: “to De Staël, having liberal principles meant showing kindness, generosity, and compassion,

without which France would be ruined forever” (Rosenblatt, 2018, p. 53). With Rosenblatt, I agree that for De Staël liberal principles depend on demonstrating good “moral and civil values”. It is important, however, to see that the values mentioned here (kindness, generosity, and compassion) are also, and first of all, passions, because De Staël herself treats kindness, generosity, and compassion primarily as passions throughout her work. A person can feel kind, generous and compassionate, and one can value these passions in others. Thus, when we value kindness, generosity, and compassion and judge them to be moral, social, or civil values, we recognize them as social and moral passions before we judge them to be morally and socially valuable.

Here, we see the interplay between the sentimental and the rational as it comes to the fore in De Staël’s theory of the passions: passions such as kindness, generosity, and compassion sprout from our sentimental nature and our rational capacities allow us to understand their positive (civil or moral) value and judge them accordingly. This relation between our sentimental, *impassioned*, nature, our rational nature, and our capacity for moral judgement is central to De Staël’s theory of the passions and forms part of the psychological anthropology that underlies De Staël’s political, social, and moral theory. Consequently, her notion of liberty cannot be understood without keeping this framework in mind.

Passions like kindness, empathy, sympathy, compassion, and generosity are understood as social and positive passions by De Staël. Whereas anti-social passions are the most important forces in causing harm to others, these social passions enable us to relate to others, have a sense of fellow-feeling, and thereby allow us to acknowledge the humanity of others. These humane types of passion are, therefore, crucial for our moral understanding and judgement.

Through the right use of reasoning—which ought to occur autonomously and freely—a person can attempt to keep his or her passions in check. Similar to the balancing act between liberty and order, which was mentioned above, maintaining the right balance between our positive and negative sentimental and rational tendencies is a very precarious undertaking. In this balancing act, private liberties stem from being able to develop and express oneself privately in a free and autonomous manner, whereas public liberties stem from acting morally without letting oneself be ruled by anti-social and egoist motives or tendencies. It is in this sense that De Staël mentions that liberal people are rational: their liberties enable them to judge autonomously.

In addition to Rosenblatt's analysis, I would, therefore, emphasize that the relation between acting in a moral and civil way and having the right liberal principles is grounded in our human passionate nature: without an expression of passions that De Staël judges as social and moral, liberty cannot be guaranteed. Thus, liberal principles are not only a political point of entry for De Staël, but also the aim of all our efforts. We should all try to be the best moral citizens we can be, in order for liberal republicanism to succeed.

4. Public Opinion as a Political Tool

During the French Revolution, public opinion came to be a crucial driving force behind political decision-making. Craiutu points out that “toward the end of the eighteenth century, public opinion gradually acquired the status of a universal tribunal before which citizens, magistrates, and governments were held accountable” (De Staël-Holstein, 2008, p. 58). De Staël defines the public, or the multitude, as being composed of an anonymous group of individuals. Therefore, the public is a multitude that is difficult to grasp and control. Public opinion is a form of judgement that supposedly rises from this anonymous public. As such, it appears to be a ‘neutral’ product of reasoning, maybe even an impartial form of reasoning. Yet this is not the case, as becomes apparent from De Staël's analysis of the discovery of the printing press in France in *De l'influence des passions*.

Before this grand invention, talented individuals (often the people in power in the *Ancien Régime*; the monarchs or the aristocrats) could hijack the public debate (De Staël-Holstein, 1796, pp. 67–69). This could potentially endanger the liberty of the multitude and often led to the oppression of the people. On the other hand, it had as its benefit that the most talented and capable persons could become the most influential leaders, and that these know-hows only had to influence and shape the opinion of their own assembly, party, or peers in order to have political influence.

After the rise of popular media and the liberty of press, the multitude came in charge—a group which is elusive, obscure, and, most importantly, potentially has unlimited power (De Staël-Holstein, 1796, pp. 68, 97). When an obscure and uncontrollable force is in power, initial liberating effects can back-fire. After the French Revolution, the Constituent Assembly was “one of the authorities which have governed France before and since the Revolution which

allowed, freely and unequivocally, the liberty of the press”, as De Staël remarks—a liberating reform which she in itself praises (De Staël-Holstein, 2008, p. 137).

