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Carolina Armenteros, *The French Idea of History. Joseph de Maistre and his heirs, 1794-1854*. Ithaca, N.Y. and London. Cornell University Press, 2011. xiii + 361 pp. \$59.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8014-4943-7.

Review by Jack Hayward, University of Hull.

My first encounter with the anonymous author of *Considérations sur la France* (anonymous because Maistre was in 1797 an official of the Sardinian government that had secretly signed a peace treaty with France) was some sixty years ago. Isaiah Berlin gave a lecture on his political thought which I attended as an undergraduate at the London School of Economics. It was a memorable experience to hear him describe how “Every new doctrine since the ages of faith is torn to shreds with ferocious skill and malice.” Berlin went on to acknowledge that Maistre’s “armoury of weapons against liberal and humanitarian doctrines is the most effective ever assembled,” who argued that attempts to reverse the French Revolution were “as if one had been invited to drain the Lake of Geneva by bottling its waters in a wine cellar.”[1]

The remark that remained imprinted on my mind was Berlin’s emphasis upon Maistre’s apotheosis of the public executioner. Far from recoiling from the Jacobins’ resort to the guillotine to preserve their precarious hold on power, he asserted that no stable authority was possible in a wicked world without this God—sanctioned author of social order. The efficient, shameful secret of sovereignty, revealed by Thomas Hobbes, was the fear of death, so “all grandeur, all power, all subordination rests on the executioner; he is the horror and bond of human association. Remove this incomprehensible agent from the world, and at that very moment order gives way to chaos, thrones topple, and society disappears. God, who is the author of sovereignty, is the author also of chastisement.”[2] Such was the dread, apocalyptic judgment of a man who in his private and public life had suffered the unforgivable disruptive and devastating consequences of the French Revolution. It was the product of what the poet, historian and politician Alphonse de Lamartine (related to him by marriage but opposed to his views) called in his *Souvenirs* an exterminating mind, written in blood.

This is not a feature of Maistre’s thought that is given any prominence in the book under review. Rather, it is written in reaction against it. While she purports to present Maistre as “the crucial bridge between the Enlightenment and the historical thought of the nineteenth century” (dust-jacket blurb), Carolina Armenteros endorses the Lamennais—Lacordaire view of the “demise of nineteenth century French historical thought: “Dehistoricisation is the corollary of de-Christianisation” (pp. 311-12). Her readers are entitled in a book called *The French Idea of History* to some comparison with the contemporary views of Jules Michelet and Edgar Quinet, who took a different and much more influential line of argument, but they are not even mentioned. While she rightly emphasises Maistre’s effective use of paradox against his opponents, it is paradoxical in a less convincing way simply to ignore the adversary, a mistake Maistre himself would never have made.

After a brief intellectual biography and an interesting discussion of Maistre’s response to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Du contrat social* in *De la souveraineté du peuple*, she turns to his *Examen de la philosophie de Bacon*, a figure who also had attracted the criticism of Hobbes, that other champion of sovereignty, but

of monarchs, not of the pope. Maistre's epistemology relies on what she calls humanity's "inborn knowledge of universals . . . that remain unknown to it until the process of revelation begins" (p. 97). This takes the form of commonsense consensus, an idea that was developed by Félicité Lamennais and then by Auguste Comte, who both sought to free social consensus from Maistre's theological strait-jacket. Like them, Émile Durkheim, who is also discussed, gave great emphasis to social solidarity as the sociological basis of society, although like the later Lamennais and unlike Comte, he was an anti-authoritarian democrat. His stand during the Dreyfus Affair placed him at loggerheads with the latter day disciples of Maistre such as Charles Maurras.

Significant parts of this book have previously been published. Drawing as it does on the research on Maistre that has flourished in recent years, this book usefully allows those of us who have turned our attention elsewhere to familiarise ourselves with some of this work at second hand. Armenteros writes as an advocate. So, for example, in reproducing Maistre's methodological use of paradox as a persuasive device to overwhelm critics with an unexpected counter attack, she seems to endorse the Sumo wrestler using his opponent's strength against him. Maistre is allowed unchallenged to proffer theocratic enormities with self-assurance, presented as self-evident truth: "Because humanity is naturally Christian, Christian government is 'the only government that is convenient to men at all times and of all places'" (p.127, quoting Maistre's *Du Pape* p. 278). So the Roman Catholic "pope-church" represents universal reason, the Pope personifying "the intervention of the divine in the world that propels human history forward" (p. 126). Paradox is indulged by phrases like "Maistre remained true to Bellarmine by overturning him . . ." (p. 140).

Armenteros rather tempts Providence by admitting that for her, "describing Maistre's historical thought is often an exercise in the recovery of the implicit" (p. 3). For those who prefer to rely upon the explicit, her claim that Maistre uses his key dogma of original sin as Providence's "instrument of divine education, the incarnation of the Enlightenment belief that human beings no longer hopelessly embroiled in the toils of original sin, can be informed and improved by knowledge" (p. 2) is dubious. She appeals to Maistre's divinizing facts . . . "understanding the divine through the real" (pp. 48-49). Once again, he paradoxically uses historic solidarity in sin to reject Enlightenment reformism because humanity is "bound together in weakness" (p. 205). She discusses Maistre's fascination with Martinist mysticism but makes a rather confusing conflation of Swedenborg and Mesmer (p. 200), whose views were very different. Another passing allusion to the abbé Grégoire (p. 298) would have merited more attention, notably his *Histoire des sectes religieuses qui depuis le commencement du siècle dernier jusqu'à l'époque actuelle, sont nées, se sont modifiées, se sont éteintes dans les quatre parties du monde* (2 vols. 1810, 2nd ed., 6 vols. 1828-45). She sees Maistre's theocratic universalist utopia as seeking "to ease the arrival of the Christian unity that would dissolve politics and mark history's end" (p. 155).

