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Joseph de Maistre's Civilization and its Discontents

Graeme Garrard

In his study of Sigmund Freud's social and political thought Paul Roazen claims that Freud was the first to depict the human psyche as torn between two fundamentally antithetical tendencies:

The notion of a human nature in conflict with itself, disrupted by the opposition of social and asocial inclinations, the view that the social self develops from an asocial nucleus but that the social trends are also dynamic and emotional in nature, and finally the conception that reason's control can be extended by a detailed knowledge of the repressed asocial tendencies—all this was not known before Freud.¹

Although Freud is undoubtedly the most famous modern exponent of this conception of human nature at war with itself, he was by no means its first, let alone only, proponent. Kant, for example, wrote of the "unsocial sociability of men" over a century earlier.² An even more unlikely precursor of this basic assumption of Freudian social psychology is the Catholic reactionary Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821). The social theory elaborated by this arch-paladin of throne and altar—who was, quite literally, *plus royalist que le roi, plus catholique que le Pape*—is strikingly similar to that expressed by Freud in his famous essay *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929).³

I would like to acknowledge my debt to Sir Isaiah Berlin for the time and attention he generously gave me to discuss the thought of Joseph de Maistre (and many other subjects) with him while I was a graduate student at Oxford University, when the first draft of this essay was written.

¹ Paul Roazen, *Freud: Political and Social Thought* (New York, 1968), 249-50.

² Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," in *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. H. Reiss, tr. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge, 1970), 44-45. This work was first published in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, 4 (11 November 1784), 385-411.

³ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, tr. Joan Riviere, ed. James Strachey (London, 1979).

Both conceived of the individual as “a being both social and evil,”⁴ perpetually struggling to prevent the innate aggressiveness of the species from plunging society into a Hobbesian war of all against all. That is why Freud insisted that it “has to use its utmost efforts in order to set limits to man’s aggressive instincts,”⁵ a view advanced over a century earlier by Maistre. Events in Europe after 1789 led many conservatives such as Maistre, as events after 1914 would lead Freud, to reject the common Enlightenment view of human beings as naturally sociable and of social life as a reflection of the spontaneous harmony of a natural world governed by laws established by God and discoverable by reason. In Maistre’s view, social and political life are better understood as the artificial and fundamentally precarious imposition of order on the violent flux of nature. Anticipating Freud, he asserts that individuals, if left to their own devices in society, would soon be plunged into a state of social warfare identical to that which Hobbes had attributed to the state of nature. His particular brand of extreme conservative thought derives its social and political authoritarianism from these deeply pessimistic social assumptions, which leave him with more in common (on this subject) with Freud than with either the Enlightenment or fellow conservatives such as Edmund Burke.

Homo Homini Lupus

The pessimistic, even tragic, argument of *Civilization and Its Discontents* is that human beings are driven by extremely powerful instincts, the full satisfaction of which is incompatible with social life. According to Freud, the “cultural frustration” that ensues from this incompatibility “dominates the large field of social relationships between human beings. As we already know, it is the cause of the hostility against which all civilizations has to struggle.”⁶ Unhappiness, understood as the non-satisfaction of these basic libidinal urges, is therefore a necessary part of human association. “One feels inclined to say that the intention that man should be ‘happy,’ ” Freud writes pessimistically, “is not included in the plan of ‘Creation.’ ”⁷

Freud also argues that, in addition to these basically erotic instincts, there is a “constitutional inclination in human beings to be aggressive towards one another,”⁸ which “constitutes the greatest impediment to civilization.”⁹

⁴ Joseph de Maistre, “De l’état de nature,” ch. 2, in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, 1884-1931), VII, 563 (hereafter cited as *OC*).

⁵ Freud, *op. cit.*, 49.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

This ineliminable tendency accounts for Freud's Hobbesian view of the precariousness of civilization:¹⁰

[M]en are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbour is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. *Homo homini lupus*. Who, in the face of all his experience of life and of history, will have the courage to dispute this assertion?¹¹

This innate aggressiveness poses a constant threat to the social bond, which is "perpetually threatened with disintegration" by "this primary mutual hostility of human beings."¹² Writing in the shadow of the First World War, just as Maistre wrote in the context of the French Revolution, Freud speaks disdainfully of those who claim that human beings are naturally good and that the aggression and cruelty so evident in human history is attributable to contingent external factors that can be overcome.¹³ "For 'little children do not like it,' " he writes sarcastically, "when there is talk of the inborn human inclination to 'badness,' to aggressiveness and destructiveness, and so to cruelty as well."¹⁴

At most, Freud claims, this native aggression can be held in check or channelled in socially benign directions. "Civilization, therefore, obtains mastery over the individual's dangerous desire for aggression," he writes, "by weakening and disarming it and by setting up an agency within him to watch over it, like a garrison in a conquered city."¹⁵ It cannot, however, be eliminated. Freud mentions nationalism as an example of the beneficial outward venting of these powerful destructive urges. He refers to this "convenient and relatively harmless satisfaction of the inclination to aggression by means of which cohesion between the members of the community is made easier" as the "narcissism of minor differences," an antipathy commonly

¹⁰ On Freud's similarities to Hobbes, see Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (New York, 1988), 546; Paul Roazen, *Freud: Political and Social Thought*, 154, 213; Jeffrey B. Abramson, *Liberation and Its Limits: The Moral and Political Thought of Freud* (New York, 1984), 4, 11, 52-53, 133-34, 137-38.

¹¹ Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 48.

