



2023

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Recommended Citation

DeMarco, Carl J. Jr. (2023) "A Historical and Philosophical Comparison: Joseph de Maistre & Edmund Burke," *The Gettysburg Historical Journal*: Vol. 22, Article 7.
Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/ghj/vol22/iss1/7>

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Abstract

Most historians have focused on the British thinker and statesman Edmund Burke, when discussing the development of Conservatism. He is often considered the “Father of Conservatism” as his principal work *Reflections on the Revolution in France* inspired generations of conservative thinkers. However, another conservative thinker was writing during the same period as Burke and has been relatively lost to history. Joseph de Maistre, was developing conservative thought at the same time as Burke, but has received little to no credit for the influence he held. The aim of this paper is to show that Maistre was just as influential in the development of conservatism as Burke during the Revolutionary years in Europe. The paper will also demonstrate that Maistre was not an extremist as many historians have portrayed him to be.

Keywords

Joseph de Maistre, Edmund Burke, Conservatism, Political Philosophy, French Revolution, Reflections on the Revolution in France, Conservative Thought

A Historical and Philosophical Comparison: Joseph de Maistre & Edmund Burke

Carl J. DeMarco Jr. | Gettysburg College '25

The French Revolution shook Europe's political elite and thinkers to the core. Not since the Protestant Reformation a few centuries earlier had the continent witnessed such a profound change in the political and social landscape. Naturally, many of Europe's thinkers reacted to this attempt to radically alter European society, by questioning the revolutionaries' motives and the legacies of the revolution altogether. Two thinkers emerged during those revolutionary years who would profoundly shape the conservative ideology. Edmund Burke in the United Kingdom and Joseph de Maistre, a Savoyard, émigré, and diplomat. They unknowingly laid the foundation for conservative philosophy to take hold in European society. However, while Burke is lauded for being "the father of modern-day conservatism," Maistre has been relegated to the backwaters of counter-revolution reactionary conservatism. Further study of both Maistre and Burke demonstrates that they shared such similar beliefs. Tossing Maistre to the side does a disservice to the historical development of conservatism as an ideology. Both Burke and Maistre are the fathers of conservatism and analyzing one without the other leaves

the story of European conservatism incomplete, as they developed the ideology virtually simultaneously.

The history of conservative thought has traditionally always begun with Edmund Burke and his book *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Jesse Norman wrote one of the most recent books on the historic development of the political life and the thought of Edmund Burke in the last decade. In his book appropriately titled *Edmund Burke, The First Conservative*, Norman continued the academic argument that Burke was without a doubt the first conservative intellectual in the wake of the French Revolution.¹ Norman argues that despite Burke never using the term conservative, and being a member of the Whig Party, his intellectual tendencies to affirm tradition, place society over the individual, and emphasize slow and gradual change earn him the title of “the first conservative.”² It is because Burke wrote these ideas down first and influenced generations of Anglo-American politicians and thinkers that this title is warranted. However, Norman acknowledged that Burke bequeaths a blueprint for conservatism that would eventually evolve into the modern factions that political scientists study to this day.³ Yet, in the course of his biography and argument naming Burke “the first

¹ Jesse Norman, *Edmund Burke: The First Conservative* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 238.

² Norman, *The First Conservative*, 238.

³ Norman, *The First Conservative*, 238.

conservative”, Norman failed to even acknowledge the existence of Joseph de Maistre and his contribution to the development of conservative intellectual thought.

While many other historians have neglected to include Maistre in the cumulative history of the development of conservatism as a political ideology, Edmund Fawcett incorporated the dueling narratives into his book *Conservatism: The Fight for a Tradition*, while embracing the intellectual tradition passed down by academic Isaiah Berlin. Fawcett brought Maistre into the fold in a dialogue between him and Burke, all while emphasizing Maistre’s connection with “right-wing authoritarians and fascists.”⁴ Yet, Fawcett was not the first to make this argument. As previously mentioned, the political philosopher and academic Isaiah Berlin first argued this point in the mid-1960s. For both Fawcett and Berlin, Burke represented the tamer and more sensible Anglo-American conservative tradition, while Maistre embodied the irrational and reactionary continental strand of conservatism dedicated to repression.⁵

⁴ Edmund Fawcett, *Conservatism: The Fight for Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 1.

