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Abstract

The French writer Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821) is perhaps the most famous representative of the counter-enlightenment. A conservative monarchist from Savoy, Maistre's life was dominated by the French Revolution. He regarded it as the most important event in European history. Where the revolution had inspired optimism amongst European liberals, Maistre regarded it with horror. Liberals saw the revolution as an opportunity to replace traditional institutions—monarchy, hereditary nobility, and the church—with institutions rooted in reason. While their specific programs varied, liberals were generally inclined to favor republicanism to monarchy, tolerance to state religions, and deism to theism. Maistre instead saw liberal values as incompatible with human nature. In 1796, he wrote Considerations on France, an exposition of the failures of the French Revolution. To him, the revolution was doomed to fail because the "reason" which guided its authors was a false prophet. A priori reason abstracts humanity from their historical circumstance and therefore God. History is, to Maistre, the determining force in politics, philosophy, and law. It gives our very words meaning. The idea of a revolution is star-crossed because states and laws can only emerge organically over centuries—anything created by human reason is, like its creator, weak and ephemeral. History is an extension of God, and attempts to supersede history are tantamount to rebellion. While Maistre's opposition to the revolution has consigned him to the dustbin of intellectual history, his historical critique of liberalism anticipates both Hegel and the continental left. He is, like Friedrich Nietzsche, a counter-enlightenment thinker whose thought reaches well beyond its author's reactionary intentions.

Keywords: Catholicism, Conservatism, France, Philosophy, Royalism

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The French writer Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821) is perhaps the most famous representative of the counter-enlightenment. A conservative monarchist from Savoy, Maistre's life was dominated by the French Revolution. He regarded it as the most important event in European history. Where the revolution had inspired optimism amongst European liberals, Maistre regarded it with horror. Liberals saw the revolution as an opportunity to replace traditional institutions—monarchy, hereditary nobility, and the church—with institutions rooted in reason. While their specific programs varied, liberals were generally inclined to favor republicanism to monarchy, tolerance to state religions, and deism to theism. Maistre instead saw liberal values as incompatible with human nature. In 1796, he wrote *Considerations on France*, an exposition of the failures of the French Revolution. To him, the revolution was doomed to fail because the "reason" which guided its authors was a false prophet. A priori reason abstracts humanity from their historical circumstance and therefore God. History is, to Maistre, the determining force in politics, philosophy, and law. It gives our very words meaning. The idea of a revolution is star-crossed because states and laws can only emerge organically over centuries—anything created by human reason is, like its creator, weak and ephemeral. History is an extension of God, and attempts to supersede history are tantamount to rebellion. While Maistre's opposition to the revolution has consigned him to the dustbin of intellectual history, his historical critique of liberalism anticipates both Hegel and the continental left. He is, like Friedrich Nietzsche, a counter-enlightenment thinker whose thought reaches well beyond its author's reactionary intentions.

Early Life

Joseph-Marie, Comte de Maistre was born in Chambéry on April 1st, 1753.[1] At the time of his birth, Chambéry was the regional capital of Savoy: a French-speaking province of Piedmont-Sardinia. Maistre was born into an obscure but locally prominent noble family. As late as the 17th century, Maistre's family were "illiterate mule drivers," but they grew prosperous upon entering agriculture and then law.[2] This prosperity culminated in king Charles Emannuel III raising Maistre's father, François-Xavier, to the Savoyard senate in 1740.[3] François-Xavier enjoyed a "successful and distinguished" career as a senator,[4] eventually earning noble status in 1778 when King Charles granted him the title of count.[5] Joseph was François-Xavier's first son with his wife, Christine Demotz, the daughter of a judge and fellow senator.[6] Joseph's younger brother, Xavier de Maistre, became a competent soldier and author in his own right. His family was aristocratic, deeply religious, and rife with lawyers and writers. The traditionalist intellectual which Maistre became was the natural product of such an upbringing.

The locale of Chambéry exerted equal influence upon the young Maistre. Like the Vendée before its rebellion, Chambéry was a quaint, bucolic place where the vestiges of feudalism were alive but not odious enough to render its inhabitants particularly receptive to

[1] Lebrun, *Intellectual Militant*, 3.
[2] Ibid, 4.
[3] Ibid, 5.
[4] Ibid, 5.
[5] Ibid, 5.
[6] Ibid, 6.

the revolutionary cause.[7] The Piedmontese crown was illiberal and autocratic, but ruled by competent administrators who enjoyed great popularity.[8] Savoy's relationship between crown and people differed greatly from the situation just slightly West, in France proper. There, popular vitriol had been directed at the French crown throughout the entire 18th century. During the buildup to the Revolution, the French sooner regarded their king and church with suspicion than devotion; one need only look at the hysteria surrounding the diamond necklace affair to see how readily the French public believed their monarchy would betray its subjects.[9] No such public relations disasters maligned the Piedmontese crown. King and church alike were treated with rustic honor. Maistre internalized these feudal values and maintained them his entire life.

Maistre became a lawyer and Savoyard senator.[10] Elevated to the office in 1788, he expected a long, peaceful life faithfully serving his king in his tranquil home.[11] Since his youth, Maistre had married, had children, and become a freemason. He occupied a similar social role to his father.[12] He spent his days "enjoying the company of close friends, holidays at their country estates, and long tramps to his vineyard properties in nearby villages. His social life included dances, plays, and dinner parties."[13] This laidback aristocratic life was supplemented by reading an ever-expanding library. Had the revolution never happened, one might expect Maistre to have lived and died in happy obscurity. History, however, had no such peaceful plans for the Savoyard. Political rumblings in the Kingdom of France sent cultural shockwaves throughout Chambéry in the early 1780's—namely a budgetary crisis which proved fatal to the old regime.