The authorization of liberty of the press was followed by the democratization of the public stage, as well as by an increase of fierce verbal competition. Many individual attempts to be heard in the public debate remained unnoticed and whoever wanted to be distinguished among *le peuple*, who wanted to be recognized and acknowledged by the public, had to compete with other ambitious people. During any revolution, this passionate ambition is aroused in individuals, as a redistribution of power is taking place. De Staël points out that this process can result in both the rise and the destruction of individual successes and individual glory. In our current age, we recognise these proto-Twitter tendencies all too well.

In the light of the events of the revolution and the rise of the popular media and the liberty of the press, public opinion became an essential political tool. It is in this sense that I understand public opinion to function as a political instrument in De Staël’s analysis—an instrument, moreover, that might be used for different purposes. On the one hand, it can help to promote the expression of moral and social passions and, thereby, can become a catalyst for liberty and progress. On the other hand, this instrument could be misused for anti-social and egoistic purposes. Public opinion, in any case, is not a neutral instrument, since it entails the promotion of passionate forms of judgment, as De Staël explains in *De l’influence des passions* (De Staël-Holstein, 1796, p. 76). It is influenced by *impassioned* actors, acknowledged or refuted by an *impassioned* public, and shaped through passionate forms of communication. When the main influencers are driven by anti-social passions, public opinion can give rise to uncivil and immoral action. This is especially the case when public opinion is negatively influenced by political passions.

5. Love of Glory, Ambition, and Spirit of Party

In her *Considérations*, De Staël uses many synonyms for the phenomenon of public opinion and describes it also as a public spirit, public mind, as the voice of the people, the wish of the nation, or a provider of public esteem. The way in which public opinion developed in the late 18th century was new, as were the ways in which media were used to allow for these public voices to be heard. Moreover, the amount of voices that were raised publicly and the speed at which these opinions were spread increased greatly.

According to De Staël, the nobility traditionally valued public honour and esteem—values that are closely connected to public opinion. Yet, this recognition was nothing compared to the risen importance of public opinion in the context of pre-revolutionary politics, as De Staël points out in her chapter about the division of Estates General into orders:

All, whether men or women, who in the higher circles exercised influence on the public opinion, spoke warmly in favor of the national cause. Such was the prevailing fashion; it was the result of the whole of the eighteenth century; and the old prejudices, which still favored antiquated institutions, had at that time much less strength than any other period during the twenty-five years that ensued. In short, the ascendancy of the popular wish was so great that it carried along with it the parliament itself (De Staël-Holstein, 2008, p. 123).

Here, De Staël describes that at the dawn of the French Revolution, the voice of the people, “the popular wish”, had gained considerable strength and could not remain to be overlooked. In a way, public opinion got a seat in parliament. Still, despite all its modern and progressive pretensions, De Staël also noticed that the *Parlement de Paris* had a paradoxical way of dealing with the public demand for new liberties: the public wish for fairer and more equal laws and taxes was not met by the parliamentarians (De Staël-Holstein, 2008, p. 123). There were even occasions in which the parliament also actively tried to limit the liberty of the press.

One could argue that by judging these actions, the nobles in the parliament did not truly value public esteem; at least not intrinsically, for the sake of public’s opinion itself. In the chapter on love of glory in *De l’influence des passions*, De Staël differentiates between different types of glory: true glory and love of glory. Both types of glory are connected to recognition of others, to being held in esteem. The difference between the two types of glory is that true glory functions as an emergent property. Glory is not the aim; it is never sought for its own sake. By contrast, the lover of glory values being glorified: being glorified and being held in public esteem becomes the aim of all actions.

True glory, in De Staël’s opinion, is detached from public esteem and splendor. Geniuses receive glory for the “the most beautiful actions, inspired by spontaneous movements of the soul” (De Staël-Holstein, 1796, p. 78). Behind these spontaneous actions, there is no hidden motive, no intrinsic longing for recognition. A real genius acts in an autonomous way: he or

she discovers, invents, advocates or develops out of an intrinsic motivation. Free and autonomous acting is, thus, not endangered in the case of this true form of glory.¹¹

The opposite is the case with love of glory, the object of which is external recognition, like making a name for oneself, gaining respect, or being publicly appreciated. Because love of glory has recognition as its aim, and since this type of recognition can only be attributed to a person by others, the lover of glory is dependent on general opinion. By being dependent on this form of accreditation, the lover of glory loses personal freedom and autonomy. Because of this, De Staël understands love of glory as a negative political passion. It drives people to act for personal gain, it is instrumentally motivated, and it makes a person become subjected to the public yoke.

