

The Ladder and the Mesh

Germaine de Staël, the Four Relations, and the One-Dimensional Reading of Power

J.Konstapel, Leiden, 19 August 2026

1. The claim

Germaine de Staël built a two-dimensional account of human conduct in 1796. The current revival reads her with a one-dimensional instrument. That instrument is the ladder: power as a single quantity, held by one group, more or less of it over time.

The ladder cannot represent what she wrote. She did not argue that reason is good and the passions are bad. She did not argue the reverse either. She argued that reason and the passions each have a good and a bad use. That is four cells, not two poles.

The same mismatch appears one level up. When her modern readers ask what is to be done about the return of male dominance, they are asking a ladder question. It admits ladder answers only. Staël's own work points somewhere else, and so does the anthropological evidence about how people actually relate.

This article does three things. It sets out Staël's fourfold structure from her own text. It gives the missing name for the alternative order, using Alan Fiske's relational models. It then restates the question of dominance in a form that can be measured.

2. What Staël built

The source text is *De l'influence des passions sur le bonheur des individus et des nations*, published in 1796, written during the Terror.

Staël separates *l'âme* from *l'esprit*. The soul carries sentiment. The mind carries reason. She keeps them distinct and denies that either governs the other.

She then does the unusual thing. She sorts each of them twice.

Passions, negative. *Esprit de parti*, party spirit. Ambition. Love of glory. These distort judgement and destroy the capacity to compromise.

Passions, positive. *Pitié*. She calls it *la vertu primitive* — the primitive virtue (1796, p. 330). Moral goodness does not arrive through reasoning. It arrives through this passion, and it arrives first. Also love, and enthusiasm.

Reason, positive. Contemplation and study. These produce distance from personal interest, and with it impartial judgement.

Reason, negative. Cold calculation. She names the utilitarian calculus directly. A weighing of advantages can serve ambition and end in the sacrifice of innocent lives. Systematic reasoning also fails on ordinary events, because ordinary events are messy and the system is built for clean cases.

Four cells. Each populated with named examples from her own text.

She adds a third faculty in *Essai sur les fictions* (1795): the imagination. It is not decoration. It is what allows abstract ideas to be internalised at all. This is why she wrote novels. The novel is not an illustration of her theory. It is the instrument of transmission that the treatise cannot be.

And she adds an epistemic claim. In her *Lettres sur Rousseau* (1788) she describes the love of liberty as a sentiment that guides moral judgement without the mediation of reasoning. She says she believes rather than thinks, adopts rather than reflects — and that she has not thereby surrendered her judgement. A feeling that carries knowledge. Not a feeling about knowledge.

3. The diagnosis inside the theory

The sharpest instrument in the book is *esprit de parti*, and it is routinely read as a synonym for fanaticism. It is not.

Staël compares it with *amour propre*, and the comparison is the point. In *amour propre* you are blinded by your own convictions. In *esprit de parti* you are blinded by the absence of them. Party spirit negates personal conviction for the sake of an external cause. She writes that the integrity of the dogma comes to matter more than the success of the cause (1796, p. 206).

Two things then go at once. Autonomy of judgement, and the ability to compromise. Once both are gone, she says, the way is open to every kind of crime committed in the name of the cause (1796, p. 209).

That is a structural description, not a moral complaint. It states a condition — the person has no standing of their own — and it states what follows from that condition. It was written by someone who watched the Terror from close range and lost people in it.

Hold that description. It returns in section 7.

4. What the current reading does with it

The reference work is now Eveline Groot's dissertation, *Reason and the Passions in the Philosophy of Germaine de Staël*, defended at Erasmus University Rotterdam on 17 April 2026, 157 pages, supervised by Han van Ruler and Wiep van Bunge. Three of its five chapters appeared earlier as journal article and book chapters, between 2021 and 2026.

The dissertation recovers the fourfold structure accurately. It is the best available reconstruction, and section 2 above rests on it.

It also does something braver than it is credited for. In chapter 5 Groot examines the presupposition that women should assimilate to the ranks of men, and she names it as a presupposition rather than a neutral goal. She finds it in Wollstonecraft and in Beauvoir. She sets Staël's equality-based-on-difference against it.

