



**Carolina Armenteros.** *The French Idea of History: Joseph de Maistre and His Heirs, 1794-1854.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011. xiii + 361 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4943-7.



**Carolina Armenteros, Richard A. Lebrun, eds.** *Joseph de Maistre and the Legacy of Enlightenment.* Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century Series. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2011. 264 pp. \$85.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7294-1008-3.

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**Published on** H-Catholic (August, 2016)

**Commissioned by** Matt Vester (West Virginia University)

## Joseph de Maistre and the Enlightenment: A Review Essay on a Paradoxical Figure

Over the past few decades, the tendency to reconsider and re-categorize the thinkers of the *si cle des lumi res* has led to a rapid multiplication of "enlightenments." Scholars can now only with difficulty refer to *the Enlightenment* without qualifying it with "radical," "moderate," "counter-," "religious," "Catholic," "atheological," or any number of adjectives. As scholars examine the figures associated with these enlightenments more carefully, the edges appear blurrier than ever and the surfaces variegated, uneven, and overall imperfect. One consequence is that it has become exceedingly difficult to keep historical figures strictly within the lines of any of these intellectual movements, a point that recent studies of Joseph de Maistre seem to confirm. *Joseph de Maistre and the Legacy of the Enlightenment*, edited by Carolina Armenteros and Richard A. Lebrun, and Armenteros's most recent monograph, *The French Idea of*

*History: Joseph de Maistre and His Heirs*, make important contributions to our understanding of the complexity of intellectual trends during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These authors enhance our understanding of how aspects of diverse intellectual movements, once considered distinct, shared common concerns, values, and proponents. Challenging Isaiah Berlin's classic depiction of Maistre as an enemy of the Enlightenment and a forerunner of fascism, the authors discussed below reveal the relationship between Maistrian thought and groups as diverse as the philosophes, traditionalists, positivists, and early socialists.[1]

Although Maistre was an outspoken opponent of *philosophie* and the secular trends of the eighteenth century, several authors in *Joseph de Maistre and the Legacy of the Enlightenment* stress the ways in which he engaged

in and was shaped by the very Enlightenment he decried. Aimee Barbeau argues that Maistre's engagement with Enlightenment thought prompted and shaped his appropriation of Origen's Christian Neoplatonism (pp. 163-164). She identifies commonalities between Maistre's religious views and the Enlightenment, including his appeals to natural religion and his tendency to appeal to the empirical record of history, a history driven by political, rather than transcendent, factors (p. 188). Elcio Verãçosa Filho stresses Maistre's deep concern for the education of humanity, which he hoped would bring about a religious Enlightenment that could compete with what he saw as a godless one. Filho places Maistre not within the Counter-Enlightenment, per se, but within a religious, particularly Christian Enlightenment as opposed to the philosophic one he abhorred (p. 219). While scholars traditionally excluded religious conservatives from discussions of Enlightenment thought, this collection contributes to a recent trend in scholarship that views religion as part of, rather than antagonistic to, the Francophone Enlightenment.[2]

Many of the essays in this volume attempt to paint Maistre in more vivid colors by examining heretofore unexplored links between Maistre and a wide variety of thinkers. Through a careful comparison of Maistre and Arthur Schopenhauer, Yannis Constantinid's shows that these two thinkers had a great deal in common, despite the fact that there is no evidence they read each other's work. He shows that they never condemned the Enlightenment's goal of propelling humanity out of a state of nonage; rather, they stressed the limits of reason. This keen observation leads the author to insist that neither figure should be considered Counter-Enlightenment. However, given that he refers to both figures as enemies of the Enlightenment, eschewing the label Counter-Enlightenment may appear to some readers as splitting hairs (p. 107).

In other essays in this volume, Maistre appears firmly planted within the Counter-Enlightenment. Philippe Barthelet highlights how Maistre employed the ideas of Plato, and particularly the Cambridge Platonists, in his siege warfare against the philosophes (p. 69). Douglas Hedley's contribution also highlights the influence of Christian Platonism within Maistre's thought. Challenging Owen Bradley's reading of Maistre as a modern in *A Modern Maistre: The Social and Political Thought of Joseph de Maistre* (1999), Hedley instead portrays him as a romantic thinker who stresses at once the transcendence of humanity and, as scholars have more commonly noted, the cultural specificity of humans in historical contexts.