¹² *Ibid.*, 49.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 50-52.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

found among immediate neighbors.¹⁶ However, this aggression can also be “internalized” by directing it back at its source, where it is “taken over by a portion of the ego, which sets itself over against the rest of the ego as super-ego, and which now, in the form of ‘conscience,’ is ready to put into action against the ego the same harsh aggressiveness that the ego would have liked to satisfy upon other, extraneous individuals.”¹⁷ The tension that develops between the “strict” super-ego and the “subordinate” ego Freud calls guilt, which is manifested as “the need for punishment.”¹⁸ This “internal policeman,” the superego, reduces somewhat the need for the external repression of aggression.

Thus, according to Freud, society rests precariously upon the basis of an ineliminable dialectic of aggression and repression. Our sexual drives and primal aggressiveness are locked in a perpetual struggle with both the superego of the individual and the social superego. These innate destructive forces occasionally shatter the fragile bonds of society against which they are in constant, incipient rebellion, erupting in violent bursts of destruction and barbarism such as the Reign of Terror and the First World War. Although Freud claims that “what we call our civilization is largely responsible for our misery and that we should be much happier if we gave it up and returned to primitive conditions,”¹⁹ he nonetheless believes that we are also social beings, and that the achievement of civilization lies in its ability to control and direct our destructive anti-social tendencies, which it does, in part, through internalization and the “sublimation” of erotic energies. However, this achievement comes at the price of our happiness and leads to the “tormenting uneasiness” of civilized life.²⁰

Although Freud accepted the need for a considerable degree of instinctual repression, he also believed that modern civilization had more than met this need, and had actually become excessively restrictive. One of the objectives of psychoanalysis is actually to “oppose the super-ego” and to “endeavour to lower its demands” under such conditions. Notwithstanding this belief in the need for reform, Freud denied the possibility of the transcendence of this primal struggle between *Eros* and *Thanatos*, which underlies social life and individual psychology. While he was sympathetic to critics of civilization, he was unwilling to offer any such “false” consolation.

Freud combines the psychological assumptions of Aristotle and Hobbes to produce a theory according to which society is a source of both human fulfillment and frustration. In effect he sought to replace conventional views about human nature with a more complex psychological theory that combined elements from other theories traditionally regarded as contradictory. In

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁰ J. B. Abramson, *Liberation and Its Limits*, 9.

Freud and Society Yiannis Gabriel describes Freud's dualism as a "stubborn refusal to look at the individual as an integrated personality or character and through his insistence that each person is a fragmented complex of different and often contradictory functions ... Freud avoids the shortcomings of most theorists who try to articulate the relationship between the individual and society."²¹

"A Being Both Social and Evil"

When the French Revolution began, Joseph de Maistre was a provincial magistrate living in the quiet obscurity of French-speaking Savoy, which was then part of the independent kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia. Despite his provincial, conservative upbringing and orthodox education by Jesuits, Maistre had a considerable interest in modern ideas, which he retained throughout his life. He read surprisingly widely in philosophy, science, and literature and, as his writings abundantly demonstrate, he was familiar with the important ideas of his age. He also had a natural curiosity about modern science, owned a large and diverse library, was an enthusiastic reader of contemporary periodical literature,²² and enjoyed the intellectual stimulation he received in the salons of Lausanne and St. Petersburg, at which he was a popular guest. Indeed, as Jean-Louis Darcel argues, Maistre probably underwent a "religious crisis" at the end of his adolescence as a result of his exposure to such ideas. "Nourished in the thought of the Enlightenment," he writes, "Joseph de Maistre saw the certitudes he had inherited from his father shaken by the arguments of the philosophes."²³

Although Maistre eventually repudiated the ideas and values of Enlightenment France, he was raised, educated, and grew into middle age during the later Enlightenment. He was nearly forty years old when the French Revolution began. He was a moderate supporter of reform in the years prior to 1789, and was an occasional critic of the regime of his reactionary sovereign. Also, despite Pope Benedict's anti-Masonic bull of 1751 and the strong disapproval of his own government, the Catholic Maistre was an active freemason

²¹ Yiannis Gabriel, *Freud and Society* (London, 1983), 151.

²² See R. A. Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre: An Intellectual Militant* (Montreal, 1988), 37, and Jean-Louis Darcel, "Les Bibliothèques de Joseph de Maistre, 1768-1821," *Revue des études maistriennes*, 9 (1985), 5-123 (hereafter cited as *REM*). English translation in *Maistre Studies*, tr. R. A. Lebrun (New York, 1988), 3-41 (hereafter cited as *MS*). Darcel writes: "If metaphysics occupied only a modest place in J. de Maistre's library (4 titles for the Greeks and Romans), his interest in modern metaphysics must be noted (15 titles of which 10 were published after 1770). Works appearing here include those of Descartes, Fénelon, Cudworth, Mosheim, Helvétius, Locke (4 works), and Saint-Martin (3 volumes)" (19 [*MS*, 13]). Also, see R. A. Lebrun, "Les lectures de Joseph de Maistre d'après des registres inédites," *REM*, 9 (1985), 126-94 (*MS*, 42-64).