That is the correct objection. Occupying a higher rung does not alter the ladder.

But the argument stops one step short, and the stopping point is visible in the vocabulary. The alternative is stated as equality versus difference. That pair is still about the distribution of positions. It has no term for a relation that is not a position at all.

Two counts make the gap concrete. In the 157 pages, the word *patriarchal* occurs three times, two of them inside quotations from other authors. The word *matriarchy* occurs zero times. There is no theory of dominance in the dissertation. There is a theory of the passions, and dominance is handled by a borrowed word.

One passage shows the cost. Describing why certain authors are underestimated, the text names hegemonic structures and then lists in a parenthesis: patriarchal, and also imperial, and also colonial. Three names stacked without distinction. At that moment the term is carrying the work that the analysis should carry.

5. The missing name

The anthropology has had the answer since 1991.

Alan Fiske found that people everywhere organise their relations with four elementary forms, and only four. Every culture uses all four. Cultures differ in which relation governs which domain.

Communal Sharing. What is mine is ours. Members are equivalent and undifferentiated. Contribution is not tracked.

Authority Ranking. Members are ordered. Higher takes precedence, and owes protection downward.

Equality Matching. Balanced reciprocity. Turn-taking, one-for-one exchange, lotteries, equal shares.

Market Pricing. Ratios and rates. Value is compared through a common metric, usually price.

Fiske attached each to a measurement scale, and the mapping is exact. Communal Sharing is nominal — inside or outside, no order. Authority Ranking is ordinal — order without distance. Equality Matching is interval — equal differences. Market Pricing is ratio — a true zero and proportions.

This matters for the present argument. The four are not four amounts of one thing. They are four different mathematical structures. You cannot get from one to another by increasing or decreasing anything.

Now the pair that has no ordinary name. Authority Ranking together with Market Pricing gives rank and rate: hierarchy plus price. That combination is what "the economy" names. Equality Matching together with Communal Sharing gives turn-taking plus gift: reciprocity plus belonging. That combination has no standard word in Dutch or English. It is what the older literature was reaching for with the word *matriarchy*, and the word has been unusable ever since it was taken to mean rule by women.

That is the confusion this article is written against. A matriarchy is not a patriarchy with a woman at the head. Rule by women is Authority Ranking with a different occupant. The genuine contrast is a different pair of relations altogether.

6. Staël on the grid

Place her four cells on the four relations. The fit is not forced; it is close enough to do work.

Esprit de parti is Communal Sharing gone rigid. Membership is total, contribution is not tracked, the boundary between inside and outside is absolute — and personal conviction is dissolved into the group. Staël's own description says exactly this: conviction is negated for an external cause.

Ambition and *love of glory* belong to Authority Ranking. Both aim at position. Staël notes that love of glory requires recognition, and that recognition must be granted by others — so the person seeking it becomes subject to the public.

The *utilitarian calculus* is Market Pricing. Lives enter a common metric and are traded against a total. Staël's objection is not that the arithmetic is wrong. It is that a common metric exists at all for this.

Pitié is the intact form of Communal Sharing. Undifferentiated regard for another, prior to any accounting. Hence *la vertu primitive*: prior in her sequence, not primitive in the pejorative sense.

Contemplation sits nearest to Equality Matching. Its product is impartial judgement — treating cases as equivalent, which is the interval structure.

Two results follow immediately.

First, Staël's negative list is not a list of vices. It is a list of what each relation looks like when it runs unchecked and unmixed. Every relation has a good use. Each becomes destructive when it becomes the only one.

Second, her prescription is not moderation. It is mixture. She says the faculties must be aligned and that the success of one can never come at the expense of another. Read on the grid, that is a statement about keeping four relations live at once.

7. Dominance restated

The public question of 2026 is whether male dominance is making a comeback, and what can be done against it.

Both halves of that question are ladder-shaped. "Comeback" assumes one quantity moving up and down in time. "Against" assumes a counterforce applied from above.