Here Maistre emerges in his traditional garb as a critic of the Enlightenment, Baconian science, and secularization.

Armenteros, in her contribution, examines Maistre's intellectual debt to Jean-Jacques Rousseau who, as our author notes, has himself been situated within the Counter-Enlightenment.[3] She argues that Maistre discerned several Rousseaus, at least one of whom the Rousseau who reinfused nature with Christian metaphysics he admired. In the long run, it was Rousseau, distilled and filtered through the works of Maistre, that bound together traditionalists, socialists, and positivists in a like-minded philosophy of history, a theme she delves into more deeply in *The French Idea of History*. Armenteros clearly shows that Maistre's ideas were profoundly shaped by the Genevan philosophy and that his engagement with Rousseau far predated the French Revolution.

For Maistre, the Revolution was the unfortunate, if logical, culmination of a godless century that idolized individual achievement at the expense of divine order and tradition. In an especially engaging essay, "The Genius of Maistre," Darrin McMahon traces the evolution of the term genius, which had variously been used to designate a spirit, a deity, an angel, or a talent. By the end of the eighteenth century, the term genius came into its modern meaning: a person of singular abilities. Placing the emergence of this extraordinary figure within the context of Marcel Gauchet's *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion* (1997), he argues that as supernatural intercessors began to retreat from the mental world of Europeans, the genius came to fill the gap by assuming the role of mediator traditionally played by spirits, angels, and God. As McMahon shows, Maistre himself sometimes hoped for some human savior. More commonly, however, he warned against the dangers of essentially deifying human beings. Giving sacred powers to humans was dangerous, Maistre asserted, a claim he substantiated by linking the violence of the Revolution with the veneration of what he saw as revolutionary idols: Voltaire, Rousseau, Jean-Paul Marat, and others. Maistre criticized this new human idol, believing that when human beings invested men with the power of gods, they could do terrible things (p. 28).

If Maistre's early works were shaped by the debates of the Enlightenment, his preoccupation with the ill effects of the French Revolution dominated the bulk of his later writings. According to Emile Perreau-Saussine, this momentous event was largely responsible for Maistre's ultramontanism. In Maistre's view, it was Gallicanism

that first encouraged a rift between the spiritual and temporal spheres in France, thereby setting the stage for the ultimate rupture during the Revolution. Joseph Eaton's essay uses Maistre's critique of the American Republic and the character of Native Americans to deepen our understanding of his critique of the French Revolution and republicanism. While the philosophes often praised Native Americans for allegedly living in an Eden-like state of nature, Maistre condemned them as cruel savages, living in the wake of a second dose of Original Sin (p. 32). Linking violence with a lack of Christianity, he alluded to the French revolutionaries who had forsaken revealed religion, replaced it with a natural one, and subsequently fallen into a bloody cycle of violence. Although the American Revolution was less radical than its French counterpart, Maistre nevertheless attacked the former for exchanging "the wisdom of ages" for a written constitution, one that he assumed was ultimately doomed to fail (p. 38).

This criticism of the American Revolution stemmed from Maistre's particular vision of history, according to which humanity would continuously, although not always smoothly, progress toward a pacific ecclesiastical-political order. As Jean-Yves Pranchère argues, Maistre insisted that society could only thrive under "the conditions of a monarchical sovereignty established on sacred foundations" (p. 46). Maistre believed that Europe had seen a gradual "insurrection against God," which began with Protestantism, intensified with scientific empiricism and Enlightenment secularism, and finally reached its height during the French Revolution (p. 52). The disaster of the French Revolution, as Maistre saw it, was a sign that history was speeding ever more closely toward its inevitable end: global unification under the Catholic Church.