Intellectual Maturation

The French Revolution caused Maistre's intellectual awakening. One cannot overstate this singular event's centrality to his philosophy. He saw the inner workings of providence within it; like the sea receding before a tsunami, the French Revolution briefly exposed the foundations of politics in naked sunlight. Maistre felt it was his duty to investigate this "singular terrifying phenomenon" before the tide resubmerged these secrets. We must not mistake Maistre's awe for hope. He never saw the French Revolution as an opportunity for secular progress. He instead saw it as a Biblical calamity—like Noah's flood—which present generations were both privileged and doomed to witness. It happened suddenly, horribly, and punitively, but it was temporary. The world that followed it would be more or less similar to the one that preceded. Maistre did not anticipate the birth of nationalism, sister republics, or Napoleon's conquests; his revolution was a calamity that must be investigated rather than a project to be repeated.

[7] Paul H. Beik. "The French Revolution Seen from the Right: Social Theories in Motion, 1789-1799." *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society 46, no. 1* (1956): 64.
[8] Lebrun, *Intellectual Militant*, 5-6.
[9] See explanation of Diamond Necklace Affair in Chapter 3, "The Monarchy Adrift", in Popkin, Jeremy D. *A New World Begins: The History of the French Revolution*. (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2019).
[10] Armenteros, *The French Idea of History*, 21.
[11] Lebrun, *Intellectual Militant*, 70.
[12] Ibid, 70.
[13] Ibid, 70.

Maistre followed events in pre-revolutionary France closely. He was broadly sympathetic to Jacuqes Necker, Louis XVI's Swiss finance minister, and his attempts to correct French finances in the years leading up to the 1789 meeting of the Estates-General. In a letter to a friend, Maistre wrote that, in the introduction to Necker's *On the Administration of France's Finances*, he found "some of my own ideas, so to say, my own expressions."[14] In another letter, he writes favorably of Necker's reformist outlook: "Great revolutions in internal politics are like dissonances in music in that they must be prepared [i.e. fit into the larger symphony] … every old institution has thrown out deep roots that ordinarily extend much farther than one thinks, and that must not be uprooted before having cut these long filaments one after the other, and, if possible, quietly, so that when the great blow is struck there is not too much clatter nor too great tears."[15] Maistre's comparison of the monarchy to a tree prefigures his organic conception of polities and anticipates Burke. His fears about "clatter" and "tears" resulting from overly hasty reform demonstrates that Maistre anticipated the possibility of revolutionary anarchy prior to the terror. He always viewed kingdoms as bonsai trees: they must be trimmed, maintained, and cared for, lest one cut too greedily and let the whole plant die.

He transformed from a moderate reformist to a right-wing monarchist as the revolution unfolded. In 1788, "Maistre had been an enthusiastic partisan of the French parlementaires and endorsed their campaign to force the calling of an Estates-General."[16] He had even himself considered seeking election, according to one note written as a diplomat in St. Petersburg.[17] However, he quickly turned as the revolutionary proceedings unfolded, writing of the October Days of 1789: "Would you believe it, my dear friend? Mounier saw, with his own two eyes, women of Paris, who had just taken bread from the King's kitchens, soak this bread in the blood of the slaughtered bodyguard and then eat it. The charming people! … What can I say to you, my dear friend? My faith is shaken. Help! Assist me! My head is forever fermenting with all these affairs to the point that sometimes I cannot sleep. Never has a more interesting spectacle struck mankind …"[18] Maistre's correspondence after this letter becomes decidedly counter-revolutionary. Whatever hopes for reform he saw in Necker and, later, the Estates-General, were dashed as revolutionary violence took shape. As indicated by his phrasing ("[an] interesting spectacle"), Maistre saw the French Revolution as an unprecedented, world-historical phenomenon. This attitude pervades the rest of his early revolutionary correspondence.

Maistre did not begin his political writings, however, until after Chambéry was invaded by revolutionary forces. Savoy was overwhelmed by France in the earliest days of the revolutionary wars. The French Republic was established on 21 September 1792, and French forces reached Chambéry on 22 September 1792.[19] Sitting on the corner of the French realm, and manned by a significantly smaller army than that of revolutionary France, it is perhaps

[14] Ibid, 77.
[15] Ibid, 78.
[16] Ibid, 95.
[17] Ibid, 95.
[18] Ibid, 98.
[19] Ibid, 108.

unsurprising that continental Savoy (and, with it, Chambéry) was one of the first foreign territories incorporated into the expanding republican giant. Maistre's journal entry from the day Chambéry fell reads as follows: "Saturday, French invasion, horrible rain. Dishonorable flight of our troops. Treason or stupidity of the generals, a rout that is incredible and even a little mysterious, according to some persons. This is the eternal shame of the government and, perhaps, the annihilation of the military state."[20] That same day, Maistre left Chambéry on horseback, joining his family in Moutiers. Thus began Maistre's long period of exile. He had begun the revolution partially sympathetic to reform, but, now that the "sickness" of the revolution had forced him from his home, he embarked on a new journey as the leading counter-revolutionary intellectual in continental Europe.

Considerations was preceded by a turbulent exile culminating in Maistre's political maturation. He immediately fled to Moutiers to join his family, and then tried to settle in Turin, the seat of the Piedmontese throne.[21] Turin rejected the Chambéry émigrés because they failed to defend their province from French aggression. Rejected by his king, Maistre briefly returned to Chambéry but found it wholly transformed under French Republican rule.[22] The French had styled themselves "liberators" and renamed streets, taken over royal palaces, and confiscated all property which formerly belonged to the church and aristocrats.[23] Leaving Chambéry again in 1793, Maistre next settled in Lausanne, Switzerland, and embarked on his writing career. There, Maistre found a community of old friends and sympathetic émigrés.[24] In Lausanne, Maistre wrote *Letters from a Savoyard Royalist*, in which he castigates the republican government as an affront to traditional notions of monarchical sovereignty.[25] In *Letters*, Maistre explains his initial sympathy for reform as an error shared by many literate Europeans, and that all European powers before the revolution were decayed and in need of regeneration.[26] However, after 4 August 1789, when the national assembly renounced hereditary titles,[27] the revolution was "left without a single wise supporter."[28]