On the grid the question changes shape. What is called patriarchy is the pair Authority Ranking plus Market Pricing governing domains that other relations used to govern. Its rise is not a quantity increasing. It is a mix changing composition.

The rest of this section works that out with the available measurements.

7.1 Where the four relations were housed

Each relation lived in institutions. That is the point at which the argument becomes checkable.

Communal Sharing lived in family, neighbourhood, parish, village, conscription. Equality Matching lived in unions, guilds, associations, mutual funds, apprenticeship, amateur sport, choirs, rotating credit. Authority Ranking lived in school, employer, state, church government. Market Pricing lived in the market.

Four relations, four kinds of housing. The question for the present is not which values have changed. It is which housing is still standing.

7.2 What has been measured

Friendship. The share of American men with no close friend rose from 3 per cent in 1990 to 15 per cent in 2021, a fivefold increase. Men reporting six or more close friends fell from 55 to 27 per cent. For women the no-close-friend share went from about 2 to 10 per cent. Emotional support received from a friend in the past week: women 41 per cent, men 21 per cent. Source: Survey Center on American Life, American Perspectives Survey. Their 2024 measurement puts the no-close-friend share at 17 per cent.

Time spent with friends fell by 37 per cent from the early 2010s, in Bryce Ward's analysis of the American Time Use Survey. Fifteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds spent 45 per cent more time alone in 2023 than in 2010.

Partner formation. This is the sharpest measurement available. Rosenfeld, Thomas and Hausen, PNAS 2019. In the mid-twentieth century heterosexual couples met through friends (about 30 per cent), family (27), school (24), neighbours (12), church (9). By the early twenty-first century: online 39 per cent, friends 20, family 7, church 4, neighbourhood 3. Online overtook friends around 2013.

Note what disappeared. Family, church, neighbourhood, friends — precisely the institutions of Communal Sharing and Equality Matching. And note what replaced them: a ranked, metered, priced environment. The authors call it disintermediation.

The political divergence. In 2021, 44 per cent of young American women identified as liberal against 25 per cent of young men, the widest gap in twenty-four years of polling. In 2026, 66 per cent of women aged 18 to 29 identify as Democrat against 44 per cent of Gen Z men. In the United Kingdom's 2024 general election, among 18- to 24-year-olds, 32 per cent of women voted Green against 12 per cent of men, and 12 per cent of men voted Reform against 6 per cent of women.

One qualification strengthens the case rather than weakening it. A study of 466,089 people aged 20 to 29 across 32 European countries, 1990–2023, finds no sharp divergence on ordinary left–right self-placement. The gap appears in voting behaviour and in attitudes about the relation between the sexes, not in general ideological position.

So this is not an ideological shift. It is something else, expressing itself through the only channel open to it.

7.3 Why now

A metering infrastructure cannot carry Communal Sharing. That relation is nominal: no order, no metric, contribution untracked. A platform is precisely an apparatus that tracks. Followers, likes, reach, score, rank. It cannot represent unmetered membership, because metering is what it is.

It cannot carry Equality Matching either. That relation needs a bounded group and a memory of turns — you went last time, I go now. Platforms have unbounded groups and no turn structure.

What remains representable is exactly Authority Ranking and Market Pricing. Ordinal and ratio. Those are the two the medium can carry, and they are therefore what it produces.

This is not a causal story. It is selection by fit. What matches the form persists; what does not match never appears. The dates are consistent with that reading: smartphone saturation around 2012, the crossover in partner formation around 2013, the youth divergence opening from about 2014.

7.4 Why it lands asymmetrically

Both groups are responding to the same fact — only ladder and market remain on offer — from different entry positions.

The institutions that housed male Communal Sharing and Equality Matching were single-purpose: union, church, conscription, apprenticeship, workingmen's association, amateur club. Single-purpose institutions collapse in one move. The figures show it: men lost their friendship circles about five times as fast.

The institutions that housed female Communal Sharing ran through kinship and care. Those networks are tougher, because they are neither voluntary nor cancellable. Hence 10 against 15 per cent, and 41 against 21 per cent on emotional support.