²³ J.-L. Darcel, "Des pénitents noirs à la franc-maçonnerie de la sensibilité maistriennes," *REM*, 5-6 (1980), 93 (*MS*, 120).

and an admirer of the mystical “illuminist” ideas of Jean-Baptiste Willermoz and Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, the so-called “philosophe inconnu.” The police in Turin kept a secret file detailing Maistre’s Masonic activities and liberal opinions and his *Letters of a Savoyard Royalist*, published in 1793, had been banned. In the spring and summer of 1788 he was an enthusiastic partisan of the French *parlémentaires* and endorsed their campaign to force the calling of an Estates-General. There is even some evidence that he may have considered joining their ranks himself.²⁴

In 1793 Maistre began working on two essays intended to refute some of the principal ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who was then the hero of the French Revolution. One of his main objections to Rousseau, an objection that appears in several of his works, is his reliance on the “chimera” of a social contract, which presumes that human beings can create societies and governments. Maistre denies that the species is capable of such constructive undertakings:

The philosophes of this century who shook the bases of society never ceased to tell us about the views men had in uniting in society. It suffices to cite Rousseau speaking for all of them. *Peoples*, he says, *have given themselves Chiefs to defend their freedom and not to enslave themselves*. This is a gross error, mother of all others. Man *gives* himself nothing; he receives everything. He has chiefs because he cannot do without them, and society never is nor can be the result of a pact.²⁵

According to Maistre’s theocentric outlook, political society is the creation of divine, not human, will. “[S]overeignty comes from God,” he writes in his anti-Rousseau essay “De la Souveraineté du Peuple,” “since he is the author of everything, except evil, and in particular he is the author of society.”²⁶ He later adds:

Rousseau and all the reasoners of his kind imagine or try to imagine a people *in the state of nature* (this is their expression), deliberating formally on the advantages and disadvantages of the social state and finally deciding to pass from one to the other.... It is a capital mistake to represent the social state as a chosen state founded on the consent of men, on a deliberation, and on an original contract.²⁷

Maistre also invokes what he takes to be the testimony of history to refute social contract theory. History, he argues, is “experimental politics,” from which facts about man and politics can be deduced through disinterested

²⁴ R. A. Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre*, 95.

²⁵ “De l’état de nature,” ch. 2 (*OC*, VII, 563-64).

²⁶ Joseph de Maistre, “De la Souveraineté du Peuple,” book 1, ch. 1 (*OC*, I, 314).

²⁷ “De la Souveraineté du Peuple,” book 1, ch. 2 (*OC*, I, 317-18).

observation, a method he opposes to the abstract, a priori speculations of modern philosophy.²⁸ “Every question about the *nature* of man must be resolved by history,” he writes. “The philosopher who wants to prove to us by a priori reasoning what man must be, does not merit being heard.”²⁹ Applying this method, Maistre concludes that “history tells us that man is a social being who has always been observed in society.”³⁰

Maistre’s attack on social contract theory was entirely consistent with the dominant view of the philosophes on the subject. During the period between the middle of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century new ideas about the relationship between the individual and society emerged as part of the growing disenchantment with contract theory and its correlative conception of human nature as entirely given pre-socially. Social contract theory was closely associated with the writings of Hobbes and Locke in particular, who had depicted society as the deliberate creation of rational individuals motivated by a self-interested desire to avoid the hazards and inconveniences of the natural, presocial world.³¹ The strong individualism presupposed by this view assumes a sharp ontological separation of the individual from society, which are related only instrumentally and contingently. It regards fully-formed individuals as prior to both political society and all social interaction. “What contractarianism does require,” writes David Gauthier, “is, first of all, that individual human beings not only can, but must, be understood apart from society.”³² As such, he continues, it is “incompatible with the view that men undergo fundamental change in becoming members of society. Men’s reasons for contracting one with another are supposed to arise out of their presocial needs in the state of nature.... Society is thus conceived as a mere instrument for men whose fundamental motivation is presocial, nonsocial, and fixed.”³³

According to this view, a person in the state of nature is presumed to have a pre-formed identity, interests, needs and desires, a free will, and a certain capacity for instrumental rationality. Society is regarded as neither the necessary medium through which human identity develops nor as instrumental to human agency. By the time Rousseau’s *Social Contract* was published in 1762 the social contract theory still widely accepted by the writers of the early Enlightenment was therefore already in decline.³⁴ As J. W. Gough

²⁸ “De l’état de nature,” ch. 1 (*OC*, VII, 540). Also, see “De la Souveraineté du Peuple,” book 2, ch. 2 (*OC*, I, 426).

²⁹ “De la Souveraineté du Peuple,” book 1, ch. 2 (*OC*, I, 316).

³⁰ “De l’état de nature,” ch. 1 (*OC*, VII, 541).

³¹ Leslie Green, *The Authority of the State* (Oxford, 1992), 126, categorizes Hobbes as the leading representative of what he calls “unrestricted contractarianism.”

³² D. Gauthier, “The Social Contract as Ideology,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 6/2 (1977), 138.

³³ *Ibid.*, 138-39.