Considerations on France was written during the following three years, completed in 1796 and published in 1797.[29] It is the culmination of Maistre's intellectual development. The book's thesis is that the French Revolution was divine punishment sent to punish France. This punishment will result in a counter-revolution that "rejuvenates" Christianity across the Western world. *Considerations* was an immediate success across Europe, and catapulted Maistre to fame within reactionary circles. Its fiercely monarchical sentiment reconciled Maistre to the Piedmontese throne, and he soon took up work as a diplomat—a position which would find him traveling to St. Petersburg and communing with Tsarists of similar political bent. *Considerations* is interesting because of its ideas rather than its thesis. The idea that the

[20] Ibid, 108.
[21] Ibid, 110-111.
[22] Ibid, 112.
[23] Ibid, 112.
[24] Ibid, 119.
[25] Ibid, 122-123.
[26] Ibid, 125.
[27] Ibid, 100.
[28] Ibid, 100-101.
[29] Ibid, 155.

revolution was a divine punishment had already been conceived by the mystic Louis Claude de Saint-Martin.[30] Saint-Martin, however, lacked Maistre's philosophical talent. The philosophy of law, religion, and history which Maistre marshals in support of his thesis are wholly his own and therefore fruitful subjects of scholarly inquiry.

Considerations on France: Providence and History

The thesis of Considerations—that the revolution was divine punishment—rests upon three pillars: a philosophy of history, a philosophy of law, and Catholic theology. Maistre's philosophy of history is the first pillar he introduces to the reader. He advances providentialism, or the belief that human history is designed by God and is therefore, in the final analysis, supremely good. All good and bad things that happen in the world have been weighed out by God to be the best of all possible worlds. This is not to say that evil does not exist, but rather that evil is necessary for good's eventual triumph. Such a worldview is not exclusive to Maistre. Catholic providentialism stretches back at least to St. Augustine's *City of God*. What is unique about Maistre's providentialism is his attempt to explain the French Revolution in providential terms. Maistre believes that there are no historical contingencies. If everything was designed by God, then everything is historically necessary. The slightest breeze and the strongest tempest are equally central to providence's designs. In light of this philosophy of history, Maistre begins *Considerations* by exploring man's relationship with providence:

> We are all attached to the throne of the Supreme Being by a supple chain that restrains us without enslaving us. Nothing is more admirable in the universal order of things than the action of free beings under the divine hand. Freely slaves, they act voluntarily and necessarily at the same time; they really do what they will, but without being able to disturb the general plans. Each of these beings occupies the center of a sphere of activity whose diameter varies according to the will of the Eternal Geometer, who can extend, restrict, check, or direct the will without altering its nature. In the works of man, everything is as wretched as their author … in divine works, the riches of infinity are openly displayed … nothing resists it, and for it everything, even obstacles, are means; and the irregularities introduced by the operation of free agents fit into the general order.[31]

To Maistre, humans are "free slaves" who act "voluntarily" and "necessarily" at the same time. We have free will, but our exercise of free will inevitably plays out in a manner predetermined by God. Humans are an indistinguishable part of the causal chain which underpins history and the cosmos; any action we take cannot betray the ultimate plans of our creator, if they may betray his moral law. This is why "in the works of man, everything is as wretched as their author": our actions have no power independent of their alignment with God's will. Because God's will is backed by the "riches of infinity", we can see God's will in history when we study which people and movements have enjoyed historic success. And what does history reveal? The triumph of Christianity over paganism, monarchy over republicanism, and order over anarchy. While there have been deviations from this path—namely Islam and

[30] See Bates, David. "The Mystery of Truth: Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin's Enlightened Mysticism." Journal of the History of Ideas 61, no. 4 (2000): 635–55. https://doi.org/10.2307/3654073.
[31] Maistre. *Considerations on France*, 3.

Protestantism—they never threaten the "general order" of things and should therefore be understood as mere deviations.

These deviations, however, offer instruction to careful students of history. Maistre believed that political wisdom is found in history rather than reason. History is a superior teacher to reason because it is written by God. Historical events—rather than logical abstractions—should be what we investigate when we seek to answer political problems. In light of this, Maistre first mentions the French Revolution as an especially wisdom-rich event:

> A miracle is an effect produced by a divine or superhuman cause that suspends or contradicts an ordinary cause. If in the middle of winter, before a thousand witnesses, a man were to command that a tree suddenly be covered with leaves and fruit, and the tree obeyed, everyone would proclaim it a miracle and bow down before the wonder-worker. But the French Revolution and everything now happening in Europe is just as marvelous in its own way as the instantaneous fructification of a tree in the month of January. However, instead of being shocked, we look the other way or talk nonsense.[32]

Maistre fixates upon miracles because they are moments when the divine will is most visible. The French Revolution is a miracle—albeit a terrible one—and it should therefore be regarded with fascination. God's will is most visible when historical forces are accompanied by tremendous success. The French Revolution has been accompanied by astounding successes, so God is working through the revolutionaries:

> … whatever could have prevented [the revolution] does not exist [and] nothing succeeds for those who wish to prevent it. [Never] … is Providence more palpable, than [here] when superior action is substituted for that of man and it acts all alone … the French Revolution leads men more than men lead it … Those who established the Republic did it without wanting to and without knowing what they were doing … Robespierre, Callot, or Barère [were] led to it imperceptibly by circumstances … these extremely mediocre men exercised over a guilty nation the most frightful despotism in history … but the very moment these detestable tyrants completed the measure of crime necessary to that phase of the Revolution, a breath overthrew them.[33]

Interestingly, God's will is most visible when human agency diminishes. The revolutionaries ("mediocre men") were vessels for history instead of authors. Maistre's revolution is a leviathan working through the hands of unconscious idiots. It routinely disposes of them once they are no longer necessary. It is an uncontrollable force which "goes all alone."[34] As the revolution bears all of the hallmarks of providential power, contemporary observers are therefore witnessing God acting through history in real time. Every new law from the National Assembly, every death on the battlefield, and every fall of the guillotine is one note in his cosmic symphony: "never has the Divinity shown itself so clearly in any human event. If the vilest instruments are employed, punishment is for the sake of regeneration."[35]

[32] Ibid, 3-4.
[33] Ibid, 5-6.
[34] "[Spectators] are right when they say [the revolution] goes all alone." Ibid, 8.
[35] Ibid, 8.