A person who has lost the reciprocity institutions and is offered only rank will reach for rank. That is the rightward movement among young men. A person who has entered the ladder institutions at scale — university, labour market — and meets them from below will contest rank. That is the leftward movement among young women.

Neither is a return of patriarchy. Both are what a society with two of four relations produces.

This also accounts for the country pattern. The divergence is sharpest where formal equality has advanced furthest. Formal equality is achieved through law and market, which are ordinal and ratio instruments. They distribute positions well and build no reciprocity at all. You can equalise positions on the ladder and still have removed the mesh.

7.5 Staël's diagnosis of what follows

Esprit de parti is her name for what happens to a person who has no standing of their own and receives one from an external cause. Their own conviction is erased in favour of that cause. The purity of the dogma comes to matter more than its success.

She names two consequences, and always together: independent judgement goes, and the capacity to compromise goes.

That is the manosphere. It is also its mirror image. Both recruit among people without standing by supplying one, and both deliver the two symptoms at once.

She was not describing men or women. She was describing what happens to a person when Communal Sharing collapses into total membership and nothing else remains on offer.

7.6 The wider zeitgeist

The same pattern runs everywhere, because it is one movement: everything has been made measurable, and measurability leaves only two relations standing.

Politics has become polling and seat counts. Science has become citations, impact factor and h-index. Education has become rankings and credentials. Art has become streams and charts. Care has become throughput. In each case the instrument can represent only rank and ratio, so what does not fit ceases to exist as a category.

This is also why the word patriarchy works so well. It is itself an ordinal word. It fits the infrastructure it criticises. A critique that can only be stated in rank terms confirms the rank.

8. The removal, and why it is the same reflex

Groot's first chapter reconstructs how Staël was read out of philosophy. The mechanism was not a decree. It was recategorisation. A philosopher was relabelled a woman of letters, and the label did the rest over two centuries.

Recategorisation is an Authority Ranking operation. It sorts. It does not argue.

This is why the one-dimensional instrument keeps reappearing on both sides of the case. The apparatus that removed Staël sorted her into a lower rank. The apparatus that now defends her sorts the removal under a single heading. Both operate ordinally. Neither can describe a relation that is not a position.

Staël is the better instrument for her own case than the vocabulary currently used to rescue her. That is the sharpest thing to say about the revival, and it is said in her favour.

9. What this predicts

Four statements that can be checked, each derived from the argument above rather than added to it.

P1. Where Equality Matching and Communal Sharing institutions persist with real content — mutual aid associations, rotating credit, guilds, congregations with obligations, sports clubs run by members — the young-adult gender divergence in political attitudes will be smaller, at equal levels of formal legal equality.

P2. Interventions framed as counterforce against hierarchy — quotas, mandated ranks, reserved positions — will change the occupancy of positions without changing the divergence. They operate inside Authority Ranking, so their result stays inside it.

P3. Movements that recruit through total membership will show Staël's two symptoms together, never singly: loss of independent judgement, and loss of the capacity to compromise. If one appears without the other, *esprit de parti* is the wrong diagnosis for that case.

P4. The four relations will not be found reducible to a single dimension in any culture examined. Where a study reports a single axis of dominance, it will be found to have measured only the ordinal relation and to have left the nominal, interval and ratio relations unmeasured.

P5. Where reciprocity institutions are rebuilt without metering — no score, no leaderboard, no tracked contribution — the pull of membership-by-cause will fall away in that population. Not because anyone has been argued out of it, but because they have standing again. Metered versions of the same institutions will not produce the effect. That difference is the test.

10. Where this leaves the reading of Staël

She wrote a theory of what people are like when their relations are in good order and when they are not. She wrote it in the middle of the event that supplied the evidence. She wrote it in four cells because two would not hold what she had seen.

The revival is real and the scholarship is now good. What it lacks is a name for the order that is not a ladder. Fiske supplies it, and the mapping in section 6 shows that Staël had already populated the cells.

Read this way, she is not primarily a forgotten woman philosopher who deserves a place. She is the earliest complete statement of a fourfold reading of human relations, written by someone who watched what happens when the fourfold collapses to one.