⁵ Isaiah Berlin, “Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism (Isaiah Berlin,” accessed October 30, 2022, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1990/09/27/joseph-de-maistre-and-the-origins-of-fascism>).

In the first chapter, Fawcett's main argument is that Maistre took positions similar to Burke but pushed them to a more irrational and theological conclusion. Maistre is portrayed more irrationally compared to Burke, with Fawcett emphasizing his strong belief in Catholicism as an irrational philosophical explanation for his political thought.

While Fawcett and Berlin saw a threatening precursor to modern fascist authoritarian thinkers and regimes, historian Owen Bradley sought to place Maistre into a more positive light.⁶ He highlighted the similarities in his work to modern thinkers, while simultaneously arguing that his views were far more complex than many have previously considered. Throughout his work, Bradley aimed to redraw Maistre's image and bring him into the mainstream political tradition of conservative thought. Bradley argued that Maistre's work was far more complex than what modern political philosophers and historians have previously mentioned. While other historians have analyzed Maistre's work and placed him in the chorus of right-wing ideologues, Bradley's analysis found that his thought often countered these thinkers and criticized what would become the nascent fascist tradition.⁷ Bradley engaged Berlin's argument in the opening pages of his

⁶ Owen Bradley, *A Modern Maistre* (Lincoln University of Nebraska Press, 1999), XVIII.

⁷ Bradley, *A Modern Maistre*, XVII.

work, arguing that while Maistre was more of an irrationalist than other thinkers of his time through, tracing the roots of fascism back to him ignores what Maistre believed. Maistre was an early critic of what would become fascism by critiquing the revolutionaries but never advocating for policies or pre-fascist philosophical ideas, Bradley argued.

Although many historians have dedicated their lives to researching the historical significance of both Burke and Maistre, there are relatively few historiographical pieces comparing the two men and their political philosophies. Often, as in the case of Edmund Fawcett's work, when the two men are compared, they are deemed so different that their similarities are glanced over while their differences are exhaustively discussed. Historian Richard Lebrun is one of the few who has taken the position that a comparison of these two men shows that their similarities outweigh their differences. In his work *Joseph de Maistre's Life, Thought, and Influence*, Lebrun dedicated a chapter to comparing the lives, work, and thoughts of both men. He concluded that Burke had a potentially measurable influence on Maistre's philosophical development, as Maistre utilized his writings in his work and praised *Reflections on the Revolution in France* to various colleagues.⁸ Lebrun drew comparisons between the two

⁸ Richard Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre's Life, Thought and Influence Selected Studies* (Montreal ; McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001).

even going as far as to say that Maistre's early works "echo" many of Burke's beliefs. Turning away from the French Revolution, Lebrun argued that "themes common to conservatism, in general, may be found in both."⁹ Themes such as a reverence for tradition, defense of sovereignty, and the belief that wisdom was formed from the collective thought of past generations. Yet, Lebrun also acknowledged that these men come to the same conclusions by different means; Burke tending to be more empiricist and Maistre drawing on "providential or sociological" grounds. Lebrun also demonstrates that the two disagreed on a variety of topics including social contract theory.¹⁰ However, overall, Lebrun drew a favorable comparison of the two men while noting that both held very complex belief systems that did not always align.

Joseph de Maistre's political thought is very complex and influenced from a variety of sources. Maistre was first and foremost a devout Roman Catholic who centered much of his political thought around concepts developed by Church Doctors and the Church's rich intellectual tradition.¹¹ Maistre's political philosophy was heavily influenced not only by his deep religiosity but also the life that he lived. He was trained as a lawyer and at a young age and would become a member of the Senate of the

⁹ Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre's Life*, 167.

¹⁰ Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre's Life*, 169.

¹¹ Richard Lebrun, *Throne and Altar; the Political and Religious Thought of Joseph de Maistre*. (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1965), 8.