³⁴ For an account of the historical decline of contract theory in the eighteenth century, see J. W. Gough, *The Social Contract: A Critical Study of Its Development* (Oxford, 1957), 186-206.

notes, “[T]he late eighteenth century was a period when men were losing their belief in the older, naïve contractarianism, which accepted the contract as literally true, yet they had not succeeded in finding a new theory of government to take its place.”³⁵

The influence of David Hume on the trend away from concepts such as the state of nature, the social contract, and natural law was considerable at this time. His 1748 essay “Of the Original Contract” presents a strong case against the “fallacious and sophistical” theory of the social contract.³⁶ He also subjected the whole enterprise of modern natural law theory and its assumptions to the same kind of devastating skeptical critique. Natural law, natural rights, and contract theory were also increasingly challenged in the years after 1750 by new doctrines such as utilitarianism, so that by the end of the century there was at best a “half-hearted and often inconsistent rejection of some and acceptance of other parts of the contractarian system.”³⁷

With very few exceptions, therefore, the philosophes believed in the natural sociability of the species.³⁸ In his *Persian Letters* (1721), for example, Montesquieu relates this belief to a rejection of the contractarian idea of a pre-social state of nature. “Every discussion of international law that I have ever heard,” he writes, “has begun with a careful investigation into the origin of society, which seems to me absurd ... they [men] are all associated with each other at birth.”³⁹ He repeats this point in *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), in which he declares that human beings were “[m]ade for living in society.”⁴⁰ Voltaire, often regarded as the most representative figure of the French Enlightenment, shared this view. “It seems clear to me,” he wrote to Frederick the Great, “that God designed us to live in society—just as he has given the bees the instincts and the powers to make honey.”⁴¹ In a direct response to Rousseau he wrote that “I do not think that this solitary life, which our forefathers are supposed to have led, is in human nature.... The foundation of society ever-existing, there has therefore ever been some society.”⁴²

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 191.

³⁶ *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1737-40), Bk. 3, §9, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1978), 549; “Of the Original Contract,” in *Three Essays, Moral and Political* (Edinburgh, 1748); and in *Hume: Political Essays*, ed. K. Haakonssen (Cambridge, 1994), 186-201. See S. Buckle and D. Castiglione, “Hume’s Critique of Contract Theory,” *History of Political Thought*, 12/3 (1991), 457-80, and for a contrary interpretation D. Gauthier, “David Hume, Contractarian,” *Philosophical Review*, 88 (1979), 3-38.

³⁷ J. W. Gough, *The Social Contract*, 191.

³⁸ See my “Rousseau, Maistre and the Counter-Enlightenment,” *History of Political Thought*, 15 (1994), 97-120.

³⁹ *Persian Letters*, no. 94, tr. C. J. Betts (Harmondsworth, 1973), 175.

⁴⁰ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, tr. A. Cohler, B. C. Miller, and H. S. Stone (Cambridge, 1989), 5.

⁴¹ Voltaire to Frederick the Great, 15 October 1737, in *Voltaire: Selections*, ed. P. Edwards (London, 1989), 209.

⁴² *The Philosophy of History* (1765) (New York, 1965), 27.

Diderot also postulated the natural sociability of human beings.⁴³ Society is natural, he points out in his *Encyclopédie* article “Société,” because our weakness demands a social *milieu*, and nature, by way of compensation for our frailty, “endowed him [man] with two gifts to make him superior to animals, I mean reason and sociability.”⁴⁴ This Enlightenment view of humans as naturally sociable was shared by most conservatives in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They opposed the idea of society as the deliberate creation of individuals in a presocial state of nature, motivated by a self-interested desire to avoid the hazards and inconveniences of the natural, presocial world. Edmund Burke, who believed that Rousseau’s views lead to “an unsocial independence,”⁴⁵ traced the origins of the French Revolution to what he regarded as Rousseau’s individualistic revolt against the bonds of society, in which he privileged individual conscience over all else.⁴⁶

What distinguishes Maistre from both conservatives such as Burke and the philosophes is the emphasis he places on the anti-social aspects of human nature. Despite Maistre’s repeated affirmation of the natural sociability of the species, his experiences after 1790 prevented him from subscribing to this view in any straightforward sense. His more complex mature outlook was formed in response to the violence and disruption of the French Revolution, which accentuated the dark, misanthropic dimension of his outlook and fuelled in him an almost desperate need for order. By the middle of the 1790s Maistre had been forced to flee from Savoy as the advancing army of revolutionary France annexed his homeland and confiscated his property. He would not return to live in his native Savoy again for nearly twenty-five years. By the middle of the decade, moreover, Louis XVI had been executed and the Terror had begun. Maistre was traumatized by these events to such an extent that he was gradually transformed from a moderate conservative and cautious reformer critical of social contract theory who shared the Enlightenment belief in human sociability into a full-blown reactionary for whom “society is really a state of war.”⁴⁷ The works for which he is now best known all date from after this transformation in his views.

⁴³ *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. J. Assezat and M. Tourneux (Paris, 1875-77), I, 431.

⁴⁴ *OC*, XVII, 131, 134, quoted in Charles Vereker, *Eighteenth-Century Optimism: A Study of the Interrelations of Moral and Social Theory in English and French Thought Between 1689 and 1789* (Liverpool, 1967), 185.

⁴⁵ *The Works and Correspondence of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, VI, ed. R. and C. Rivington (London, 1852), 33.

⁴⁶ “A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly,” in *Edmund Burke: Selected Writings and Speeches*, ed. P. Stanlis (New York, 1963), 512; and see J.-F. Suter, “Burke, Hegel and the French Revolution,” in *Hegel’s Political Philosophy: Problems and Perspectives*, ed. Z. Pelczynski (Cambridge, 1971), 52-72.

⁴⁷ Maistre, “De l’état de nature,” ch. 2 (*OC*, VII, 563). Freud also suffered several traumatic personal setbacks prior to writing *Civilization and Its Discontents*: his second daughter died in 1920, and he was diagnosed as having cancer in 1923.