References

Annotated. Each entry states why it is worth reading, and where relevant how to read it.

De Staël-Holstein, Germaine. 1796. *De l'influence des passions sur le bonheur des individus et des nations*. Lausanne: Jean Mourer. The primary text of this article. Contains the four cells, the *esprit de parti* analysis (pp. 206, 209) and *pitié* as *la vertu primitive* (p. 330). *Why read it?* Because every secondary account compresses it, and the compression removes the structure. The book itself sorts reason and passion twice, and that double sorting is the whole argument. *Reading advice.* Freely available in French through Project Gutenberg. Read the chapters on party spirit, on philosophy and on study consecutively; the four cells only become visible in that order. There is still no modern English translation.

De Staël-Holstein, Germaine. 1795. *Essai sur les fictions*. Her account of the imagination as a third faculty, and her defence of the novel as a philosophical instrument. *Why read it?* Short, and it explains why she wrote fiction. Without it the novels look like a career alongside the philosophy rather than part of it.

De Staël-Holstein, Germaine. 1788. *Lettres sur les ouvrages et le caractère de J.-J. Rousseau*. Published anonymously when she was twenty-two. Contains the earliest statement of love of liberty as a sentiment that guides judgement without reasoning. *Why read it?* It is where the epistemic claim starts. Everything later in her work about feeling as a way of knowing traces back to these pages.

Groot, Eveline. 2026. *Reason and the Passions in the Philosophy of Germaine de Staël*. PhD dissertation, Erasmus University Rotterdam. The current reference reconstruction. Five chapters:

reception, the passions, public opinion, republicanism, feminism. *Why read it?* It is the only systematic treatment of Staël as a philosopher rather than as a literary figure, and it is careful with the primary text. *Reading advice.* Chapter 2 for the theory of the passions, chapter 5 for the assimilation critique. Chapter 1 for the removal mechanism, which is the part with the widest application beyond Staël.

Groot, Eveline. 2021. "Public Opinion and Political Passions in the Work of Germaine de Staël." *Ethics, Politics & Society* 4: 126–152. Open access, CC BY. The dissertation's third chapter in article form. Public opinion as simultaneously an emancipatory and a discriminating instrument, with the trial of Marie-Antoinette as the case. *Why read it?* It is the accessible entry point to the whole project, and the two-sided treatment of public opinion is the same double-valence move as the four cells.

Groot, Eveline. 2024. "Germaine de Staël's Theory of the Passions." In *Teaching Women Philosophers*, edited by Ruth Hagengruber. Springer, Women in the History of Philosophy and Sciences 21. *Why read it?* The most compact statement of the interplay between the rational and the sentimental. All translations are the author's own, from the 1796 edition.

Groot, Eveline. 2026. "The Republicanism of 'The Mother of Liberalism'." In *Women and Republicanism*, edited by Sandrine Bergès and Alan Coffee. Oxford University Press. *Why read it?* For the love of liberty treated as an epistemic emotion in a political rather than a moral setting.

Fiske, Alan Page. 1991. *Structures of Social Life: The Four Elementary Forms of Human Relations*. New York: Free Press. The full statement of the four relational models with the ethnographic basis. *Why read it?* Because it establishes that the four are structures and not degrees, which is the load-bearing point of section 5. *Reading advice.* Long. The 1992 article below gives the same argument in publishable length.

Fiske, Alan Page. 1992. "The Four Elementary Forms of Sociality: Framework for a Unified Theory of Social Relations." *Psychological Review* 99 (4): 689–723. *Why read it?* For the mapping of the four relations onto the four measurement scales — nominal, ordinal, interval, ratio. That mapping is what makes the reduction to one dimension a demonstrable error rather than a matter of taste.

Lerner, Gerda. 1986. *The Creation of Patriarchy*. New York: Oxford University Press. *Why read it?* Because it dates the thing. Lerner argues that male dominance is a historical construction, formed in Mesopotamia between roughly 3100 and 600 BCE, and therefore has a beginning. *Reading advice.* Note that Lerner rejects the hypothesis of a prior universal matriarchy. That rejection does not weaken the argument of this article; it strengthens it. A made system can be described in terms of which relations it promoted and which it demoted.