Kingdom of Savoy. He would dedicate his entire life to the service to the King of Savoy. Originally sympathetic to the reforms trying to be made in France prior to the Revolution of 1789, it was France's unprovoked invasion of Savoy in 1792 that set Maistre's political mind truly ablaze. He was forced to emigrate from his home to Turin and then to Switzerland making him a part of a community of intellectuals, royalty, and antirevolutionaries who were forced to flee Revolutionary France in fear for their lives.¹² Maistre's forced emigration would have a profound impact on Maistre's political thought as it gave him yet another reason to oppose the revolution, but on a more personal level as he saw what radical change can do to the individual. Maistre was certainly a product of his life and the events that he witnessed and lived through would go on to shape his political thought, and thus the development of conservatism as an ideology in the wake of the French Revolution.

Perhaps one of the most prevailing philosophical thoughts that influenced the French Revolution was the eighteenth-century liberal idea of the social contract. The social contract was a philosophical answer to the question of why men form governments, by thinkers such as England's John Locke and France's Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The general theory stated that man

¹² Lebrun, *Throne and Altar*, 9.

voluntarily gives up some of his freedoms and rights in order to form a government that protects each individual from each other and the collective as a whole. It is on this philosophical battleground that Maistre began to develop his conservative political philosophy. For Maistre, man did not come together to form governments, but that these governments and communities developed naturally because men are naturally social creatures. The idea of a utopian “savage” that Rousseau developed was nonsensical to Maistre because there was no historical evidence or tradition to support Rousseau’s claims. Government was a naturally occurring phenomena. Maistre’s adherence to tradition and historical evidence is clearly demonstrated by his argument against the social contract and Rousseau.¹³

When the Revolution in France began, it was understood by many in the Enlightenment and liberal tradition that the revolution was nothing more than the people exercising their right to determine their government. However, Maistre saw this in a very different light. The revolution was releasing nothing but pure anarchy occurring in a flawed, but stable system, according to Maistre.¹⁴ Revolutions breed destruction of institutions and customs, could be taken off their original target of reform (such as in France), and were rarely successful in gaining the goals desired.

¹³ Lebrun, *Throne and Altar*, 47–48.

¹⁴ Lebrun, *Throne and Altar*, 54.

The events occurring in France at the time were to an extent unnatural and a betrayal to God and one another in Maistre's eyes. He firmly believed that the monarchies in Europe were the most stable and natural form of government that man could have. In December of 1816 he wrote that "if one asks which government is the most natural for man, history is there to answer it is monarchy,"¹⁵ once again demonstrating the idea that an adherence to history and tradition can prevent the bloodshed that he was witnessing in France. Of course, Maistre believed that the monarchy needed be morally sound and "established on good laws"¹⁶ in order to prevent upheaval from the people.

Tradition, order, and stability were the pillars to Maistre's political philosophy. His deep devotion to God and the Roman Catholic Church led him to believe that these pillars were the key to a successful society. Yes, men had free will and deserved to be free, but God and his divine providence has bound them to his will. In his most famous work, *Considerations on France*, Maistre demonstrated this idea when he wrote that "We are all bound to the throne of the Supreme being by a flexible chain which restrains without enslaving us. The most wonderful aspect of the universal scheme of things is the action of free beings under divine

¹⁵ Lebrun, *Throne and Altar*, 84–85.

¹⁶ Lebrun, *Throne and Altar*, 85.

guidance.”¹⁷ In Maistre’s view, the Revolution occurred under the supervision of God, but only because it was the result of the sinful and fallen nature of man. The bloodshed, death, and destruction were a result of “man’s wickedness”¹⁸ and the existence of original sin. The wickedness of man is why the sovereign as it existed as it did in the late Eighteenth century. For Maistre, reason and rationalism had pushed men to the breaking point and was counter what was natural. This new founded rationality was driving the reforms that Maistre thought were deteriorating society. In a piece titled *On God and Sovereignty*, Maistre wrote that “the word reform, by itself and prior to any scrutiny, will always be suspect to wisdom, and the experience of every generation justifies this instinct.”¹⁹ It was this suspicion that Maistre detested. The wisdom and tradition handed down by history and God were not to be manipulated at the will of man, for when that happened destruction and decay was sure to follow.

In 1790, Edmund Burke’s *Reflection on the Revolution in France* was published for audiences throughout Europe. It would become the cornerstone for conservatism and the blueprint for the ideology moving forward. Just like Maistre, Burke’s opinions would be shaped by his life and the time that he lived. Born in

¹⁷ Jack Lively, *The Works of Joseph de Maistre* (The Macmillan Company, 1965), 47.