Considerations on France: The Crucifixion of France

But what are these "vile instruments", and how will they "regenerate" France? To answer this question we must first understand Maistre's understanding of French history. Before the revolution, France was the most culturally and politically significant Western kingdom. Ever since Clovis, French kings sat *primus inter pares* amongst European monarchs. This was the product not of random historical contingency, but rather divine necessity. Maistre argues that France has been given a mission to lead Europe for all time:

> Every nation, like every individual, has received a mission that it must fulfill. France exercises over Europe a veritable magistracy that it would be useless to contest and she has most culpably abused. In particular, she was at the head of the religious system, and not without reason her king was called *Most Christian* … [after the revolution] she has used her influence to contradict her vocation and demoralize Europe.[36]

France was the spiritual and political leader of Europe before the revolution. Because France was the foremost kingdom, it was necessarily the most Christian kingdom. The fact that the revolution happened in the citadel of the Catholic faith is historically significant. God would not choose to assault his favorite kingdom with atheism, republicanism, and democracy without some greater purpose in mind. Because history is governed by providence, France's destruction must necessarily lead to its rebirth in a holier form.

Maistre begins this mission by analyzing the advantages the revolution has given France. He first looks towards the French Republic's military successes. By 1796 the French Republic had bested Austria, Britain, Prussia, and the Netherlands with no major allies.[37] Maistre concluded that this is evidence God favors the French cause. God cannot want the French Republic to last forever, however, as the French Republic is opposed to Catholicism. Maiste therefore believes that providence intends to revive the French Kingdom at some point in the future—with greater territory than it had prior to 1789.

In light of this, Maistre argues that the good royalist in 1796 should ironically fight for the French Republic against its enemies. This belief alienated many contemporary royalists and rendered Bourbon Restoration intellectuals hesitant to endorse Maistre's writings.[38] It is, however, a coherent outgrowth of his theory of providence. If the French Republic were to lose on the battlefield and be divided up amongst European powers, there would be no future for a revived French Kingdom. If foreign monarchs imposed a French monarchy upon the defeated republic, it would be weak and unpopular (this is, ironically, how the Bourbon Restoration ultimately happened—Maistre was right in predicting its impotence). The only way for the French monarchy to truly revive is by France's own will; the good royalist will therefore defend the French realm against foreign advances and wait until providence returns the Bourbons to Paris.

Maistre holds that the French Republic is useful to providence's designs precisely because of its cruelty. The republican government is not bound by the same moral scruples as

[36] Ibid, 9.
[37] Popkin, *A New World Begins*, 860.
[38] Ibid, 853-857.

the "gentle" Bourbon monarchy.[39] The "somber rigor" of the Jacobin regime allowed it to "condemn to death the inhabitants of foreign lands" as "insurgents" and inspire bravery by threatening French soldiers with the guillotine if they failed.[40] Echoing Machiavelli, Maistre says that "these horrors, very useful to the future king, could not, however, be used by him" due to his Christian morals, i.e. "kindness, clemency, justice" and "meekness of character."[41] The utility of republican cruelty to France allows Maistre to explain away the revolution as a tool of providence.

Why would a loving God willingly create a bloodthirsty regime? Maistre answers that our "loving God" has never shied away from violent means, so the French Republic is not substantively unusual. Maistre dedicates a chapter of *Considerations* titled "On the Violent Destruction of the Human Species" towards exploring the omnipresence of violence in history. The first paragraph includes the following law:

> Unhappily, history proves that war is, in a certain sense, the habitual state of mankind, which is to say that human blood must flow without interruption somewhere or other on the globe, and that for every nation, peace is only a respite.[42]

Maistre then writes a history of bloodshed from antiquity to the present. He documents Caesar's conquests, the rise of Islam, the rise of Genghis Khan, the Crusades, the war of the Spanish Succession, and concludes with the French Revolution.[43] Upon finishing this grim catalog, Maistre speculates whether violence is ultimately evil:

> There is room to doubt [that] this violent destruction is, in general, such a great evil as is believed … when the human soul has lost its strength through laziness, incredulity, and the gangrenous vices that follow an excess of civilization, it can be retempered only in blood … mankind may be considered as a tree which an invisible hand [providence] is continually pruning and which often profits from the operation."
>
> God therefore uses violence to help mankind. This "profit" is human flourishing:
>
> Now the real fruits of human nature – the arts, sciences, great enterprises, lofty conceptions, manly virtues – are due especially to the state of war … Thus Greece's most brilliant hour was the terrible epoch of the Peloponnesian War, the Age of Augustus followed immediately the civil war and the proscriptions … in a word, we can say that blood is the manure of the plant we call *genius*.[44]

While Maistre's excuse of violence may echo atheistic thinkers like Nietzsche, this dark passage is ultimately rooted in Catholic theology. Christianity is the religion of pain just as much

[39] Maistre, *Considerations on France*, 17.
[40] Ibid, 17.
[41] Ibid, 17.
[42] Ibid, 23.
[43] "But from time to time the flow [of blood] is augmented prodigiously by such extraordinary events as the Punic Wars, the Triumvirate, the victories of Caesar, the interruption of the barbarians, the Crusades, the wars of religion, the Spanish Succession, the French Revolution, etc. … Buffon has proven quite clearly that a large percentage of animals are destined to die a violent death. He could apparently have extended the demonstration to man; but let the facts speak for themselves." Ibid, 28.
[44] Ibid, 28-29.

of love. Christ was brutally murdered by the Romans; Peter was crucified upside down; Thomas was impaled in India; James was thrown off of a spire and stoned; the other apostles had similarly gruesome deaths. Looking to the Old Testament, God has a penchant for cruelty. He obliterated Jericho. He razed Sodom and Gomorrah. He genocided Canaan to make way for Israel. Christians have endured persecutions by pagans, muslims, and other Christians. The Christian faith accepts suffering (especially of the righteous) just as readily as it promotes love. While Maistre's endorsement of violence is shocking, it does not qualify him as a pagan *a la* Nietzsche and Machiavelli.