She explains that in book two of *Du Pape*, Maistre argues that "popes made Europe, and they will one day make the world" (p. 239; cf. 116, 142). He so argued following Napoleon's capture and imprisonment of Pope Pius VII from 1809-14, after annexing the papal states, an act that had been preceded in 1798 by the deposition of Pope Pius VI by French general Louis-Alexandre Berthier in the previous assault on Rome. In what was a destructive dogmatic summary of his future theocratic masterpiece, *Du Pape*, Maistre wrote in 1814 to his close friend, the Count de Blacas, adviser to the exiled and then restored Louis XVIII: "There is no public morality or national character without religion, no European religion without Christianity, no Christianity without Catholicism, no Catholicism without the Pope, no Pope without his supremacy."^[3] For Maistre, government presupposed sovereignty, which in turn presupposed infallibility. Pius VII was unwilling to claim it, but Pius IX did so in 1870, vindicating Maistre's assertion.

In discussing Maistre's "Europeanist Theory of History," Armenteros refers on two occasions to his views on the Protestant Madame de Staël, with whom he had frequent discussions in Lausanne about their very contrasting interpretations of the historic significance of the French Revolution. However,

while on page 112 she quotes Maistre as referring to Staël's "completely perverted head," by page 117 their "mutual respect" is explained on a personal level as well as their common commitment to Christianity. Armenteros refers to the fact that *De la réorganisation de la société européenne*, published in 1814 in the name of Henri de Saint-Simon and his "secretary" Augustin Thierry (but due essentially to the latter because the aristocrat Saint-Simon was incapable of methodical writing), shared with Maistre the eulogy of the medieval Roman Catholic clergy in unifying Europe and anticipated Maistre's advocacy of a European federation (p. 286). She does not point out, however, that the liberal Thierry was, with François Guizot, to pioneer French nineteenth-century history as a science during the Restoration. Together with Michelet and Lamartine, they were much closer to Madame de Staël, notably her influential *De la littérature* (1808), than they were to Maistre.

The author dwells upon the degeneration of Saint-Simonism into religiosity under the extravagant Barthélemy Prosper Enfantin, who led them into a *cul de sac*, and Eugène Rodrigues, rather than those who went on to make French history. The latter included men who pioneered socialism like Pierre Leroux or industrialism like Michel Chevalier and those who developed French banking and railways during the July Monarchy and especially during the Second Empire. Philippe Buchez deserves the attention he receives as parliamentary historian, but Armenteros does not refer to his role in 1848 as President of the post-Revolutionary Assembly. As for Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, the antitheist certainly had a high regard for Maistre, but as his antithesis, the arch protagonist of authoritarianism! The misleading claim (in which she follows many others who have not made a close study of his thought) that Saint-Simon was "the father of socialism" (p. 317) would have made more sense if his end-of-life "New Christianity" was said to father his "secretary" Comte's later conversion of his social scientific positivism into a hieratic church. Comte's late pseudo-Catholicism minus Christ does owe a debt to Maistre, although it owed more to his infatuation with Clothilde de Vaux.

Carolina Armenteros would have been better inspired to turn to Honoré de Balzac as the literary historian who in *La Comédie Humaine* cycle of novels showed himself to be the truest and most influential disciple of Maistre and Louis de Bonald. In the preface he explicitly declared that behind the panorama of characters portrayed lay the twin principles of Catholicism and monarchy, to repress the depraved tendencies of men in the service of social order. "French society was to be the historian. I was only the secretary." [4] Carolina Armenteros's spirited essay in retrieval cannot disguise the fact that Maistre's legacy was a reactionary one. In the late nineteenth century, it was Charles Maurras' *Enquête sur la monarchie* and the polemicist Louis Veuillot, who declared "God made me a Catholic. M. de Maistre made me Roman." These were Maistre's latter day heirs. [5]

NOTES

[1] Isaiah Berlin, "The Hedgehog and the Fox", in Berlin, *Russian Thinkers* (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), pp. 77-8.

[2] Joseph de Maistre, *Les soirées de Saint Pétersbourg; ou entretiens sur le gouvernement temporel de la Providence* (1821) cited from *The Works of Joseph de Maistre* ed., Jack Lively (London: Allen and Unwin, 1965), p. 192.

[3] Quoted in Fernand Baldensperger, *Le mouvement des idées dans l'émigration française, 1789-1815* (Paris: Plon, 1924), II, p. 244.

[4] Honoré de Balzac, *La Comédie Humaine*, Pléaïde ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1956), p. 7; cf. pp. 8-9.

[5] Quoted by Richard A. Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre: An Intellectual Militant* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988), p. 261.

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