¹⁸ Lively, *The Works of Joseph de Maistre*, 12.

¹⁹ Lebrun, *Throne and Altar*, 62.

Dublin in 1729, Burke was the son of an Irish attorney and an Irish Catholic mother from a prominent family. Growing up he was exposed to both the Church of England of which he was a member, and the majority Roman Catholic faith of which half of his family belonged. This caused Burke to have a sincere respect for the Roman Catholic Church and other religions that were in the minority.²⁰ He attended Trinity College in Dublin and received a liberal arts education, and then to London to study law just as his father had done. While in school he studied the classic literature, ancient and current philosophical texts, and was exposed to what would become classical liberalism which promoted individual rights, limited government, and freedom. From 1766 until 1794, Burke served an extensive and influential career in the British House of Commons as a member of the Rockingham sect of the liberal Whig Party.²¹ A writer, politician, and philosopher, Burke's expansive career and experiences gave him the tools to develop conservatism during the early days of the French Revolution.

Like Maistre, Burke was concerned with France's attempt to develop an ideal society based solely off the ideals of the enlightenment. He thought man was "incapable of adequately discerning the full meanings and modes of operation of social and

²⁰ Edmund Burke, *Edmund Burke: Selected Writings and Speeches*, ed. Peter Stanlis (Regnery Publishing, 1963), 1.

²¹ Burke, *Edmund Burke: Selected Writings and Speeches*, 18.

political institutions and processes.”²² Man lacked the ability to rationally think out the reform that were being instituted in France at this time. The reason for this, Burke thought, was because the historical tradition and collective wisdom of previous generations superseded any rational thought that group of individuals could develop in one lifetime. In essence, he believed that tradition was superior to human reason, similar to Maistre’s belief. The rights the revolution claimed to support were abstract and potentially unattainable, whereas looking to tradition showed what works and what does not. Prior to the writing of *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke wrote a letter responding to a colleague in France requesting his opinion on the establishment of the National Assembly in 1789 in which he demonstrated his thoughts about the idea of creating new governments and rights out of thin air and abandoning tradition. He writes that “you may have made a revolution, but not a reformation. You may have subverted monarchy, but not recovered freedom,”²³ arguing that while the monarchy’s power has been subverted and power supposedly given to the people, until France instituted ordered liberty based off tradition, the oppression, they experienced under the *Ancien*

²² David Dwan and Christopher J. Insole, *The Cambridge Companion to Edmund Burke*, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 199, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9780511794315>.

²³ Burke, *Edmund Burke: Selected Writings and Speeches*, 510.

Regime will continue, but under a new government. In *Reflections* he expanded his views on this issue when he wrote that “The science of government being therefore so practical in itself and intended for such practical purposes—a matter which requires experience, and even more experience than any person can gain in his whole life.”²⁴ It is their common belief in the supremacy of tradition and collective human wisdom is superior to Enlightenment reason that make Maistre and Burke so similar.

Burke was not solely opposed to change but believed that it needed to have a historical basis for it to occur and that it must be gradual over time. Instituting drastic reform should be the last case scenario for a group, requiring a level of proof so large that he believed that the events in France did not meet it. In *Reflections* he wrote that “is it, then, true that the French government was such as to be incapable or undeserving of reform, so that it was of absolute necessity that the whole fabric should be at once pulled down and the area cleared for the erection of a theoretic, experimental edifice in its place?”²⁵ Similar to Maistre, Burke believed that there was no justifiable reason for the revolution to take place the way it had. In fact both men agreed that the French monarchy had grown in

²⁴ Edmund Burke, “Reflections On The Revolution in France ,” *Reflections On The Revolution in France - McMaster Social Sciences*, accessed November 30, 2022, <https://socialsciences.mcmaster.ca/econ/ugcm/3ll3/burke/revfrance.pdf>, 52.

²⁵ Edmund Burke, “Reflections On The Revolution in France.”

excess and that certain freedoms were being curtailed, but instead of a complete destruction of the current order, a reformation was needed. Both men questioned the Enlightenment rationality and reasoning that helped spur the French Revolution. Men's minds could not build a new society and abandon generations of knowledge without there being unforeseen consequences that could destroy a people.