Goettner-Abendroth, Heide. 2012. *Matriarchal Societies: Studies on Indigenous Cultures Across the Globe*. Revised edition. New York: Peter Lang. *Why read it?* The standard survey of societies organised without a governing hierarchy. It establishes the empirical point that such societies exist and are not the mirror image of hierarchical ones. *Reading advice.* Read for the case material rather than for the terminology. The word *matriarchy* carries the wrong implication in every modern European language; the societies described are Communal Sharing and Equality Matching societies, which is what section 5 argues.

Rosenfeld, Michael J., Reuben J. Thomas and Sonia Hausen. 2019. "Disintermediating your friends: How online dating in the United States displaces other ways of meeting." *PNAS* 116 (36): 17753–17758. *Why read it?* The single most useful measurement in this article. It tracks, decade by decade, which institution introduced people to their partner, and it shows family, church,

neighbourhood and friends being displaced by a metered environment, with the crossover around 2013. *Reading advice.* Read the figure before the text. The lines for family, church and neighbourhood begin falling around 1940; friends from about 1995. That staggering is itself informative.

Cox, Daniel A. 2021. "The State of American Friendship: Change, Challenges, and Loss." Survey Center on American Life, American Perspectives Survey. *Why read it?* The source of the friendship figures: men with no close friend from 3 to 15 per cent between 1990 and 2021, men with six or more from 55 to 27 per cent, and the gap in emotional support (women 41 per cent, men 21 per cent). *Reading advice.* The whole distribution moved, not just the tail. That is what makes it structural rather than a story about a few isolated people.

Ward, Bryce. 2022 onward. Analyses of the American Time Use Survey on time spent with friends. *Why read it?* For the 37 per cent fall in time spent with friends since the early 2010s. Note that this is Ward's analysis of the underlying government data, not a figure published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics itself.

Burn-Murdoch, John. 2024. "A new global gender divide is emerging." *Financial Times*, January 2024. *Why read it?* It is the compact presentation of the divergence in political attitudes between young men and young women across countries, with the data behind it.

"Is there a growing gender divide among young adults in regard to ideological left–right self-placement? Evidence from 32 European countries." *European Sociological Review* 41 (6), 2025: 862 ff. *Why read it?* Because it is the honest counterweight. Across 466,089 respondents aged 20–29 in 32 countries, 1990–2023, the divergence in general left–right self-placement is modest and uneven. The gap shows up in voting and in attitudes about the sexes, not in ideology as such. *Reading advice.* This is not a refutation of the divergence. It locates it. Read it as evidence that the phenomenon is relational rather than ideological, which is the argument of section 7.

Borgmann, Albert. 1984. *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. *Why read it?* For the device paradigm: technology delivers a commodity and withdraws the practice that used to surround it. Read alongside Fiske's scales, it describes the same withdrawal from the other side — Borgmann on what is removed, Fiske on what can still be represented.

Evans, Alice. Ongoing. *The Great Gender Divergence*. *Why read it?* For the comparative work on why the divergence differs by country. The cross-country variation is the material against which P1 above is checked.

Konstapel, Hans. 2024. "Het Nieuwe Matriarchaat." *constable.blog*, 21 July 2024. *Why read it?* The source of the distinction developed here: a matriarchy is not a patriarchy with a woman at the head. Contains the mapping of Fiske's relations onto the seasons and onto the measurement scales.

Konstapel, Hans. 2024. "De Terugkeer van de Moedergodin." *constable.blog*, 12 July 2024. *Why read it?* The preceding piece, on the historical displacement of the mother goddess. It supplies the long timeline against which section 8 should be read.

McWhinney, Will. 1992. *Paths of Change: Strategic Choices for Organizations and Society*. Newbury Park: Sage. *Why read it?* A four-worldview model, independently derived, that partitions the same ground as Fiske's four relations. Where two independent derivations arrive at four, the number is unlikely to be an artefact of either.

