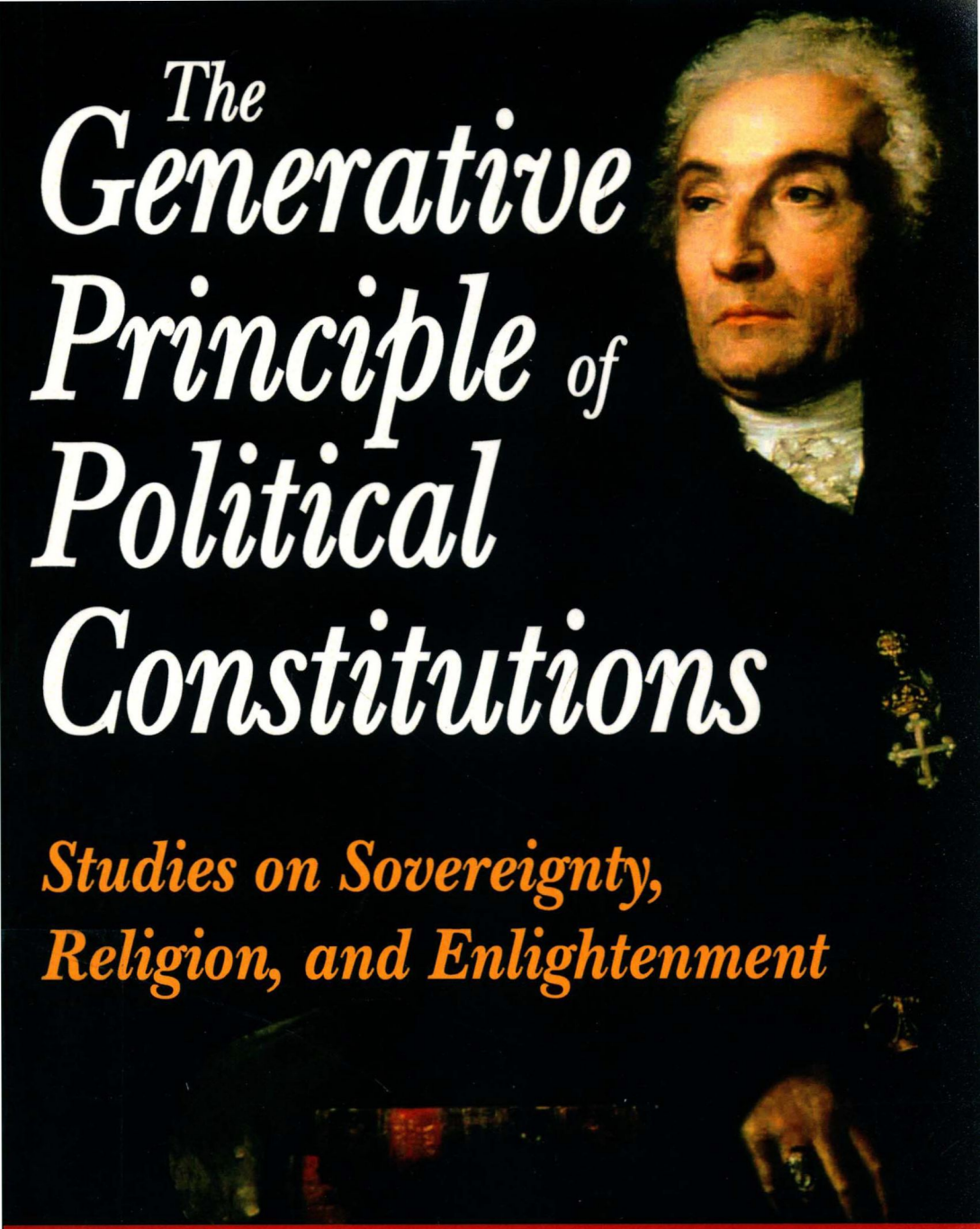
The Generative Principle of Political Constitutions



Studies on Sovereignty, Religion, and Enlightenment

Joseph de Maistre

Jack Lively, editor and translator

With an introduction by the editor

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PREFACE

In this edition, the attempt has been made to present the central arguments of Maistre's most important works. Inevitably this has meant cutting much of interest from them. It has involved leaving out many of the digressions which form a characteristic feature of his style, and pruning drastically his many and lengthy footnotes. I hope that what remains, most of it translated into English for the first time, will allow a wider insight into a much-quoted but little-read thinker.

I should like to thank Professor Sir Isaiah Berlin, Mr. Beynon John, Dr. Hugh Kearney, and Professor John Rees who, at one time or another, have given me most valuable help and advice.