Maistre instead couches the necessity of violence within an idiosyncratic Catholic theodicy. He describes an "age-old dogma" of sacrifice (which he defines as "the innocent [suffering] for the benefit of the guilty"),[45] which finds historic instantiation in pagan rituals, Christian dogma, and human history:

> All creation groans, and tends with pain and effort towards another order of things …
>
> there is no chastisement that does not purify; there is no disorder that *eternal love* does not turn against the principle of evil.[46]

Pain is a concomitant of history. The violence of the revolution, while extreme, is therefore not substantively unusual. Indeed, whenever great suffering has happened in human history, it has been followed by "genius", i.e. flourishing in arts, sciences, and virtue. The violence of the French Revolution, then, will necessarily be followed by a golden age of Christianity and monarchy.

Considerations on France: Power and Law

Maistre has only described the mechanisms of history thus far. Even if we accept his providentialism, he has yet to provide a justification for his royalist politics. He provides this justification in a chapter titled "Can the French Republic Last?" In Maistre's view, large republics are doomed to collapse. Lasting peace can only happen under a monarch because the monarch's rule on earth most closely approximates God's rule over heaven. Republican governance gives mankind too much authority; we need to be ruled by a paternalistic authority just as we are ruled by a paternalistic deity. While small republics like Rome and Athens thrived in antiquity, they fell to anarchy or monarchy upon becoming too large. The French Republic is doomed to fail because large republics have never existed:

> If we are told that a die thrown a billion times had never turned up anything but five numbers – 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 – could we believe there was a 6 on one of the faces? No, undoubtedly … Well then! Let us run through history; there you will see so-called *Fortune* tirelessly throwing the die for over four thousand years. Has *large republic* ever been rolled? No. Therefore, that *number* is not on the die … monarchies have always existed, and sometimes republics. If we want to go into subdivisions, we can call government where the masses exercise sovereignty *democracy*, and that where sovereignty belongs to a more or less restricted number of privileged families *aristocracy*. [With this]

[45] Ibid, 30.
[46] Ibid, 31.

> everything has been said … thus, nothing is new, and a large republic is impossible, since there has never been a large republic.[47]

Maistre believes the French Republic will not last because it is unprecedented. This position appears silly to modern eyes because most people live in large republics. In Maistre's day, however, the only other large republic that existed apart from France was the young United States, which he dismisses on the grounds that it was not yet big enough to collapse.[48] Out of fairness to Maistre, the French Republic did collapse into monarchy under Napoleon. France was ruled by one man from the 18 Brumaire coup until the collapse of the second empire in 1870. While mistaken, Maistre was not irrational for doubting the feasibility of large republics.

Like monarchy, Christianity's survival is inevitable because it has always succeeded: "For eighteen centuries it has ruled a great part of the world, particularly the most enlightened portions of the globe."[49] Maistre highlights its antiquity by emphasizing its connection to Judaism, and, through it, the beginning of the world: "This religion even predates antiquity … *it was born the day days were born*."[50] Christianity links modern souls to genesis. Maistre mentions how it has enjoyed observance by the educated and illiterate alike,[51] survived persecutions,[52] and grew to dominate Europe because of its veracity.[53] Like monarchy, the historical success of Chrisitanity is enough justification for its believability. The anticlericalism of the French Revolution, then, directly contravenes the ultimate goal of history.

But appeals to historical precedent cannot justify a political order alone. The true center of Maistre's royalism lies in his legal philosophy, i.e. his theory of unwritten constitutions. This theory is articulated in the chapter "On Divine Influence in Political Constitutions". Maistre sees legal rights and powers as outgrowths of history. That is, political systems only make sense within a given historical circumstance. Where Kant would argue that legal systems should develop around a priori rights that all rational beings have, Maistre would instead argue that legal systems inevitably develop around a posteriori rights that themselves emerge from custom. They cannot be known independent of observation. A priori reasoning only leads mankind towards self-destruction because it abstracts man from history. Legislators should exclusively use a posteriori observation because history is created by an omnipotent God.

Maistre's irrationalism contravenes prevailing enlightenment philosophy. Liberals saw the state and individual as ideally rational. Social contractarians like Locke and Hobbes believed that society derives from a social contract. This contract was created by rational agents in reference to self-interest. It did not develop over centuries of unwritten custom. Locke's sovereign derives legitimacy from the pooled freedom of his subjects. Maistre's sovereign derives legitimacy from the traditions which his people have practiced for centuries. The very

[47] Ibid, 32-33.
[48] "America is often cited [as an example of a successful large republic]. I know of nothing so provoking as the praises bestowed on this babe-in-arms. Let it grow." Ibid, 35.
[49] Ibid, 46.
[50] Ibid, 46.
[51] Ibid, 46.
[52] Ibid, 47.
[53] Ibid, 46.

idea of a liberal revolution is opposed to tradition; the French revolutionaries sought to violently dispose of inherited institutions like the monarchy, church, and nobility. In Maistre's view, then, the revolutionaries fundamentally misunderstood politics. In replacing the Old Regime with the First Republic they tried to sever themselves from tradition. Their actions were decidedly un-historical, and the republic is therefore devoid of legitimacy (and, by extension, the long-term support of providence). The "rights" protected by the national assembly's laws are therefore meaningless.