Several essays in the edited volume incorporate discussions of Maistre's view of history; however, it is Armenteros's book that provides us with the most comprehensive survey on this topic to date. Maistre never articulated a clear theory of history, and Armenteros confesses that "describing Maistre's historical thought is often an exercise in the recovery of the implicit" (p. 3). Despite this, she manages to discern a very clear sense of his view of history through a close examination of his major works on sovereignty, Baconian philosophy, the papacy, sacrifice, and other topics. The crux of her argument is that Maistre "was at the origin of a distinctively Francophone way of thinking about history" (p. 18).

As a firm defender of throne and altar, Maistre has

been most commonly represented as a religious conservative, a reactionary, and an avid proponent of the Counter-Enlightenment and Counter-Revolution. In *The French Idea of History*, Armenteros highlights the aspects of Maistre's thought that reveal him to be more politically moderate, rationalist, and progressive than scholars have commonly assumed. Armenteros writes that Maistre took a "atheological interest in history," but that he viewed history as "experimental politics," and thus, his interests extended far beyond religious issues (p. 3). For Maistre, history was guided by Providence, which gradually liberated mankind "by revealing its ways to humanity," a belief that Armenteros links to Enlightenment optimism about the acquisition of knowledge and human improvement (p. 2).

The book is organized in two parts. The five chapters in part 1 are detailed descriptions of various aspects of Maistre's historical thought. Chapter 1 focuses on the origin of Maistre's historical thought, which she argues was shaped by his vitriolic reading of Rousseau's works. In her analysis of Maistre's *De l'état de nature* (1795) and *De la souveraineté du peuple* (1794), Armenteros provides further evidence of the debt Maistre owed to his self-professed enemy, Rousseau. In chapter 2, she focuses on Maistre's theory of knowledge, principally as it is laid out in his *Examen de la philosophie de Bacon* (begun in 1809, published posthumously in 1836). Here she reveals that Maistre's epistemology contained not only innatist but also (more surprisingly) empiricist aspects as he represents "the process of knowledge acquisition as a form of practical self-adaptation to the world" (p. 90). His historical model helped to shape his vision of proper education, and indirectly, Russian educational policy through two Russian officials: Via Razumovskii and Sergei Uvarov. Maistre believed that the history of knowledge was progressive and driven by human and divine wills, both of which were aided by religious institutions that ensured the transmission of truth. History was not linear, however, and he saw the French Revolution as a period of disorder that had disrupted the progression of mankind.

Out of the disorder came a re-Christianization campaign in France, during which time the status of the pope remained uncertain. In chapter 3, Armenteros examines Maistre's most famous work, *Du pape* (1819), within the context of religious debates in both France and Russia. She is the first scholar, to my knowledge, to examine the text within the Russian context, an odd oversight, perhaps, given that Maistre spent over a decade living there and had left only two years before the publication of his

magnum opus. Armenteros shows how Maistre posited a Europeanist theory of history, which linked the history of Europe to that of the Catholic Church. For Maistre, the Roman pontiff had acted, and could again in the future, as a leader in international politics. The pope would rule with an implicit rather than written constitution, which would allow him to reunite Europeans under a single Christianity and prevent both violent revolutions and the excesses of ineffective leaders. Despite this vision of the future in which Europe would seemingly revert to a medieval order, Armenteros insists that Maistre was no reactionary. Arguing that he was not opposed to political change or freedom as scholars have commonly supposed, she claims that "he intended that they be attained gradually, legally, and bloodlessly within the framework of existing institutions" (p. 139). Maistre saw Christianity as the liberator of humanity. Although he may have been "more Catholic than the pope," his focus on the power of the papacy did not make him a theocrat. Rather, his goal was "to save kings from themselves, and God's freedom from Caesar's tyranny" (p. 155). In short, Armenteros exchanges Maistre the authoritarian for Maistre the defender of human freedom.

Chapter 4 focuses on Maistre's *Ãclaircissement sur les sacrifices* (composed in 1809, published in 1821), an early contribution to the sociology of violence. While in some chapters Armenteros shows how various aspects of Maistre's thought were compatible with Enlightenment optimism, here she shows the influence of a pessimist Christian anthropology that posits sacrifice as a driving force in history. Maistre's theory of violence provided consolation for those who had suffered during the Revolution. It placed the death of Louis XVI, for example, within the context of a progressivist history that gave his martyrdom meaning within "the larger divine story of cosmic salvation by sacrifice" (p. 165).