J. L.

University of Sussex
January, 1964

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Introduction

I. LIFE

Joseph de Maistre was born on April 1, 1753, in Savoy. He was the son of François-Xavier de Maistre, a high court judge who had been ennobled by the Sardinian king for his work in legal reform. From school in his home town of Chambéry he went on the faculty of Law in Turin. As soon as he gained his degree, he returned to Chambéry, where he was appointed to a post as a public prosecutor in the Senate of Savoy, a judicial body of which his father was President.

This was in 1774. Until 1789 his life was peaceful, undisturbed by the political convulsions which were to rend his later years or by the intellectual ferment which political strife produced. Nevertheless, there were slight tensions. Brought up by a profoundly pious mother in an equally pious Savoy, he was a deeply committed Catholic. Yet, soon after his return to Chambéry, he joined a Masonic lodge, and was greatly influenced by the mystical notions of Saint-Martin, although Freemasonry had already been condemned by the Pope. The inner conflict was deep enough to reveal itself much later in the argument between the Count and the Senator on mysticism and Martinism in the *Saint Petersburg Dialogues*. The Freemasonry to which Maistre was drawn was mystical rather than "enlightened," conservative rather than reforming and democratic, yet he too was affected by the liberal opinions in the air in the decades before the Revolution. At any rate, he was criticized for an address to the Senate in 1775 in which he had defended freedom of thought, and his first reaction to the Revolution was enthusiastic.

This initial impulse soon subsided, and even before the invasion of Savoy by the new French Republic in 1792, he had taken up fixed positions against revolutionary aspirations and opinions. In November, the month after the French armies entered, he left his country. He returned briefly at the beginning of 1793, but fled again, leaving his children and his wife, whom he was not to see again for twenty years.

He established himself at Lausanne, where he was made the representative of the Sardinian king, and took up an active counter-revolutionary role. More importantly, he began his long career as a political writer. Much of what he wrote when he was in Lausanne was not to be published until 1884 when the complete works appeared, including his *Study on Sovereignty.* But one work, the *Considerations on France,* was published in 1796. This book played a large part in formulating the inchoate reactions of the émigrés to the Revolution. It also laid down lines of thought which Maistre was to pursue later.

In 1798 he returned to Italy and settled in Venice, moving to Piedmont in 1799. This restless and rootless life ended when he was sent to represent the Sardinian Crown at Saint Petersburg in 1802. His period in Russia was to be the most intellectually productive. In the *Saint Petersburg Dialogues, The Pope,* the *Essay on the Generative Principle of Political Constitutions,* and the *Examen de la philosophie de Bacon,* he filled in the picture which had been sketched in Lausanne. He remained in Russia until 1817, watching and encouraging the European struggle against Napoleon. Only then was he returned to the family life of which the Revolution had robbed him. Yet in recompense the Revolution gave him European fame, for the writings of his long years of exile caught the imagination first of the émigrés and then of a Europe disillusioned with the revolutionary message. In the fierce and mordant irony of his books, he embodied all the hatred of the lonely and dispossessed for the authors of their sufferings. If in the end he transcended this hatred, his thought always remained a protest against the revolutionary present. He was strictly a reactionary in the sense that this protest was the reason for his writing, but, like all reactionaries, his protest against the present tended to raise up an image of the past no less radical in its implications than the revolutionary dream of the future.

II. MAISTRE AND HIS INTERPRETERS

Maistre had no doubt that the root causes of the Revolution were intellectual and ideological. The degeneration of its first immense hopes into the bloody Terror was not merely the fortuitous result of a ruthless competition for power or of a war situation. He echoed with no less conviction, but much less enthusiasm, Voltaire's boast that "books did it all." The philosophers of the Enlightenment were the

true architects of the new regimes, and the shadow between the revolutionary idea and the revolutionary reality could be traced directly to a fatal flaw in their thought.

D'Alembert had with pride characterized his own age as "a century of philosophy," a century in which principles of every kind had been subjected to systematic doubt and analysis. In his efforts to define and expose the flaw in Enlightenment thought, Maistre was willing, like most of his contemporaries, to accept the Age of Reason at d'Alembert's valuation, and to attack an inquisitive and skeptical rationalism as both the prime tenet of the Enlightenment and the fatal principle of the Revolution. But the "revolt against reason," of which Maistre was so striking an exemplar, attacked a wide variety of targets. For some, "reason" was the enemy of all authority—but for others it was the enemy of the romantic ideal of the emotionally mature and socially independent individual: it was attacked by the faithful because it undermined all belief—and by the skeptical because it enthroned apocalyptic political faiths: some hated it because it presumed to make a science out of political morality—and others because it ignored and frustrated the only true scientific method, the empirical.