Love of glory is a fairly mild political passion amidst the ones De Staël discusses in *De l'influence des passions*. Ambition and spirit of party are far more disruptive, according to her. Whereas lovers of glory have a concern for their future reputation, ambitious people are primarily preoccupied with their current egoistic motives. They do not want to be remembered by future generations, nor do they seek praise. Ambitious people are driven by a hunger for power: they wish to accumulate as much influence and personal gain as soon as possible.

Whereas ambition might have a positive connotation in the 21st century, this is certainly not the case for 18th century men (most of the persons that De Staël analyses in relation to ambitious behaviour are men). Ambitious people are willing to sell out on moral principles and moral duties, for nothing else but personal, often material, gain (De Staël-Holstein, 1796, p. 108). Therefore, De Staël believes that, if in revolutionary times only ambition or conscience can serve as a guide, ambition will unfortunately always prevail (De Staël-Holstein, 1796, p. 107).

De Staël writes that ambition “is impulse rather than real strength; it is a kind of ardour that cannot feed itself on its own resources; it is the feeling that is the most hostile to the past, to reflection” (De Staël-Holstein, 1796, p. 108). From this fragment we can gather that ambition is a passionate impulse. Impulses cannot be controlled emotionally according to De Staël. Rather, an *impassioned* person undergoes these impulses. Normally, one should use one’s rational faculties to subjugate and restrict them as much as possible, for example by weighing whether these impulses lead to (im)moral or (un)civil actions, arise from positive motivations,

¹¹ See Levy (2002) and Kete (2012) for more information on the notion of genius in the work of De Staël.

or could potentially harm others. Ambition is hostile to reflection and, thus, to this type of reasoning. Public opinion could function as an external judge, but an ambitious person, being driven by ego and power, is not likely to adjust his or her plans accordingly.

With regard to public opinion, an ambitious person is eager to influence the voice of the people: to understand the will of the people and to shape their desires in order to make them meet one's own, and thus, to manipulate public opinion (De Staël-Holstein, 1796, p. 98). The ambitious person is not interested in listening to the public voice for its own sake: ambitious people "have as their enemies the need of the public to judge and create anew, to discard a name that has been repeated too often, to feel the emotion of a new event" (De Staël-Holstein, 1796, pp. 96–97). The danger of ambition with respect to public opinion is that the ambitious person could hijack the public debate, thereby potentially contributing to more inequality and a less just society.¹²

Another danger to public opinion—one that also diminishes its freedom and autonomy and one that is often repeated in De Staël's oeuvre—is the corruption of public opinion by spirit of party. Spirit of party is in essence a collective passion. It represents a way of collective thinking and feeling shared by a specific group of people, often related to a certain political stance or ideology. In the revolutionary days, politically awakened citizens, whether they were members of the aristocracy or the people, formed different political parties, varying from Jacobins, Girondins, and constitutionalists (De Staël-Holstein, 2008, p. 300).

The main problem that De Staël discerns regarding spirit of party, is that the 'spirit' in which one finds oneself in party politics, is too fixated, too narrow-minded, too rigid. When a person becomes absorbed in a collective ideology, one's capacity for impartiality is lost: "disdain for their adversaries forms its basis, and disdain is always adverse to the knowledge of truth" (De Staël-Holstein, 2008, p. 179). Spirit of party leaves little room for individual judgement, for change of opinion, for critique, for nuance or moderation. Thus, on a personal level, spirit of party leads to a lack of reasonable judgement in individuals, to a form of intellectual blindness, and therefore, to a loss of personal autonomy and freedom. Since De Staël believes in moral and political progress due to intellectual development, spirit of party regresses rather than brings political progress forward.

¹²In her days, De Staël regarded men as Robespierre and Napoleon as exemplary of this.

Spirit of party not only blinds personal judgment but also corrupts collective judgment—partly because spirit of party is a form of biased collective judgment in and by itself, partly because, as a politically influential collective, a party is able to push an agenda and influence public opinion. De Staël refers to the corruption, or perversion, of public opinion by spirit of party throughout her work.