Maistre accordingly lambasts the contemporary French constitution as an entity made for an abstract "man" which does not exist: "The Constitution of 1795, like its predecessors, was made for man. But there is no such thing as man in the world. In my lifetime I have seen Frenchmen, Italians, Russians, etc. … But as for man, I declare that I have never in my life met him; if he exists, he is unknown to me."[54] Maistre's subject is an extension of their historical circumstance. They cannot transcend it. We do not exist as abstract rational agents, but instead as a collection of contingent identities. Maistre's subject is a historically-determined entity who cannot legislate for other cultures or be legislated to by other cultures. As cultures are created by history, and history is created by God, the human subject is ontologically tied to providence through tradition. The French Revolution failed because it tried to transcend history. A restored Bourbon monarchy is inevitable because French society is Catholic and royalist. It always has been so it always will be; all other systems are doomed to destruction.

This view, however, appears fatalistic, if not quietist. Are humans not politically agent? Maistre accounts for human agency in politics by arguing that man is the caretaker, rather than author, of society: "Man can modify everything within the sphere of his activity, but he creates nothing."[55] This echoes his opening statement about providence, wherein Maistre states that human activity is "just as wretched as [its] author" but divine actions are all-powerful.[56] How can humanity create nothing if states depend upon humans to function? Maistre answers with a comparison to a tree:

> Undoubtedly a man may plant a seed, raise the tree, perfect it by grafting, and trim it a hundred different ways, but he would never imagine that he had the power to make a tree. How can he have imagined that he had the power to make a constitution? Would it be from experience? Let us see what experience teaches us. All free constitutions known to men have been formed in one of two ways. Sometimes they have germinated [in] an unconscious manner through the conjunction of a multitude of so-called fortuitous circumstances, and sometimes they have a single author who appears like a sport of nature and enforces obedience.[57]

The comparison of a constitution to a tree is instructive: not only is it an organic entity, but it is one with a predetermined *telos*. Mankind can help it achieve this *telos* by taking care of it, but we cannot determine its *telos* (i.e. "make a tree") on our own. Aristotelian influence is striking in this passage. In Maistre's earlier discussion of French "magistracy", he maintained

[54] Ibid, 53.
[55] Ibid, 49.
[56] Ibid, 3.
[57] Ibid, 49.

that nations have missions assigned to them by providence. Just as a seed's potential to become a tree is preordained by nature, the form which France, Britain, or Spain will develop into is preordained. Human agency in politics lies in realizing this *telos* through proper maintenance of that society's traditions. To Maistre, change happens without humans consciously trying to make it happen. Divinely predetermined historical contingencies ("fortuitous circumstances") add up over eons to allow societies to take shape culturally, spiritually, politically, and legally. Humans, then, can only either facilitate or stunt this growth, like a good or bad botanist. Politics is a *techne* of caretaking human civilization; those of us who live in the present can hope for nothing more than preserving their culture as best fate allows them and passing the torch on to the next generation. The French Revolution attempted to forcibly remake French civilization in light of nonexistent abstract rights that serve a nonexistent abstract man. It was a doomed project. The revolutionaries misunderstood history. Progress is something which naturally germinates through providence, not the ephemeral hands of mankind. Good politicians nurture the society into which they have been born. They forever regard themselves as a part of a tradition which they did not make leading towards a *telos* they cannot determine.

After this passage, Maistre lists a series of laws which govern the organic growth of constitutions. The first reads: "No constitution is the result of deliberation. The rights of the people are never written, or at any rate, constitutive acts or fundamental written laws are never more than declaratory statements of anterior rights about which nothing can be said except they exist because they exist."[58] This legal theory would be wholly unintelligible to the *philosophes*, but makes perfect sense to Maistre. Constitutions, i.e. the accumulated legal and political practices of nations, emerge from providence's divine germinative potential. As they derive from God's will, they, like God, simply exist because they exist. The second reads: "God, not having judged it appropriate to use supernatural means in this area, has at least so far circumscribed human action that in the formation of constitutions [historic] circumstances do everything and men are only part of the circumstances."[59] Constitutions are as historically-determined as humanity, and do not derive from a priori abstractions. Law three states that "the rights of the people" always "procred from the concessions of sovereigns" but "the rights of the monarch and the aristocracy" are "constitutive and *basic*, [having] neither date nor author."[60] Maistre, here, notes that monarchies are the wellspring of political legitimacy. Even abstract rights ultimately find their genesis in kingly authority, and therefore all sovereignty is monarchical in nature. The fifth and sixth laws state that "some things in every constitution [cannot] be written and must be allowed to remain in dark and reverent obscurity on pain of upsetting the state … the more that is written, the weaker the institution becomes … laws are only declarations of rights" and "rights are declared only when they are attacked."[61] Maistre argues that this is why Sparta, "the most vigorous political system of secular antiquity", had nothing written down.[62] Language universalizes constitutions. Constitutions are, by their very

[58] Ibid, 49.
[59] Ibid, 49-50.
[60] Ibid, 50.
[61] Ibid, 50.
[62] Ibid, 50.

nature, particular to societies. The transcription of constitutions, then, contorts them by universalizing them and abstracting them from their native historical milieu. This abstraction weakens constitutions because it misrepresents them as intelligible things which can be objected to on universal, rational grounds. Such is what happened with the French. Maistre cites the countless laws produced by the national assembly as evidence that the French Republic lacks sovereign authority.[63] In contrast, monarchies are like God: simple, paternalistic, and wanting of no higher justification. They are natural because they respect the organic, historically-determined nature of political constitutions.