Among critics of revolutionary thinking, these methods of attack were not clearly distinguished, and nowhere less than in Maistre's writings. Sometimes he flays the Enlightenment because its arid reliance on the intellect dried up the deepest springs of human action and understanding; at other times because it lacked the ability to see politics in its real and concrete complexity, resorting to political formulae as a substitute for political wisdom; and at others because its arrogant individualism had destroyed the basis of all social cohesion.

These crosscurrents in Maistre's thought have led to differences in interpretation. Some commentators see him as the expounder of a realistic social science in face of the a priori reasoning of the Enlightenment, others as the champion of authority in Church and state, and others again as an originator of the modern Fascist tradition. All can draw on Maistre's writings, and all express at least a partial truth.

His empirical and pragmatic strain is strong enough to allow some interpreters to see him as the disciple of Montesquieu and the precursor of Comte and the positivist school.[1] Lord Morley painted him as the French Burke, echoing the belief that "what in the result is likely to produce evil is politically false; that which is productive of good

[1] Cf. F. Bayle, *Les idées politiques de Joseph de Maistre* (1945), pp. 149, 154.

politically true."[2] There is considerable evidence for this view of Maistre as the protestant against a priori reasoning. He certainly quoted Burke often and with approval, and Comte leant heavily on his writings. He complained persistently of the *philosophes* that they based their political ideas on psychological or contractual or natural-rights theories which they believed could be discovered independently of any study of society as it existed, and which indeed they used to criticize existing societies. In their emphasis on man's capacity for rational thought and action, they had ignored the fortuitous, uncontrollable element in human development, the restrictions and compulsions imposed by circumstances upon action, the variety of historical, geographical, and national situations, the emotional and instinctive traits of human nature. They had thus created a political science which, precisely because it spurned social analysis in favor of the construction of ideal models, was totally irrelevant to actual life. False theory bred destructive practice. The French Revolution, just such an attempt to realize the Enlightenment's political science, had achieved only the disruption of European society because its architects had no conception of the real nature of men or politics.

In place of this destructive a priori reasoning, Maistre wished to substitute a science of politics firmly rooted in history and experience. Time and again he referred to history as "la politique expérimentale," as the first and indeed the only teacher in politics.[3] His most bitter venom was reserved for the constitution builders spawned by the Revolution. No constitution can be created a priori, he argued, for no one can comprehend or to any great degree affect the multitude of circumstances which fit a nation to a particular constitution. For the same reason, it is impossible to judge governments by any absolute standard. "No one should ask what is the best form of government in general, since none is suitable for every nation. Each nation has its own, as it has its own language and character, and this government is the best for it." And, quoting Rousseau with approval, he added that "there are as many good governments as there are possible combinations in the relative and absolute positions of nations." Institutions should change with history, customs, climate, and political situation, and those are best which best fit these varied and shifting factors.[4] By

[2] Lord Morley, *Critical Miscellanies* (London, 1871), pp. 113–192.

[3] See, for example, *Essay on the Generative Principle*, p. 162. *Study on Sovereignty* p. 114. Unless otherwise stated, the references are to this volume.

[4] *Study on Sovereignty*, pp. 100–101, 126.

the side of this empirical attitude and in his eyes as a complement to it, he insisted that political ideas should be judged according to pragmatic standards. In politics, the terms "truth" and "falsehood" mean little; the only meaningful terms are "beneficial" and "harmful." Institutions should be judged not on their origins but on their constant and permanent effects. What might appear in the abstract to be abuses could be necessary and beneficial to a political system as a whole.[5] Like institutions, ideas and beliefs are true so far as they are useful. This is the only sure test, for, in all questions of morality, certainty is impossible and we are reduced to conjecture; and "if our conjectures are plausible, if we can find an analogy for them, if they rest on universally accepted ideas, above all if they console us and make us better men, what do they lack? If they are not true, they are good; or more accurately, since they are good, are they not true?"[6] The best advice he could give to ordinary men was to abide by the rule "Never deny what is useful, never uphold what can be harmful."

Yet this protest is only part of Maistre's criticisms of the Age of Reason. Other interpreters have seized on his defense of authority as the core of his thought.[7] Certainly, what he found most objectionable in this most objectionable of ages was the excessive individualism lying behind its claims for the omniscience and universality of reason. If, as the *philosophes* thought, reason could discern those simple rules on which moral and political obligation were based, and if every human being was possessed of this attribute of reason, society, like religion, became an artifact of the individual. This belief was reflected in eighteenth century political theory, dominated by the ideas of a social contract, making society and government subservient to the freely given and freely revokable consent of the individual, and of natural rights held by the individual independently of government and society. Everything, it seemed to Maistre, had in consequence become the subject of doubt and discussion, no authority being safe from the challenge of the sovereign individual. It seemed equally clear to him that Europe would remain plunged in chaos and anarchy until the authority of spiritual and secular rulers had been restored and the absolute and unquestioning obedience of subjects in both Church and state

[5] *Essay on the Generative Principle*, p. 168.

