

that power to a single authority. Constant believed in the constitutional separation of powers. The key to stable politics was to give the separate branches of government – executive, legislature and judiciary – the right to represent the state in their different capacities. In this way politicians could keep an eye on each other. This was the idea that lay behind the new American republic that had come into existence at the end of the eighteenth century. Constant wanted it for France.

However, it could not be the whole answer. If politicians were keeping an eye on each other, who was keeping an eye on the politicians? A moderated Hobbesian state, organised around a well-designed constitution, was dangerous because it allowed people to forget what underpinned their security. (That’s one reason why Hobbes would have been suspicious of it.) When peace becomes the rule and war the rare exception, it is easy to drift into thinking politics has little bearing on everyday life. Constant foresaw two risks. One was that politicians would hive off secret networks of coercive power which they could use for their own purposes. Their divided interest in checking on each other would lose out to their shared interest in keeping the public in the dark. This is how little states within the state arise: pockets of wealth, privilege and paranoia that know to give each other a wide berth.

The other risk was that the public would occasionally wake up to its political passivity and lash out. People who lose interest in politics don’t give up on politics entirely. Instead they become sullen, resentful and prone to fantasies of revenge. They fall prey to

provocateurs peddling stories of political transformation. Constant thought one such story had taken hold in France before the revolution: the ideal of ancient politics where citizens were able to control their own destiny. Look how powerless you have become, went the refrain; then look at the ancients, the heroic Greeks and the noble Romans. That was how to live (so long as you weren’t a slave, or a woman or anyone with a private life). Take back the power! Result: chaos. Fantasies of a rebirth of pure political liberty had led to the uncontrolled violence of the revolution.

Modern politics was a balancing act. Expecting too much participation was unsustainable in large, diverse commercial societies such as nineteenth-century France. (In which case, how much more so today.) People simply didn’t have the time or the inclination to get involved, which meant that, if you wanted them all to take part, you ended up having to force them to participate with threats of violence. Guillotines do not make good citizens, just frightened or dead ones. But allowing too little participation opened up a dangerous gap between citizens and their governments. Bad government would be the inevitable result of the public’s inattention. Constant’s answer was vigilance without total immersion. He wanted citizens to be better-informed about politics, to read the newspapers and debate the issues, to join clubs and political parties, to petition their representatives to keep them on their toes. There ought to be time to do this while still leaving plenty of room for private satisfactions. A partly political life is perhaps not as much fun as a purely private life. But in the end there is no such thing as a purely