It is of great importance to De Staël that public esteem is valued for the right reasons and is not pursued for personal gain. Furthermore, public opinion should not be subject to manipulation by ambitious people. Liberal values and public opinion highly influence each other and without a public sense of autonomy, liberty cannot be guaranteed.

6. Liberty and Public opinion

As we have previously discussed, De Staël's notion of public opinion is closely connected to her idea of liberty. Evidently, public opinion cannot be expressed without the liberal values of freedom of expression, thought, and belief. To enable people to express their thoughts and beliefs, freedom of the press is essential. Yet, why does the public voice need to be heard in the first place? In the *Considerations*, De Staël writes:

We live in an age in which the world does not readily imagine that the minority, and a very small minority, can have a right which is not for the advantage of the majority (...) it is better for the monarch to be guided in the administration of affairs by public opinion than incessantly to run the risk of being in opposition to it. Justice is the aegis of all and of everyone: but in its quality of justice, it is the great number which has the preferable claim to protection (De Staël-Holstein, 2008, p. 749).

The first reason that De Staël gives for the importance of having a public expression of the voice of the people, is related to the notion of inequality. Here, De Staël does not refer to the general principle of minority-rights, but to the specific context of her day: only a very small minority, namely the members of the royal family, was responsible for national law and order. The problem was that not all members of this group felt a responsibility for the general well-being of the French people. The second reason is connected to the notion of representation. Because the well-being of the majority should be taken into account, this majority needed to be politically represented. The third reason is connected to the notion of justice: equality and representation are features of what is just. And justice does not belong to a small group of privileged people, but to everyone. In a just society, therefore, the general public needs to be

heard, represented, and protected against arbitrary rule, thereby ensuring “peace, emulation, and prosperity” (De Staël-Holstein, 2008, p. 27).

As a political tool, public opinion is therefore functional and powerful. Public opinion is “a compound of penetration and power: it consists of the views of each individual, and of the ascendancy of the whole” (De Staël-Holstein, 2008, pp. 94–95). For this reason, public opinion is “so deserving of regard”, so valuable (De Staël-Holstein, 2008, pp. 94–95). The time was also ripe for the awakening and appreciation of this political instrument: it is part of human and intellectual progress. In the first chapter of the *Considérations*, De Staël points out that:

The revival of letters, the invention of the art of printing, the Reformation, the discovery of the new world, and the progress of commerce taught mankind that a military power was not the only one which could possibly exist; and they have since learned that the profession of arms is not the exclusive privilege of birth (De Staël-Holstein, 2008, p. 21).

The invention of the printing press and freedom of expression reveal the potential of political representation and inclusion. It enamours people who did not grow up with certain privileges and it allows them to take up their powerful pen.

De Staël’s analogy between *le peuple* of France and colonial slaves, also lays bare the importance of recognizing inequality and natural disadvantages:

Foreigners, and the rising generation too young to have known their country before the Revolution, who form their estimate from the present condition of the people, enriched as they are by the division of the large estates and the suppression of the tithes and feudal burdens, can have no idea of the situation of the country when the nation bore all the burdens resulting from privilege and inequality. The advocates of colonial slavery have often asserted that a French peasant was more to be pitied than a negro –an argument for relieving the whites but not for hardening the heart against the blacks. A state of misery is productive of ignorance, and ignorance aggravates misery. If we are asked why the French people acted with such cruelty in the Revolution, the answer will at once be found in their unhappy state, and in that want of morality which is its result (De Staël-Holstein, 2008, p. 67).

In this analogy about the state of misery, De Staël discusses similarities between the position of the enslaved in the French colonies and the French peasants: both of them lack freedom and bear the burdens of misfortune and inequality. These burdens lead to a state of misery that reinforces itself: in this vicious circle, ignorance, which is a result of being without educational and political privileges, leads to an even more miserable status and to more ignorance, as these people are excluded from the only privileges by means of which they might

emancipate themselves. As a result of this vicious circle of ignorance, is that the gap between the people who are privileged and in charge, and those who are ignorant due to a lack of privileges, is deepened. Accordingly, the suppression is enhanced and liberties are violated.