[6] *Considerations on France*, pp. 64–65.

[7] Cf. H. J. Laski, *Studies in the Problem of Sovereignty* (New Haven, 1917), pp. 214-220. R. Soltau, *French Political Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1931), pp. 17–18.

had been reestablished. Reason and its offspring, the individualist theories of contract and natural rights, could never form the foundation of social or political unity. Without the leading hand of authority, men soon strayed from the path of truth and security. "The human reason is manifestly incapable of guiding men; for few can reason well, and no one can reason well on every subject."[8] Maistre echoes the classic authoritarian cry—let everyone stick to his own last, and particularly let rulers rule and priests interpret the will of God. If men were blind and lost without guidance, nothing remained of the Enlightenment's picture of the self-sufficient individual deciding rationally the advantages of union and fixing rationally the limits of power. And nothing remained of the notion that men moved of their own volition from a natural into a social state.

The truth was, he asserted, that society was the product, not of men's conscious decision, but of their instinctive makeup. Both history and primitive societies illustrated men's gravitation toward some form of communal life, if only in the family. Since government was in this sense natural, the product of a god-given order, it could not legitimately be denied, revoked, or even disobeyed by the people. There could, that is, be no *right* of resistance to any sovereign—or at least, said Maistre, bowing to papal supremacy, no right except when sanctioned by a power outside the people themselves, the Papacy. In sum, sovereignty was not the product of the deliberation or the will of the people; it was a divinely bestowed authority fitted not to man's wishes but to his needs.[9]

Both of these interpretations express a side of Maistre's thought, but both are insufficient as they stand. No one who has read the frightening benedictions Maistre bestows on wars, executions, bloodletting, mass prejudices, and myths can doubt that he was something more (or less) than the realist in a world of unpractical utopians or the simple defender of traditional authority. For, starting from a conventional defense of faith against reason, he ends with a thorough and radical defense of irrationalism. In his eyes, the only cure for present ills was the disavowal of rationalism and the return to the Catholic fold. This stark opposition of faith and reason was not only an argument against the deistic idea that men were rationally led to suppose the existence of God as the Prime Mover of an ordered natural world,

[8] *Saint Petersburg Dialogues*, p. 207.
[9] *Study of Sovereignty*, pp. 95–97.

but also, in spite of his own claim to be a faithful disciple of Aquinas, a rejection of the Thomist view that the conclusions of reason were in harmony with revelation and Church dogma. For Aquinas, *"gratia naturam non tollit, sed perfecit"*; but Maistre saw reason as the deadliest enemy of faith, not as its buttress and support, and slipped very easily into the position of defending the irrational elements of man's nature as the sole means of understanding God's purposes. In this, he was not arguing just that the *philosophes* had ignored those emotions vital to an understanding of human motivation; rather he was insisting that full play should be given to instinctive and irrational impulses as the only path by which the moral truths holding society together could be reached. By direct route, this led him to the demand for the denial of those powers of free inquiry which bred moral error. This irrationalist strain plays a large part in his writings, especially in the *Saint Petersburg Dialogues.* Here the spilling of blood emerges as a sacred rite, a means of expiation for men's wickedness; war is glorified as the most terrible and thus most noble embodiment of this holy bloodshed; the executioner is elevated to the rank of high priest of society, the most exact and powerful symbol of its unity. Authority becomes a mystery as holy as any of the religious mysteries and equally beyond both explanation and criticism. The free exercise of reason, as the natural parent of subversion, should be extirpated. The individual should not trust those myths which "in all nations, even in modern nations, clothe many truths." He should accept the unreasoned prejudices handed down to him, and not try to shape traditional morality on the anvil of his personal reason. He should prostrate himself before the religion of the state, sinking his personality in communal life.[10]

There is sufficient here to justify another interpretation of Maistre as one of the first in the modern Fascist tradition.[11] But again this emphasizes one of his many modes of attack upon Enlightenment thought. In truth, he was willing to take up any weapon in his fight with the *philosophes.* Sometimes he attacks the Enlightenment (with which he bracketed the Reformation) for subverting the faith and prejudices which were the only means of perceiving religious and moral truths; at other times, because it had checked the growth of an accurate and fruitful political science; at others, because it had destroyed the bases of social unity. At first sight, these complaints

[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 108–111.

[11] Cf., for example, Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (London, 1953), p. 49.