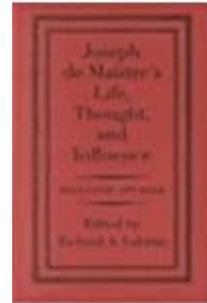


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Richard A. Lebrun, ed.** *Joseph de Maistre's Life, Thought and Influence: Selected Studies*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001. x + 338 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7735-2288-6.



**Reviewed by** William R. Everdell (Saint Ann's School)

**Published on** H-Catholic (May, 2002)

Count Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821) the most powerful writer of all the founders of European throne-and-altar reactionary conservatism, has today a very different reputation from that of other founding writers of the tradition, like Gentz, Gorres, Krudener, Chateaubriand and Bonald; their distant predecessors like Hamann and Herder; and especially his older contemporary Edmund Burke (1729-1797). It has been Burke's good fortune to be read and pondered as much by liberals, republicans and even anticlericals, as he was by the classical conservatives of the early nineteenth century and after. Indeed, most of Burke's writings and speeches from the period before the French Revolution defend liberalism—or, as the English more often called it, the Whig view of politics—and his turn to the right is justified politically rather than theologically. Maistre, a generation younger, published almost nothing before the Revolution, and of that little, only his 1775 panegyric of his centralizing royal employer, *Eloge de Victor-Amde III*, could be read in any sense as a defense of liberalism. Nevertheless in the 1780s this Count was a practicing freemason, in the 1790s, a free-market economist, and a government minister who favored reforms in ancien regimes, whether of his little County of Savoy or his slightly larger Kingdom of Sardinia, or the gargantuan neighboring kingdom of France. It was the Revolution that drove de Maistre out of Savoy through Switzerland to Russia, and turned him into a

brilliantly coruscating master of the French polemic, the erudite and tireless enemy of “natural religion,” (deism), democracy, written constitutions, humanitarianism, the idea of progress, equality, elections and empirical epistemology for the rest of his life. When he died in 1821, the same year as Napoleon, he left his most philosophically ambitious work, *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, to the printer, a politely uncompromising attack on almost everything which Bonaparte, following Robespierre, had unfurled on Europe, from republicanism and equality before the law to democratic dictatorship and state-sponsored religion. It was, he must have hoped, a demolition of every idea and every premise upon which such constitutional projects had been founded or could ever be revived.

For more than a century, Maistre was read, edited, and respected as the ideal reactionary, mainly by the French clerical Right and by knowledgeable anti-democrats in continental Europe and Russia. In 1950, the *Columbia Encyclopedia* was not even sure of his birth date. English translations were few and selective, like *Letters on the Spanish Inquisition* (*Lettres a une dame russe*, 1810) published in 1843 in Boston, and *The Pope* (*Du Pape*, 1817, 1819) published in 1850 in London. The maverick Catholic conservative, Orestes Brownson, published what seems to be the earliest American article on Maistre, a long review of Maistre's pamphlet, *Essai sur le principe*

*generateur des constitutions politiques et des autres institutions humaines* (1809, 1814) translated and published in Boston in 1847 as *Essay on the Generative Principle of Political Constitutions*. The magisterial Isaiah Berlin was already offering his “Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism” on the academic lecture circuit in 1962, but the only Maistre work I could find in English when I began my own study of him that year, was the 1814 *Essai sur le principe generateur*, ably translated under the title *On God and Society*, by Elisha Greifer and Lawrence Porter for the right-wing Washington, D.C., publisher, Regnery, in 1959.

A historical-biographical section consists of three articles by Darcel, all based on archives only recently become available. (Lebrun has translated his articles, and the others written in French, into English.) The next section groups discussions of Maistre’s ideas by Darcel, Bradley, Thurston and Pranchre, and includes an article by Denizet on Maistre’s place in the roster of liberal economic thinkers which is particularly counter-intuitive. A third section brings together comparisons: one of Maistre and Burke by Lebrun, two of Maistre and Bonald by Reedy and Pranchere, and one by Garrard of Maistre and the twentieth-century historian Carl Schmitt. The final section examines Maistre reception (or “fortune,” as the French used to say) in three different cultural contexts, Russian, anglophone and twentieth-century world thought.

All of Lebrun’s scholars have done yeoman service in making Maistre studies available to an age in which schools of thought like religious fundamentalism and irrationalism, post-Frankfurt-school socialism, neo-conservatism and neoliberalism (which may or may not be opposites), and postmodernism and science studies, have put the Enlightenment, individualism, em-

piricism, secularism and democracy, to the question once again. Studies of the eighteenth-century Counter-Enlightenment (a term I used in my *Christian Apologetics in France* in 1971) have been particularly needed since Isaiah Berlin’s long but largely solitary string of them was severed by his death. Darrin McMahon in 2001 and Didier Masseau in 2000 produced solid studies of what McMahon calls *The Enemies of the Enlightenment* and Masseau *Les ennemis des philosophes*. Joseph de Maistre’s Life, Thought and Influence. Lebrun’s collection, coming ten years after Isaiah Berlin’s lecture on Maistre and Fascism was at last printed in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, is an excellent one-volume compendium of the service Lebrun’s little band of Maistrians has done. It is the ideal book—considerably more helpful than Berlin’s essay—for the anglophone student who wants to catch up with the many things their reexamination of Maistre has taught us, not only about Maistre but about the entire movement of ideas during the Revolution. Pranchere concludes *Selected Studies* with an essay assessing the influence of Maistre (often quite direct) on modern thinkers all over the nineteenth- and twentieth-century West: poets like Baudelaire, novelists like Tolstoy, pioneer fascists like Charles Maurras, future Nazis like Carl Schmitt, Christian Democrats like Franois Mauriac, anthropologists like Paul Ricoeur, and sophisticated marxists like Theodor Adorno; and in the book’s penultimate essay, Lebrun himself offers an extended history of Maistre’s obscure “fortune” in the English-speaking world. Maistre still has bracing and challenging things to say about unresolved philosophical issues from the logical validity of inductive inference to the uniqueness of historical events and the meaning of life, death and sacrifice. Two centuries after he took his first shot against the “new regime,” it has once again become necessary to understand Joseph de Maistre and to take him on, even if—especially if—you don’t agree.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-catholic>

**Citation:** William R. Everdell. Review of Lebrun, Richard A., ed., *Joseph de Maistre’s Life, Thought and Influence: Selected Studies*. H-Catholic, H-Net Reviews. May, 2002.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6316>

Copyright © 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).