By using this image of the state of misery, De Staël not only refers to misfortune, but also to unhappiness. The state of (un)happiness is another important theme of *De l'influence des passions*, in which De Staël argues that liberty forms a fundamental condition for human happiness. In order to understand the events of the French Revolution, one needs to understand the state of unhappiness the people found themselves in and to have a clear idea about how this state originated. It is the extreme state of misery of the French peasants—the subjugation, the ignorance, the suppression, and the lack of autonomy and self-government—that De Staël understands as the reason for the extensive amount of violence: “there is no period that can be compared to the fourteen months of terror” and the only reason to explain this is “that for a century past, no people had been so miserable as the people of France” (De Staël-Holstein, 2008, p. 358).¹³

Another aspect of De Staël’s theory that comes to the fore in the misery analogy, is her idea of judging historical events by looking at the sentiments of the actors. You cannot judge a historical event when you have not felt or experienced something similar, or at least have taken an interest in the emotions that were at play. Here, again, gaining an insight in human emotions is crucial for understanding the situation: historical political events and the specific positions of people in these events cannot solely be rationally reconstructed. In order to understand the French people, their misery and their experience of their misery need to be taken into account, because these experienced passions have largely influenced the political events.

Emotions, or passions, are also an essential component of public opinion. In contrast to general opinions, which are developed through the intellectual act of contemplation and reflection, public opinion is not solely formed on the basis of reflection, particularly not in the case of political issues. Some emotions can act as catalysts for positive change: for emancipatory movements of repressed groups as well as for better political representation and, subsequently, more political influence, more liberties for a larger group of people, and more

¹³ With the view to the history of slavery we might ask whether De Staël had sufficient insight in the circumstances of the slaves in the French colonies. It is in any case clear that her comparison serves a specific purpose: demonstrating the harsh situation the French peasants found themselves in.

individual and collective happiness. Emotions that have this positive force are driven by intrinsic social and moral impulses, such as compassion, empathy, and generosity.

Public opinion can thus be driven by social and moral passions. However, it is difficult, and often only possible in retrospect, to decide whether public opinions were motivated by humane and social impulses, or by egoistic and anti-social drives. Public opinion is not an active, rational, product of the will: “it acts on men without their knowing it”, meaning that human beings undergo its influence unconsciously, and it “often leads them on in contradiction with their interests”, meaning that human beings can passively give up their personal will (De Staël-Holstein, 2008, p. 45).

Thus, there are two main problems regarding public opinion. Firstly, there is the risk of a lack of autonomous judgment, primarily due to the fact that this form of opinion is irrational, but also because of the influence of anti-social political passions on the side of all actors involved. Secondly, public opinion is a necessary political tool, yet an extremely forceful tool, since the obscure multitude is potentially unlimitedly powerful. De Staël writes that we cannot and should not ignore the public:

It is vain to try to deprive a nation of knowledge and publicity; it becomes the more distrustful; and all the depths of Machiavellian policy are but wretched child’s play when compared to the strength, at once natural and supernatural, of complete sincerity. There are no secrets between a government and a people: they understand, they know each other. One can seek support in this or that party; but to believe that one can introduce by stealth the institutions against which public opinion is on the watch, implies a total ignorance of what the public has become in our day (De Staël-Holstein, 2008, p. 578).

With the abolishment of the *Ancien Régime*, public opinion has become one of the most important political institutions. It leads to new checks and balances and is able to exercise political influence. The problem, however, is that public opinion is not a transparent tool: it is motivated by a complex and opaque emotional and rational interplay in which all parties involved can lose their autonomous judgement and self-rule. As such, public opinion can lose its impartiality and fail to serve the public good. Public opinion is very forceful and can have substantial societal consequences when it is driven by uncivil and immoral tendencies.

Whereas public opinion can indeed serve as an empowering tool, a political instrument that can be used to bring about a more just and equal society, it can also cause harm to individuals and to social order and stability. In the *Considérations*, De Staël often refers to the pollution, corruption, or perversion of public opinion, mainly caused by party politics. In the

next part, I will present the trial of Marie-Antoinette as an unfortunate case-study of perverted public opinion.

7. The Case of the Queen

In her *Réflexions sur le procès de la Reine*, De Staël reflects on the corruption of public opinion during the trial of Queen Marie-Antoinette. In August 1793, Marie-Antoinette appeared before the Criminal Tribunal—an all-male jury that was to decide about whether the queen should live or not. The fact that it was a male dominated jury is relevant, as many of the charges directly and indirectly concerned Marie-Antoinette’s sex. Not only was she on trial for treason and theft, but also for sexual abuse of her son. In October 1793, the former queen was found guilty of both treason and sexual abuse and was sentenced to death by the guillotine.