Burke was highly critical of the revolution's attack on the aristocracy and the Catholic clergy in France. In *Reflections* he writes "Nothing is more certain than that our manners, our civilization, and all the good things which are connected with manners and with civilization have, in this European world of ours, depended for ages upon two principles and were, indeed, the result of both combined: I mean the spirit of a gentleman and the spirit of religion."²⁶ Where the revolutionaries saw these institutions as evil, Burke saw them as a force of unity and good. Throughout his writings, Burke argued that a social order existed for the purpose of keeping society together.²⁷ This social order was natural and tied to the idea that those who owned land had the ability to nurture, grow, and protect culture which was vital for the survival of a society. Inherited wealth and titles also brought stability and continuity to a country that could be rocked with change. Now,

²⁶ Edmund Burke, "Reflections On The Revolution in France ,"66.

²⁷ Dwan and Insole, *The Cambridge Companion to Edmund Burke*, 204.

unlike Maistre who saw the aristocracy in a more religious and solidified view, Burke believed in the idea that families could rise up and eventually join the ranks of the aristocracy.

Burke and Maistre were horrified with the complete and total abandonment of religion in what was one of Europe's most devout nations. For Burke, the Church and religion in general provided a moral compass that along with tradition guided nations. It was his belief that the attack on the clergy was affront to the moral order and that without them France would be lead astray. He also saw the attack on the religion as the revolutions objective in order to bring down the institution of the Church as a whole in France.²⁸ The revolution brought atheism to the state and to the people in Burke's view. As historians analyzing Burke's work argued "it was a religious war – not a war between religions but a war between religion and atheism."²⁹ Religion brought serious social benefits to a society, including social cohesion, morality and stability. The Church and Christianity in general provided a non-governmental pillar that all subjects of the nation or kingdom could look too for guidance. Christianity for Burke was a hallmark of a civilized society and more importantly of civilized Europe.³⁰ The Revolutions temporal beliefs were perhaps more of a threat to

²⁸ Dwan and Insole, *The Cambridge Companion to Edmund Burke*, 204.

²⁹ Dwan and Insole, *The Cambridge Companion to Edmund Burke*, 218.

³⁰ Dwan and Insole, *The Cambridge Companion to Edmund Burke*, 100.

France and Europe as a whole, than the destruction of the social order an government.

Maistre and Burke were contemporaries who were cut from the same philosophical cloth. Their beliefs and principles led them to believe that French Revolution was a threat to the moral and political balance in Europe. There is no doubt that Maistre was influenced by Burke's writings, as historian Richard Lebrun pointed out in his work. After reading *Reflections* was published and read by Maistre, he praised it for reinforcing his anti-French sentiments and conclusions that he would make.³¹ As Lebrun pointed out "the important point is that reading Burke appears to have stimulated Maistre's own thinking on these important issues"³² and while some conclusions were different, overall, the trended in the same direction. The revolution was an attempt to systematically alter the fabric of France and Europe.

Transformations occurred in the way people thought about rights, government, and religion. They were contradictory to the historic way Europeans viewed the world, and it was this change that forced Burke and Maistre to pick up the pen and develop what would become conservatism. These men were not afraid of rights or believed that people should be oppressed, but that the

³¹ Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre's Life, Thought and Influence Selected Studies*, 153.

³² Lebrun, *Maistre Selected Studies*, 158.

revolution's reasoning and hatred for traditional institutions would lead to the destruction of society.

While Burke receives most of the historical and political credit for developing conservative thought, a closer reading of Maistre has shown that he too helped develop the ideology. Maistre was not, as some historians have argued, a precursor to fascism for he believed many of the same ideas that Burke did but justified them by different means. Both men questioned the Enlightenment's rationality, they questioned the revolution's desire to destroy tradition, and both were defenders of the Christian faith. If one judges who should be the father of conservative thought based solely on a historical timeline of who came first, then Burke deserves that title. The overlap in their writing and the development of their thoughts occurred so simultaneously that excluding Maistre only tells part of the story. Political ideologies are influenced and developed by a wide range of thinkers and events, and conservatism is no different.

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