Chapter 5 examines *Les soirÃ©es de Saint-PÃ©tersbourg* (1821), Maistre's self-proclaimed *chef d'oeuvre*. From this work, Armenteros discerns a cosmology that was "rationalist, morally progressive, and potentially historicizing" (p. 184). With a cosmology that was "animated by a nearly unbounded faith in the power of human beings to craft their own destiny," it is in this context that Maistre appears most closely linked to the Enlightenment, particularly the Jesuit-influenced Catholic Enlightenment (p. 184).

Part 2 contains three chapters, each displaying the impact of Maistre's ideas on later thinkers and the ultimate fate of the Maistrian view of history. In chapter

6 an epilogue to chapters 1, 2, and 3 she argues that although moral statisticians, social theorists, and Catholic traditionalists used social facts in different ways, all three groups saw facts "as moral entities that were socially and historically regenerative, or at the very least predictive of the future," a view Armenteros argues, is derived in part from Maistre (p. 217). For example, the prefects of the Directory reoriented their investigations toward social rather than material inquiries, "assessing states of mind rather than material resources" (p. 219). Maistre's role in the birth of the social fact links him to traditionalism, early sociology, positivism and early socialism, all of which scholars have commonly linked to authoritarianism. Challenging this view, she traces Maistre's role in the emergence of the social fact, and argues that these intellectual currents were "more freedom-imparting than is commonly supposed" (p. 254).

Chapter 7 continues the themes introduced in chapter 4 as it examines how the Maistrian notion of sacrifice affected nineteenth-century historical thought. She identifies two themes found in Maistre that were common to traditionalists, socialists, and positivists of the 1820s and 1830s. One, "an ethic of compliance and self-sacrifice," had a long legacy that survived within such figures as "Emile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud, and Marcel Mauss" (p. 281). The other was a desire "to make society holy by exalting, generalizing, and democratizing the priesthood," thereby giving the laity "the power to sanctify" (p. 282). This desire was influential not only within religious circles but also within other groups that encouraged self-sacrifice for the social good. The final chapter continues themes from chapter 5 as it argues that Maistre's vision of a pacific future inspired various figures in the first half of the nineteenth century to seek a future in which religion would achieve its ideal form at the expense of politics. Armenteros concludes by tracing the rise and fall of the various strands of Maistre's historical thought identified throughout the book. By the middle of the nineteenth century, many of his most influential ideas waned: Maistre's speculative philosophy of history died along with utopian socialism, and historical sociology died out in France even as it survived elsewhere in Europe. According to Armenteros, his most enduring legacy is to be found within his contribution to the rise of the social fact and the drive to understand history rationally in order to improve humanity. This trend survives to the modern day.

*The French Idea of History* certainly reveals aspects of Maistre's thought that make him appear more moderate, optimistic, and rationalist than most scholarly treat-

ments of his thought. Still, evidence to support earlier interpretations of Maistre as a counterrevolutionary, pessimistic, religious conservative remains strong. Even if Armenteros does not fully overturn an older version of this figure, she does give him, and early conservatism in general, new complexity and significance. For example, although Maistre's hatred of the Revolution is undeniable, Armenteros insists that the Counter-Revolution was far more innovative than historians have often assumed and that it was the decisive, if neglected, intermediary between the philosophers of history of the French eighteenth century, and the historians and historical philosophers of the nineteenth (p. 4). Maistre's thought, Armenteros contends, was especially significant and influential in this regard because his views of history helped to shape not only the philosophies of history written by traditionalists, positivists, and socialists but also political disputes, and even government policies, such as the future-oriented statistics of the Directory and the Empire (p. 4).