In the past decades, feminist scholars such as Lori Marso have studied the ways in which Marie-Antoinette’s trial was framed and how her sex and gender played a crucial role. Already in 1793, De Staël investigated these two elements. In the run-up to the trial, De Staël describes how the position of the queen was ‘polluted’ by “hideous circumstances which have led to her condemnation.” By these hideous circumstances, De Staël particularly refers to public slander:

Slander has been attached to pursuing the queen even before that time when the spirit of party made the truth disappear from the earth. A sad and simple reason for this is that she was the happiest of women. Marie-Antoinette the happiest! Alas! Such was her fate, and the fate of man is now so deplorable, that the spectacle of a dazzling prosperity is now little more than a fatal omen (De Staël-Holstein, 1871, p. 25).¹⁴

How could this woman’s happiness be the reason for this public attack? Because by marrying the French heir, Marie-Antoinette became the most visible and influential woman of her day.

When Marie-Antoinette first arrived in France in 1770, this outstanding position was not threatening. People were thrilled about her arrival and enticed by her persona. Five years later, these public sentiments had changed radically, principally because of the fact that for many years the queen could not fulfil her one and only duty: to give France an heir to their throne. This led to many negative public speculations about the queen’s sexuality, to which the many

¹⁴ All translations from *Réflexions sur le procès de la Reine* are my own.

published caricatures, pamphlets, and libels surrounding the queen's adultery, inexhaustible sex drive, or lesbian preferences, bear witness.

By the time she had a son, her reputation was greatly harmed: the worst example of this speculation became apparent in the queen's charge of sexual abuse of her own son. The available public smear provided great fuel for the radical revolutionaries who had a strong anti-monarchic and anti-aristocratic agenda and used it to influence public opinion.

Like De Staël, feminist political scientist Lori Marso argued that the political event of the trial of the queen not only revolved around the status of the monarchy and aristocracy, but even more importantly around "the status of femininity and women's role in politics" (Marso, 2002, p. 43). In the case of Marie-Antoinette, it was the most visible and famous woman of the day who stood at the centre of attention. Marso convincingly argues that the queen's trial had the potential to set a precedent for the public position of women in general. Many revolutionaries feared the political influence of women and by attacking some of the 'gendered' qualities of Marie-Antoinette, in a way these feminine qualities themselves stood trial.

De Staël's reflection on the process of the queen was published anonymously and signed "par une femme". By writing anonymously as "a woman", De Staël deliberately targeted her reflections on the trial towards a female audience, thereby hoping to influence the public opinion at large. The fact that De Staël mainly wrote for a female audience, is reflected in her style of argumentation, as well as in the arguments themselves. De Staël raises awareness for the specific position of the queen. On a political level, as a queen, Marie-Antoinette did not stand in a position that gave her legislative or executive power. She was not responsible for legislation, nor for the execution of policies. Her role did not include legitimate political responsibilities. On a personal level, Marie-Antoinette is first and foremost a woman: a wife and a mother. As De Staël writes: "The king loved the queen for her devotion towards him and her maternal virtues, but he almost never consulted her on decisions made by his ministers" (De Staël-Holstein, 1871, pp. 25–26).

Both on a political and on a personal level, the queen's gender functions as the most important argument in De Staël's defence against the death penalty. As a public person, Marie-Antoinette is 'just' a queen without genuine political power, and as a private person she is a woman like every other: a woman who is loved by her husband and a mother who is needed by her child.

Hence in De Staël's opinion, there are no valid arguments for the accusations that the queen is charged with. What then are the means of the attack? De Staël describes them in the following way:

Light has been shed on all that was thought to be most secret; thousands of observers have been charged with examining the traces of the former government: denunciation has been honoured; loyalty has been shattered; terror has been offered security without shame; fanaticism has been given success without danger; all human passions have been set free, all of them directed against past power, against objects that one remembers to have envied but is certain no longer to fear. These are the means of the attack (De Staël, 1871, pp. 26–27).