If constitutions are historically determined, however, how can there exist lawgivers in ancient antiquity, like Solon and Lycurgus? Maistre responds that these men are mouthpieces of providence, and therefore still respect the organic, unwritten nature of political constitutions: "When providence decrees the more rapid formation of a political constitution, there appears a man invested with an indefinable power: he speaks and makes himself obeyed. But these marvelous men belong perhaps only to the world of antiquity and to the youth of nations."[64] These legislators are "kings or high nobles."[65] Solon was not a noble, and therefore his "constitution was the most fragile of antiquity."[66] These legislators do not author institutions, instead "only combine pre-existing elements in the customs and character of a people" and therefore still respect the historically contingent nature of political constitutions.[67] Further, their actions are "accomplished only in the name of the Divinity. The polity and the religion are founded together; the legislator is scarcely distinguishable from the priest."[68] This reflects Maistre's belief that political orders must harmonize with heaven in structure (i.e. be monarchical) and cultural orientation (i.e. be religious).[69]

Maistre mentions one further important quality of these legislators: "they are never what are called *scholars*: they do not write, they act on instinct and impulse more than on reasoning, and they have no other means of acting than a certain moral force that bends men's wills like grain before the wind."[70] This reinforces Maistre's idea that scholarly virtues—reason and abstraction—are not those which should be carried by political leaders. Political leaders should themselves be outgrowths of historical contingency, the agents raised up to the heights of power by providence. They should, like a Roman *paterfamilias*, strictly observe the correct maintenance of tradition so that their native society can grow and fulfill the *telos* God assigned it during his act of creation. The French Republic is the opposite of this, and no government will last in France which does not respect its old, organically-grown constitution.

Considerations on France: The Counter-Revolution

[63] Maistre counts 15,479 laws as having been passed by the French revolutionary government from the first day of the Republic in 1792 to 26 October 1795. Ibid 54-55.
[64] Ibid, 51.
[65] Ibid, 51.
[66] Ibid, 51.
[67] Ibid, 51.
[68] Ibid, 51.
[69] Ibid, 42.
[70] Ibid, 51.

Because of these aforementioned considerations, Maistre thinks that a long-lasting French Republic is impossible. It must collapse into a monarchy because France's unwritten constitution yields immense invisible sway over French civilization. This collapse will be a "counter-revolution." Maistre believes that the counter-revolution will emerge naturally because it entails the mere revival of France's already-extant unwritten constitution. He emphasizes that the king will not be brought back to the throne by a popular uprising, but rather by a few leaders acting under the dictates of providence: "the people count for nothing in revolutions, or at most count only as a passive instrument. Four or five persons, perhaps, will give France a king."[71]

He outlines a series of events that can lead to a hypothetical counter-revolution. It begins domestically, with an elite-led royalist insurrection in Paris. This is followed by a mass defection of republican troops as soldiers ponder the potential spoils of being the first to swear allegiance to the king.[72] Royalist ideas "are so simple and so natural that they can escape no one."[73] The machinelike complexity of the national assembly falters before the elegant simplicity of monarchy. The people defect from the republic:

> Every minute the royalist movement is being reinforced; soon it becomes irresistible. 'Long live the king,' cry the loving and the loyal, beside themselves with joy. 'Long live the king,' responds the republican hypocrite in dire terror. What does it matter [that the republican joins the voices]? There is only one cry. And the king is crowned. Citizens! This is how counter-revolutions are made. God warns us that He has reserved to Himself the establishment of sovereignties by never confiding to the masses the choice of their masters.[74]

The French Revolution will end with a counter-revolution because only a Catholic monarch can inherit the unwritten French constitution. God creates rulers through providence. The people can never choose this. Democracy is star-crossed because democratic philosophy is grounded in a priori reason. The results of any election will be dictated by God anyway; the people's voice cannot matter under providential metaphysics. The French Revolution, then, is necessarily temporary. This new monarchy will be more Catholic and powerful than ever before:

> If one wants to know the probable result of the French Revolution, it suffices to examine that which united all parties. They have all watched the debasement, even the destruction, of the universal Church and the monarchy, from which it follows that all their efforts will culminate in the glorification of Christianity and the monarchy.[75]

[71] Ibid, 77.
[72] Ibid, 77-78.
[73] Ibid, 79.
[74] Ibid, 79.
[75] Ibid, 80.

Maistre elsewhere compares this rejuvenation to the birth of a new religion. This revival will possibly precipitate the reconciliation of all churches to the Roman pontiff.[76] Maistre thus explains the French Revolution as a historically necessary tragedy which will eventually fulfill God's plans. God's plans with the revolution are proportionate to the destruction the revolution has wrought. While God may have used cruel means to purify France, this is not a significant aberration from human history. France's unwritten customs will return its subjects to their king like moths to a flame. The republic cannot last because France's unwritten constitution is royal. Only the throne and altar align with God's will. The pious royalists of Europe need only wait for the divinely-ordained restoration of the Bourbon monarchy.

Conclusion

Considerations provided Maistre with intellectual renown and economic success. In late 1797 the Count d'Avaray informed Maistre that the pretender to the French throne, Louis XVIII, was "very pleased" with his work and was "ready to subsidize a second edition with a view to ensuring its wide distribution in France." Maistre's response to Avaray is instructive:

> I have for [Louis XVIII] a rational attachment that has never varied; I love him as one loves symmetry, order, and health! No effort would cost me too much if it could gain a friend for him. I believe his happiness necessary for Europe … I sense myself disposed, called, and drawn to defend his cause, which seems to me to be that of social order.[77]

Maistre's "rational attachment" to the pretender king was born of his political philosophy. He appreciated Louis XVIII as the human incarnation of the ancient traditions of French civilization. Louis was the only man who could return France to her proper form because he was the only man invested with the historically-determined legitimacy of France's unwritten constitution. Maistre's description of the return of the Bourbons to France in *Considerations* was akin to an eschatological scene, with the masses joyously proclaiming "long live the king!" in unison. But the historical Bourbon restoration was not so neat. Louis XVIII was brought back by foreign imposition under the Sixth Coalition. This imposition came at the end of Austrian bayonets. After Napoleon's Hundred Days, Louis returned under the dictates of the Seventh Coalition. The Bourbon monarchy had to be imposed upon France by her worldly enemies instead of divine father. Maistre's description of the counter-revolution instead reads like Napoleon's real-life return from Elba. Instead of "long live the king", Parisian streets were drowned with cries of "long live the emperor!" History mirrors Maistre's prophecy in form, not substance.