Although the Revolution had a fundamental influence on Burke's thought, it did not affect his life as directly as it did Maistre's. Also, Burke was a generation older than Maistre, whose first major work appeared the year of the former's death. Unlike Burke, Maistre was not given to waxing nostalgic about the natural harmony of human beings living in the quiet repose of their "little platoons." It is difficult to imagine him, for whom "[t]he entire earth, continually steeped in blood, is only an immense altar on which every living thing must be immolated without end,"⁴⁸ writing "A Philosophical Inquiry Into the Origins of our Ideas on the Sublime and the Beautiful." As Isaiah Berlin writes in his seminal study of Maistre, his "violent preoccupation with blood and death belongs to another world from the rich and tranquil England of Burke's imagination.... This is neither quietism nor conservatism, neither blind faith in the status quo."⁴⁹

From the middle of the 1790s on, therefore, Maistre actually portrayed human nature as a turbulent combination of conflicting social and anti-social impulses. "Vice separates men," he writes, "just as virtue unites them."⁵⁰ For much of history, it has been the former that has dominated human affairs. He writes in his unfinished essay "De la Souveraineté du Peuple," echoing Hobbes, that "[m]an is insatiable for power; he is infinite in his desires, and, always discontented with what he has, he loves what he has not."⁵¹ Years later in his *St. Petersburg Dialogues* (1821) Maistre wrote that "man's strongest inclinations are vicious to the point of obviously tending towards the destruction of society, that man has no greater enemy than himself,"⁵² anticipating Freud's notion of a "destructive instinct" in human nature. He contemptuously dismisses the idea of the "natural goodness" of the species in favor of an Augustinian depiction of a perpetual cosmic battle of good and evil played out both within and among individuals.

This is the heart of Maistre's dualistic metaphysical system, which recurs throughout his mature writings. In his first major work, written during the Revolution, Maistre writes:

⁴⁸ Joseph de Maistre, *Saint-Petersburg Dialogues*, dialogue 6, tr. R. A. Lebrun (Montreal, 1993), 217 (OC, IV, 25).

⁴⁹ Isaiah Berlin, "Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism," *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London, 1990), 112. Berlin's essay interprets this difference between Maistre and more moderate conservatives such as Burke as evidence of the former's modernistic proto-fascism but does not develop this controversial argument, despite the title of his essay. Also, see his introduction to R. A. Lebrun's translation of *Consideration on France* (Cambridge, 1994). On the relationship between Burke and Maistre, see Frederick Holdsworth, *Joseph de Maistre et l'Angleterre* (Paris, 1935), 246-49; B. Mazlish, "Burke, Bonald and de Maistre: A Study in Conservatism" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1955); Michel Fuchs, "Edmund Burke et Joseph de Maistre," *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa*, 54 (1984), 49-58; Jean-Louis Darcel, "Les Bibliothèques de Joseph de Maistre, 1768-1821," *REM*, 9 (1985), 101; R. A. Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre*, 100-103.

⁵⁰ *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, dialogue 10, 293 (OC, V, 173).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, book 2, ch. 2 (OC, I, 449).

⁵² *Ibid.*, dialogue 1, 24 (OC, IV, 43).

There is nothing but violence in the universe; but we are spoiled by the modern philosophy that tells us that *all is good*, whereas evil has tainted everything and that in a very real sense *all is evil*, since nothing is in its place. The keynote of the system of our creation has been lowered, and following the rules of harmony, all the others have been lowered proportionately. *All creation groans*, and tends with pain and effort towards another order of things.⁵³

In his next published work, *Essay on the Generative Principle of Political Constitutions* (1814), Maistre states that “[t]here is nothing good that evil does not sully or alter; there is no evil, that goodness does not repress and attack, by impelling continually all existence towards a more perfect state. These two forces are every where present.”⁵⁴ According to the *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, it is original sin “which explains everything and without which nothing can be explained.”⁵⁵ In this work Maistre claims that man is really “[a]n inconceivable combination of two different and incompatible powers, a monstrous centaur, he feels that he is the result of some unknown crime, some detestable mixture that has vitiated man even in his deepest essence,”⁵⁶ as a result of which human association is simultaneously natural *and* a “state of war,” a view befitting his Manichean belief in “the existence in the universe of two opposing forces, which are in continual conflict.”⁵⁷ Thus, while rejecting contractarianism, Maistre appropriated much of Hobbes’s pessimistic account of the passions that make social life so precarious and necessitate a substantial measure of political and cultural repression.

In addition to this emphasis on the anti-social proclivity of human nature, Maistre rejected the Enlightenment belief that the universe is governed by “an essential, general and natural order.”⁵⁸ There had been a broad consensus among the philosophes that nature is governed by an orderly system of uniform and regular laws, created and presided over by a remote, benevolent deity and discoverable by sensory experience. By studying the orderly patterns of nature individuals could come to know these natural laws and thereby understand and, to some extent, even control their world. “[I]t was not in Holy Writ,” Carl Becker writes in his study of the Enlightenment, “but in the great book of nature, open for all mankind to read, that the laws of God had been recorded.”⁵⁹ The traditional Christian belief in original sin was

⁵³ *Considerations on France*, tr. R. A. Lebrun (Cambridge, 1994), 62 (OC, I, 39).

⁵⁴ *Essay on the Generative Principle of Political Constitutions* (1814) (New York, 1977), 114-15 (OC, I, 276).

⁵⁵ *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, dialogue 2, 33 (OC, IV, 61-62).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, dialogue 2, 36 (OC, IV, 67).