For De Staël, it is evident that Marie-Antoinette is innocent and that the charges addressed to her function as symbolic politics. The trial of the queen is used as a political football by political actors who are driven by the spirit of party and ambition. What the case of Marie-Antoinette demonstrates is that in this context political passions, once they “have been set free” in times of terror and fanaticism, lead to denunciation and disloyalty: not only of the former ruling class, but also of liberty and humanity in general.

Despite the fact that De Staël's target audience was primarily female, she also explicitly addresses her defence to male political actors: “Republicans, constitutionals, aristocrats, if you've known misfortune, if you've needed *pitié*, if the future holds any fear in your mind, come together to save her” (De Staël-Holstein, 1871, p. 25). Here, it becomes clear that the central defence in the *Réflexions* is a plea for certain sentiments, in particular for the humane emotions of empathy and compassion.

In her attempt to change the people's point of view with respect to the queen, De Staël could have used a number of strategies. She could have used, for example, the power of reason, of deliberation, of debate. Yet the problem is that reason is neither speaking nor listening in this particular case. It is the myriad of human passions that determines the public position. Accordingly, people's hearts need to be addressed. The only antidote for the current corruption of the public debate, is to counter political passions by the promotion of humane, moral, and social passions. When De Staël refers to the mother's ‘heart’ of her female readers, or the feeling of *pitié* of the political actors, she directs the attention of her audience to the basic human notion of fellow-feeling: feeling empathy and compassion towards other people who are suffering.

According to Marso, by choosing women as her audience, De Staël uses a specific political strategy. In her analysis of De Staël's defense of Marie-Antoinette, Marso uses the 'Sense-sensibility' theory of Wendy Gunther-Canada to explain a clash between different political strategies that women philosophers have adopted in relation to the case of Marie-Antoinette. Philosophers like Wollstonecraft and De Gouges follow the 'sense' strategy, which basically comes down to the argument that women and men are equal because they have the same rational apparatus. As a result, women have the same virtues and intellectual capacities as men, and are thereby entitled to the same privileges as men.

De Staël is put in the sentimentalist camp. "In contrast to Wollstonecraft", Marso writes, "[De Staël] seems to imply that our feeling might be more deeply rational than our intellect" (Marso, 2002, p. 55). This notion of feeling is directly connected to the feminine, as De Staël "puts women's feminine identity at the center of her analysis to lay the groundwork for a profeminist politics based exclusively in feminine identity" (Marso, 2002, p. 55). Based on my analysis of *De l'influence des passions* I would question both of these statements. Neither does De Staël assert that our feelings are deeply rational, nor does she claim that certain sentiments are exclusively, and, thus, essentially feminine.

Whether deep or superficial, feelings are no more rational than our thoughts. According to De Staël, feelings have a fundamental different function from our thoughts, as they form part of our sentimental, and not intellectual, nature. Human beings have a complex dual psychology in which the sentimental and rational faculties are distinct, yet closely interact. As we have seen in the previous analysis of De Staël's theory of the passions, her position is, thus, more refined and nuanced.

With respect to the question of the essentialist claims, the sentimental, for De Staël, is neither simply 'feminine', nor necessarily gendered: it is a universal aspect of human psychology. Both men and women have a capacity for the whole spectrum of passions: whether these are 'gentle' and 'humane', like empathy and compassion, or 'vile' and 'egoistic', like the anti-social political passions of love of glory, ambition, and spirit of party. The same holds for the rational capacities.

In the universal, or 'masculine', narrative of 'sense', this sentimental aspect of human nature is not only neglected, but purposefully subjugated. What De Staël aims to achieve, is to provide a way to think about morality and political progress that includes the sentimental nature

of human beings and judges it alongside their rational nature. As a result, she neither develops a narrative that is based on an essentialist view of feminine qualities, nor one that is exclusively addressed to women. De Staël writes her defense of the queen to women in order to spark a strong compassionate and empathetic fellow-feeling in order to counter negative, party-driven, and slander-based opinions regarding Marie-Antoinette—precisely because autonomous and free judgement is lacking in this debate.

Throughout history, women have been both the subject and victim of unmatched gendered sexual slander. Public opinion has largely fed, and feasted on, this type of smear. In the trial of the queen, “even the virtues of the sovereigns were overlooked amid the accumulation of abuses” (De Staël-Holstein, 2008, p. 47). And not only were the virtues of the sovereigns overlooked, but also their basic humanity, particularly in respect of the queen’s role as a wife and mother. Whereas public opinion arose from a profound and crucial need for more equality and representation, this representation and equality did not translate itself into a balanced perspective on the case of Marie-Antoinette. Both her position in society and her gender were to her disadvantage.