As his prophecies fell flat, Maistre's legacy has been variegated. Students of intellectual history typically first encounter the name "Joseph de Maistre" through an unflattering article penned by Isaiah Berlin titled "Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism."[78] This article—itself a transcription of one of Berlin's Oxford lectures—was written by its illustrious author sometime in the 1950's and published by Berlin's editor Henry Hardy in "The Crooked Timber of

[76] "It seems to me that all true philosophy must opt between these two hypotheses: either a new religion is going to come into existence or Christianity will be rejuvenated in some extraordinary way. You must choose between these two suppositions according to the position you have taken on the truth of Christianity." Ibid, 4.
[77] Lebrun, *Intellectual Militant,* 157.
[78] Berlin, *Crooked Timber*, 95-117.

Humanity" in 1991.[79] A truncated version of it constitutes the foreword to the Cambridge translation of Maistre's 1796 work, *Considerations on France*.[80] Berlin's thesis is that Joseph de Maistre's scathing critique of the French Revolution and liberal philosophy anticipated fascist ideology. Maistre, then, should be seen as an "ultra-modern" thinker instead of a medievalist reactionary.[81] This creates a distasteful image of Maistre as an obscure thinker with a grotesque legacy.

Berlin's interpretation of Maistre is completely wrong. He ascribes positions to Maistre which he never held,[82] quotes to Maistre which he never wrote,[83] and on the whole categorizes Maistre as a neat representative of a movement which he preceded by a century and whose revolutionary, atheistic nature is antithetical to Maistre's traditionalist Catholicism. As historian of fascism (and former student of Berlin's) Cyprian Blamires rightly points out, Berlin's thesis is characterized by a need felt by his generation of scholars to explain the horrors of the 20th century.[84] He speculates that Berlin's choice of Maistre—a Catholic thinker—was instead motivated by an attempt to associate traditionalist Catholicism with fascist authoritarianism, as "the Catholic Church palpably comes into the category of those doctrines offering a single overarching explanation of reality that Berlin notoriously distrusted."[85]

Modern scholars, spearheaded by Richard LeBrun and his student Carolina Armenteros, have rehabilitated Maistre's legacy since Berlin's harmful caricature. Armenteros, in particular, has emphasized the debt of left-wing thinkers like Henri de Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte to Joseph de Maistre. Both men secularized Maistre's theories of providence and the religious underpinnings of government which informed utopian socialism and positivism, respectively. In 2011 Armenteros published a study of Maistre titled *The French Idea of History*, in which she makes the argument that Joseph de Maistre helped inspire left-wing European historicist thought throughout the 19th century.[86] She argues that, through Comte and Saint-Simon, Maistre energizes historicist thinkers including Marx and Hegel.[87] This establishes France as the progenitor of historicism rather than Germany, hence the book's title lauding a "French" idea of history which begins with Maistre. Through this book, Armenteros hopes to establish Maistre as

[79] Ibid, ix-xi.
[80] Found on pages xi-xxxv of Joseph de Maistre and Richard A. Lebrun, ed. *Considerations on France*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
[81] Berlin, *Crooked Timber*, 96.
[82] For one of many examples, Berlin errantly charges Maistre with a belief in a shadowy group called "*la secte*" that worked to overthrow monarchy in Europe. Maistre never mentions a *secte* anywhere in his writings. Berlin instead appears to be channeling memory of a different thinker, Abbé Augustin Barruel, who, in 1797, wrote *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*. In this work, Barruel argues that the French Revolution was the product of a *secte*-like entity called the Illuminati. For Berlin's quote, see *Crooked Timber* 119. For Barruel's work, see Hofman, Amos "Opinion, Illusion, and the Illusion of Opinion: Barruel's Theory of Conspiracy," Eighteenth Century Studies Vol. 27 No. 1 (1993).
[83] See above footnote about Berlin's "secte" argument.
[84] "The context [for Berlin's essay] was of course the widespread search in the postwar years for culprits who could be blamed for the catastrophe of Nazism." Blamires, Cyprian."Berlin, Maistre, and Fascism", 19-46 in Lebrun and Armenteros, *Joseph de Maistre and his European Readers*.
[85] Blamires, "Berlin, Maistre, and Fascism", 19.
[86] Armenteros, *The French Idea of History*, 113-114.
[87] Ibid, 324.

a thinker of world-historical importance who exercised influence on the whole of Western thought rather than a minor thinker relegated to the continental right-wing.

Joseph de Maistre, then, is a fascinating thinker with a lamentably obscure legacy. He was a passionate intellectual who matured in order to explain the failure of the revolution. He is best seen as a *philosophe* of reaction: a thinker who mobilized wide learning in order to obliterate the intellectual legacy of the Enlightenment. Where many contemporary conservatives (e.g. Louis de Bonald) merely invoked Catholic dogma to defend the king, Maistre instead attacked a priori reason. He saw society as something which emerged, like a tree, organically, with predetermined germinative potential that transcended the plans of individual humans. He saw "revolution" as synonymous with the obliteration of social bonds. While Maistre's providentialism is discredited, his meditations upon history gained currency amongst conservatives, leftists, and romantics in the 19th century. His opposition to the French Revolution was a star-crossed but bold attempt to arrest the current of history as it threatened to drown throne and altar under its tide.

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