⁵⁷ *Essay on the Generative Principle*, §40, 114 (OC, I, 276).

⁵⁸ Pierre Samuel Dupont de Nemours, *De l'origine et des progrès d'une science nouvelle*, repr. in E. Daire, *Physiocrates* (Paris, 1846), 337-38.

⁵⁹ *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers* (New Haven, 1932), 51.

rejected by many philosophes in favor of an essentially benevolent conception of the natural world. As J. H. Brumfitt writes, “Man was good, Nature was good, and a fundamental harmony existed between them. Such was the creed the *philosophes* proclaimed.”⁶⁰ Voltaire shared this belief in the natural benevolence of human beings and the existence of a providential order and explicitly connected the harmony of nature with his deist conception of God as “the eternal machine-maker”:⁶¹

[T]he unvarying uniformity of the laws which control the march of the heavenly bodies, the movements of our globe, every species and genus of animal, plant, and mineral, indicates that there is one mover. If there were two, they would either differ, or be opposed to each other, or like each other. If they were different, there would be no harmony; if opposed, things would destroy each other; if like, it would be as if there were only one—a twofold employment.⁶²

Nature is not only harmonious, according to the philosophes, but it is also unified. “[A]ll bodies of which this universe is made up,” d’Alembert writes, “form a single system, whose parts are interdependent and whose interrelations derive from the harmony of the whole.”⁶³ According to this view, society reflects this natural harmony.⁶⁴ What the writers of the early Enlightenment saw in both the natural and social worlds were their essential architectonic order and harmony. Natural law, for example, was nothing more than “the observed harmonious behaviour of material objects.”⁶⁵ By allowing society freely to operate in accordance with the laws of nature, the harmony of the natural order would be reflected in the social, economic and political life of man. As Norman Hampson notes, “In one form or another most of the philosophes believed in an ‘invisible hand.’”⁶⁶

Maistre’s views on this subject reflect the reaction against this image of nature which emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century, a reaction obviously fuelled by the course of events in France after 1789. It is hardly surprising that the influence of Hobbes, so apparent in Maistre, grew in France after 1760 as the assumptions of the early Enlightenment were increasingly challenged.⁶⁷ For as Stephen Collins’s description of Hobbes makes clear, he understood that

⁶⁰ *The French Enlightenment* (London, 1972), 96.

⁶¹ *Traité de métaphysique* (1734), ch. 8, in *Voltaire: Selections*, 92.

⁶² *Selected Works of Voltaire*, tr. Joseph McCabe (London, 1935), 9.

⁶³ Jean d’Alembert, “Qualités cosmiques,” in *L’Encyclopédie*, IV, quoted in T. L. Hankins, *Jean d’Alembert: Science and the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 1970), 106.

⁶⁴ See A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge, Mass., 1936), 183-241.

⁶⁵ *The Heavenly City*, 57.

⁶⁶ N. Hampson, “The Enlightenment in France,” in *The Enlightenment in National Context*, ed. R. Porter and M. Teich (Cambridge, 1981), 41-42.

⁶⁷ Hampson, *The Enlightenment*, 84.

a world in flux was natural and that order must be created to restrain what was natural.... Society is no longer a transcendently articulated reflection of something predefined, external, and beyond itself which orders existence hierarchically.... Order must be designed to restrain what appeared ubiquitous [that is, flux].... Fundamental to the entire reconceptualization of the idea of society was the belief that the commonwealth, as was order, was a human creation.⁶⁸

Among the most pessimistic accounts of the ruthlessness and violence of nature to be found anywhere occur in Maistre's mature writings, with their notorious descriptions of constant blood-letting as natural, inescapable, and, up to a point, even beneficial. In *Considerations on France* he claims that "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," which is "the manure of the plant we call *genius*." Mankind, he says, is a tree "which an invisible hand is continually pruning." And as with a tree, "the skilful gardener directs the pruning less towards lush vegetation than towards the fructification of the tree; he wants fruit, not wood or leaves."⁶⁹

Maistre devotes a chapter to "the Violent Destruction of the Human Species," noting that the "illustrious" Buffon "has proven quite clearly that a large percentage of animals are destined to die a violent death."⁷⁰ He then adds that Buffon "could apparently have extended the demonstration to man,"⁷¹ which is precisely what Maistre proceeds to do, beginning with a long "frightful catalogue" of the wars of recorded history. "Unhappily," he concludes, "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."⁷² Perhaps his most famous and most graphic account of the natural world occurs in the *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, where he writes:

In the vast domain of living things, there reigns a manifest violence.... As soon as you leave the domain of insensible substances you find the decree of violent death written on the very frontiers of life. Even in the vegetable kingdom the law can be perceived.... But as soon as you enter the animal kingdom, the law suddenly becomes frighteningly obvious.

⁶⁸ Collins, *From Divine Cosmos to Sovereign State: An Intellectual History of Conscience and the Idea of Orders in Renaissance England* (New York, 1989), 4, 6, 7, 28, 29, 32.

⁶⁹ *Considerations on France*, ch. 3, 28-29 (*OC*, I, 35-36).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, ch. 3, 28 (*OC*, I, 34).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, ch. 3, 28 (*OC*, I, 34).

⁷² *Ibid.*, ch. 3, 23 (*OC*, I, 28). Also see R. A. Lebrun, "Joseph de Maistre's 'Philosophic' View of War," in *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History*, 7 (1981), 43-52.