What the example of Marie-Antoinette demonstrates, is that public opinion can be blind to some inequalities and disadvantages. It can, moreover, be prejudiced and biased. It can also be manipulated and misused. Public opinion could have served as an emancipatory tool in the case of Marie-Antoinette—that is, if the public opinion of the day would have been free from class-based and gendered slander, and if the debate would not have been hijacked by party politics. Unfortunately, in the case of Marie-Antoinette, public opinion was misused in the sense that it had been motivated by the wrong sentiments, like the spirit of party and ambition, as well as wrong, biased, and prejudiced judgements. The case of the queen makes clear that public opinion is not a neutral instrument, especially not when it functions as a “universal tribunal”, in which nuanced, moderate, and impartial voices are not heard, and the heart is overlooked.

8. Conclusion

De Staël believed that liberal principles like freedom of thought, expression, and religion are fundamental to every liberal society. Due to these liberties, people are able to emancipate themselves and to outgrow their position of ignorance and misery. In this light, public opinion should be understood as an important political tool that needs to be nurtured and cherished in

the name of liberty and self-determination. Public opinion can enable social equality, political representation, and moral justice.

Public opinion, however, is not a neutral instrument. Nor is it an exclusively ‘public’ instrument, as it can be used, misused, and hijacked by a small number of individuals—or ambitious people, as De Staël calls them. The process of developing public opinion is not the same as the formulation of an opinion or judgement in general. The latter is a rational process; judging is part of reasoning. Public opinion, by contrast, is closely connected to the sentimental nature of human beings; it is aroused and felt, and depends on emotions that people have.

As a political instrument, public opinion can contribute to morally good judgements and actions, when it is motivated by human, social, and civil emotions. This way of looking at moral judgements and political phenomena is original in the context of eighteenth-century moral theory, where theories are often based upon either rational judgment, for example in Kantianism, or sentimental feelings, like in Rousseauism. De Staël offers a nuanced and multi-layered perspective that weighs both the rational and sentimental tendencies of human beings against each other and discusses their effects on moral judgments and political events.

Just as the French Revolution was not a neutral political event and can be judged both positively and negatively according to the actions of its participants, public opinion may show itself as both a positive and a negative instrument—depending on who is using this instrument to influence the political situation, who is emancipated by it, and who will suffer because of it.

In this paper, both the emancipated and the suppressed have been discussed. The ignorant *peuple* whose freedom was suppressed, gained a voice and representation due to the virtues of public opinion. The case of the trial of the queen in 1793, by contrast, demonstrates how public slander can harm personal liberties and disadvantage individuals and, as a consequence, society at large. It also shows how biased public opinion can be with regard to issues of gender and social position and how this can lead to real-life injustice.

In her work, De Staël both demonstrates the necessity for the public voice to be heard and warns against its dangers. In this paper, I have addressed some of the multiple-layered problems that De Staël discusses in relation to public opinion. Firstly, public opinion is biased and prejudiced. Secondly, political passions can distort both individual and collective autonomy. Thirdly, public discussions can be hijacked by people who are driven by negative political emotions such as spirit of party and ambition. When blinded by these emotions, these

individuals do not take the public voice at heart, but either their party idealism or their egoistic motives. Lastly, public opinion has potentially unlimited disruptive powers, because with its growing importance, public opinion increasingly acquires the status of a “universal tribunal”.

Liberty enables the rise of a public voice and this public voice in its turn potentially strengthens a good many human liberties. For De Staël, liberty is the aim of all ‘efforts’, because liberty is the key to human happiness. These liberties can have repercussions, but they should not take their toll on liberty itself. Or, as De Staël herself formulates this: “liberty must not be compelled to stab herself like Lucretia because she has been violated” (De Staël, 2008, p. 750). De Staël’s defence of the queen was not just aimed at saving the life of a specific individual. It was also a sincere attempt to stir the readers’ humane passions and to encourage a better use of the most important tool for expression and debate. Thereby, it was a heartfelt plea for human compassion and liberty in general.

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