Armenteros clearly shows that there were commonalities between Maistre and the other historical figures she highlights. However, it is exceedingly difficult in many cases to determine with any certainty that these figures borrowed directly from Maistre. For example, although Armenteros's observation that the "statistical Providentialism" that influenced the rise of moral statistics during the Directory "keenly resembled Maistre's" is insightful, her statement that the former was "probably derived from" the latter cannot be substantiated with the given evidence (p. 220). Sometimes direct links can be drawn, such as with Auguste Comte who openly declared his debt to Maistre (p. 223), or Pierre-Simon Ballanche who had personal interactions with him (p. 264). Armenteros is careful to note the difficulty of tracing Maistre's influence on later authors. She writes, for example, that the similarities between Maistre's ideas and those of Henri de Saint-Simon "sprang ... from a mixture of borrowing and coincidence" (p. 17). More broadly, she admits that "the connection between Maistre and his historical philosophical heirs is sometimes indirect and not always clear." Despite this difficulty, she maintains that "Maistre was at the origin of a distinctively Francophone way of thinking about history." At several points in her study it would have been safer to simply note that Maistre's ideas were reflective of crucial intellectual trends, rather than insinuating that he was the sole font from which such trends sprung. Nevertheless, Armenteros convincingly shows that nineteenth-century thinkers borrowed from "the vast trove of traditionalism

that he helped found" (p. 18). Although perhaps beyond the scope of the study, it would have been useful to know precisely who else contributed to this "trove" from which later thinkers were drawing their ideas.

Stating that this is an insightful and in-depth study of Maistre would not do *The French Idea of History* justice. Armenteros incorporates discussions of the manifold intellectual currents that formed Maistre's works and legacy in such vivid detail that it is easy for a reader to forget at times that this is, in essence, the study of a single thinker. Her analysis incorporates the thought of figures as diverse as Aristotle, Saint Augustine, Pelagius, Paolo Sarpi, Nicolas de Malebranche, Jacques-Joseph Duguet, David Hume, Giambattista Vico, Gottfried Leibniz, Madame de Staël, Felicité de Lamennais, Barthélemy Enfantin, and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. By identifying such a wide variety of intellectual kinships, Armenteros masterfully recontextualizes Maistrian thought within diverse intellectual movements and debates.

Maistre emerges from these two books as a romantic, a Neoplatonist, a traditionalist, a progressivist, and a proponent of the Counter-Enlightenment who was nevertheless indebted to Enlightenment philosophy. In the conclusion to the edited volume, Armenteros writes that he was "a master of paradoxes" (p. 228). Some of these apparent paradoxes likely stem from our own preconceived notions about the incompatibility of particular ideas, ideas that lead us to experience cognitive dissonance where historically none existed. Despite this, identifying aspects of Maistre's thought that seem to place him simultaneously in opposing camps—Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment, progressivism and traditionalism—provides us with a deeper understanding of the various channels through which Enlightenment thought traveled before and after the French Revolution.

Overall, both of these studies successfully shine new light on a historical figure who was long de-historicized. All of these authors seem to agree with Darrin McMahon's statement that Maistre "does not somehow miraculously think outside his time as a fascist *avant la lettre*" (p. 19). These studies successfully resituate Maistre within his own historical context, but they do not make him any easier to label. As Armenteros and Lebrun note, "Maistre, when well known, resists categorization" (p. 8). These studies reinforce the complexity of intellectual legacies and the difficulty of placing historical figures in labeled boxes, a task made all the more difficult by the continuous redefinition of the labels themselves. Al-

though we are unlikely ever to develop a scholarly consensus on the matter, these studies make an important contribution to our understanding of the complexity and legacy of the enlightenment.

## Notes

[1]. Isaiah Berlin, "Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism," in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (New York:

Vintage, 1992), 91-174.

[2]. For example, Jeffrey D. Burson, *The Rise and Fall of Theological Enlightenment: Jean-Martin de Prades and Ideological Polarization in Eighteenth-Century France* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).

[3]. Graeme Garrard, *Rousseau's Counter-Enlightenment: A Republican Critique of the Philosophes* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

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**Citation:** Angela Haas. Review of Armenteros, Carolina, *The French Idea of History: Joseph de Maistre and His Heirs, 1794-1854* and Armenteros, Carolina; Lebrun, Richard A., eds., *Joseph de Maistre and the Legacy of Enlightenment*. H-Catholic, H-Net Reviews. August, 2016.

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