A power at once hidden and palpable shows itself continually occupied in demonstrating the principle of life by violent means. In each great division of the animal kingdom it has chosen a certain number of animals charged with devouring the others;... There is not an instant of time when some living thing is not being devoured by another. Above all these numerous animal species is placed man, whose destructive hand spares nothing that lives;... a superb and terrible king, he needs everything and nothing resists him.... Yet what being will exterminate him who exterminates all else?... It is man who is charged with slaughtering man. But how can he accomplish this law, he who is a moral and merciful being, who is born to love, who cries for others as for himself?... It is war that accomplishes the decree. Do you not hear the *earth* itself crying out and demanding blood? The blood of animals does not satisfy it, nor even that of criminals spilled by the sword of the law. If human justice struck them all, there would be no war, but it reaches only a small number of them and often it even spares them without suspecting that this cruel humanity contributes to the necessity of war.... The earth does not cry out in vain; war breaks out. Man, seized by a *divine fury*, foreign both to hatred and anger, goes to the battlefield without knowing what he intends or even what he is doing.... Nothing can resist the force that drags men into combat ... an innocent murderer, a passive instrument in a formidable hand.... Thus, from the maggot up to man, the universal law of violent destruction of living things is unceasingly fulfilled. The entire earth, continually steeped in blood, is only an immense altar on which every living thing must be immolated without end, without restraint, without respite until the consummation of the world, until the extinction of evil, until the death of death.⁷³

Maistre ties this grim view of natural and social disorder to his political theory. In an essay written during the French Revolution he enlists Hobbes in support of his argument that the origin of government lies in the anti-social disposition of human nature.

Hobbes was perfectly right, provided that one does not give too great extension to his principles; society is really a state of war. We find here the necessity for government. Since man is evil, he must be governed; it is necessary that *when several want the same thing* a power superior to the claimants judges the matter and prevents them from fighting. Therefore a sovereign and laws are needed; and even under their empire is not society still in *potential* field of battle? And is the action of magistrates anything but a pacifying and permanent power that interposes itself without respite between the citizens to prohibit violence,

⁷³ *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, dialogue 7, 216-17 (*OC*, V, 22-25).

command peace, and punish the violators of the Truce of God? Do we not see that when political revolutions suspend this divine power, unfortunate nations that experience these political commotions quickly fall into the state of war, that force seizes the sceptre, and that this nation is tormented by a deluge of crimes. Therefore government is not a matter of choice. It is even the result of the nature of things: it is impossible that man be what he is and that he not be governed, for a being both social and evil must be under the yoke.⁷⁴

Around the time that Maistre wrote these words he also remarked that “the state of nature for man is therefore to be what he is today and what he has always been, that is to say *sociable*.”⁷⁵ In his essay “De l’état de nature” Maistre writes, paraphrasing Marcus Aurelius, that “*man is social, because he is reasonable*; let us also add: *but he is corrupt in his essence and in consequence he must have a government*.”⁷⁶ This is “the twofold law of man’s nature” which explains the “internal combat within himself.”⁷⁷

Given the essential precariousness of social and political life, the existence of strong feelings of individual self-interest is, on Maistre’s view, a symptom of, not a remedy for, the disintegration that perpetually threatens civil order. He condemned the “murderous egoism”⁷⁸ of individual wills which, far from providing a reliable basis upon which society could be grounded, further attenuates the fragile bonds of society, plunging civilization into complete chaos and civil war. “If each man makes himself the judge of the principles of government,” he writes, “you will see immediately the rise of civil anarchy or the annihilation of political sovereignty.”⁷⁹ Instead, Maistre emphasizes the need for obedience to authority and what he calls “individual abnegation.”⁸⁰ The individual must “lose itself in the national mind, so that it changes its individual existence for another communal existence, just as a river flows into the ocean still exists in the mass of water, but without name and distinct identity.”⁸¹ Like Hobbes, Maistre reasoned that it is better to be subject to *any* sovereign (even a Robespierre or a Napoleon) than to none at all.⁸² His criticism of the French Revolutionary leaders was not that they undermined authority, but rather that they abused it.

⁷⁴ “De l’état de nature,” ch. 2 (*OC*, VII, 563).

⁷⁵ “De la Souveraineté du Peuple,” book 1, ch. 2 (*OC*, I, 321).

⁷⁶ “De l’état de nature,” ch. 1 (*OC*, VII, 556).

⁷⁷ *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, dialogue 10, 293 (*OC*, V, 172).

⁷⁸ “De la Souveraineté du Peuple,” book 1, ch. 1 (*OC*, I, 409).

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, book 1, ch. 10 (*OC*, I, 376).

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, book 1, ch. 10 (*OC*, I, 377).

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, book 1, ch. 10 (*OC*, I, 376).

⁸² Maistre made a secret attempt to arrange a meeting with Napoleon, which was unsuccessful; and see F. Vermale, “Joseph de Maistre et Robespierre,” *Annales Révolutionnaires*, 12 (1920), 117-20.

This was, however, a lesser evil in Maistre's eyes than the liberal attempt to limit power. For Maistre disorder was the public evil most to be avoided. In his first major work, *Considerations on France* (1797), he not only attacked the Revolution but attempted to refute the arguments of more moderate constitutional republicans and liberals such as Benjamin Constant. One lesson that many liberals such as Constant drew from events in France after 1793 is that a constitution must be devised and adopted that would permanently prevent the juggernaut of political power—whether led by divine right absolutists or revolutionary Jacobins—from crushing individual liberties. This, they held, requires the dispersal of social and political power, which had been concentrated and centralized under both Bourbons and Revolutionaries.

Maistre drew exactly the opposite political lesson from the same events. He did not interpret the Revolution as an argument against a strong and unified political sovereign. Quite the opposite, in fact. In *Considerations on France*, written partly to refute Constant's "ugly pamphlet" *De la force du gouvernement actuel de la France et de la nécessité de s'y rallier* (1796), Maistre refers favorably to Rousseau when defending the "absolute and indivisible" nature of sovereignty and condemning the popular liberal idea that sovereignty can be represented.⁸³ The Revolutionary leaders, to the extent that they were able to marshal the forces of the nation and take decisive measures to save France from her enemies, were preferable to carping liberal critics like Voltaire, who were responsible for unleashing the Revolutionary tiger from its cage in the first place, and were opposed to authority *per se*. The Jacobins, on the other hand, "leave in the imagination a certain impression of grandeur that is the result of the immensity of their success."⁸⁴ Thus, the counter-revolutionary Maistre wrote of Robespierre that this "infernal genius alone could perform this prodigy.... This monster of strength, drunk with blood and success, this terrifying phenomenon ... was at once a terrible punishment sent upon French men and the sole means of saving France."⁸⁵ This position with respect to the Revolutionary leaders is quite consistent with Maistre's overall belief in the imperative of authority and the need for a sovereign that is "one, inviolable, and absolute."⁸⁶

It is important to note that, although some measure of violent disorder is inescapable in human affairs, according to Maistre, this takes place in the broader context of a providential order ordained by God. Society, as part of the natural order, must be considered in the general frame of a supernatural order which is subject to God's true design for the cosmos. One of the most distinctive features of Maistre's account of the French Revolution in *Considerations on France* is the way in which he interprets it in such providential

⁸³ *Considerations on France*, ch. 4, 71-72 (*OC*, I, 48-49).

⁸⁴ "De la Souveraineté du Peuple," book 1, ch. 8 (*OC*, I, 360).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, ch. 2, 41 (*OC*, I, 18); and ch. 1, 27 (*OC*, I, 5).

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, book 2, ch. 1 (*OC*, I, 418).

terms. Like Hegel, Maistre was, in part, undertaking a theodicy in writing this work. "If Providence erases," he claims, referring to the destruction wrought by the Revolution, "it is no doubt in order to write."⁸⁷ Thus, the Revolutionaries are merely "the instruments of Providence" working towards ends unknown to them.⁸⁸ "We cannot repeat too often," Maistre writes, "that men do not lead the Revolution; it is the Revolution that uses men. They are right when they say it goes all alone. This phrase means that never has the Divinity shown itself so clearly in any human event."⁸⁹ Running through the violent maelstrom of revolution, in other words, is a divine logic that is perfectly ordered, even though it is not apparent to human beings. This theme is also central to Maistre's *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, subtitled "Conversations on the Temporal Government of Providence." For Maistre, God uses disorder in the affairs of men and in nature to maintain a greater, cosmic equilibrium.

Conclusion

At the heart of the social psychology of both Maistre and Freud is a question that had commanded the attention of social contract theorists such as Hobbes and Rousseau and would fascinate sociologists such as Comte and Durkheim: what keeps human beings together? According to Maistre and Freud, the French Enlightenment tended to overlook this fundamental question, with disastrous consequences. The striking social naïveté of the philosophes blinded them to the deep tensions and complexities in social life and the powerful disintegrative forces that pose a constant threat to social order. For the philosophes, society, being natural, reflects the spontaneous harmony they attributed to nature. As such, social order does not in itself present a problem to them. The "problem," as far as most were concerned, was to maximize individual freedom by liberating the mind and power of human beings from the fetters of social custom and prejudice. This entailed a reduction in social control so that individuals would be capable of reasoned, independent action.

We have seen that Maistre and Freud agreed with the philosophes that humans are naturally social beings. At the same time, however, they also placed great stress on the anti-social tendencies in human nature and the deep tensions that exist at the heart of social life. In this they were the heirs of Hobbes. Consequently, they did not support the "emancipatory" social and political project of the French Enlightenment. Maistre and Freud feared that significantly loosening social, religious, and political bonds on individuals could precipitate the collapse of the fragile edifice of society, as evidenced,

⁸⁷ *Considerations on France*, ch. 2, 20 (*OC*, I, 21).

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

Maistre believed, by events in France in the second half of the eighteenth century. Contractarianism is correct, on this view, to the extent that it conceives of social order as something that depends on a considerable measure of human artifice, rather than as something that arises naturally and spontaneously. The philosophes and their successors failed to diagnose a deep-seated “problem of order” that lies at the very heart of modern civilization. The emphasis of Maistre and Freud on the power of the centrifugal forces that threaten social order and the weakness of our rational faculties in the face of them, led both to seek surrogates for reason to combat these disintegrative pressures. Foremost among these for Maistre are religious and patriotic sentiments, the “solid bases of all possible first and second order institutions.”⁹⁰

The social theory of Maistre, like that of Freud, defies categories according to which society is held to be either natural or artificial. Instead, individuals are seen as complex and dynamic beings, with many contradictory tendencies. It is this novel combination that furnishes Maistre’s thought with a sinister modernistic edge that gives his work, like Freud’s, a disturbing relevance to the twentieth-century reader missing in more moderate varieties of conservatism.

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⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, book 1, ch. 12 (*OC*, I, 408).