Joseph de Maistre
and the legacy of Enlightenment

Edited by
CAROLINA ARMENTEROS
and
RICHARD A. LEBRUN

VOLTAIRE FOUNDATION
OXFORD
2011
# Contents

Dedication  v
Acknowledgements  ix

CAROLINA ARMENTEROS and RICHARD A. LEBRUN, Introduction  1

## I. Polemics of the Counter-Enlightenment  17

DARRIN M. MCMAHON, The genius of Maistre  19

JOSEPH EATON, ‘This babe-in-arms’: Joseph de Maistre’s critique of America  31

JEAN-YVES PRANCHÈRE, The negative of the Enlightenment, the positive of order and the impossible positivity of history  45

## II. Makers and heirs of the Enlightenment  65

PHILIPPE BARTHELET, The Cambridge Platonists mirrored by Joseph de Maistre  67

CAROLINA ARMENTEROS, Maistre’s Rousseaus  79

YANNIS CONSTANTINIDÈS, Two great enemies of the Enlightenment: Joseph de Maistre and Schopenhauer  105

## III. Maistrian afterlives of the theological Enlightenment  123

DOUGLAS HEDLEY, Enigmatic images of an invisible world: sacrifice, suffering and theodicy in Joseph de Maistre  125

ÉMILE PERREAU-SAUSSINE, Why Maistre became Ultramontane  147

AIMEE E. BARBEAU, The Savoyard philosopher: deist or Neoplatonist?  161

ÉLCIO VERCÓSA FILHO, The pedagogical nature of Maistre’s thought  191

CAROLINA ARMENTEROS, Conclusion  221

Summaries  231
Bibliography  235
Index  247
Acknowledgements

The articles contained in this volume, with the exception of Carolina Armenteros’ piece on ‘Maistre’s Rousseaus’, were first presented at Reappraisals / Reconsidérations, the Fifth International Colloquium on Joseph de Maistre, held at Jesus College, Cambridge, on 4 and 5 December 2008. We owe our warmest thanks to Pierre Glaudes and Michael Kohlhauer for the invaluable advice they offered at the beginning of our editorial venture.

We would like to express our deepest appreciation to all the contributors of this volume, who responded promptly and graciously to our many questions and suggestions for revisions to their work. We are also grateful to the anonymous reviewer of SVEC for very helpful suggestions for improving our manuscript.

Lastly, this volume is dedicated to the memory of one of our authors, Emile Perreau-Saussine, who died suddenly in February 2010. His chapter in this book is one of the last pieces of scholarship that he completed before his untimely death at the age of 37.
‘This babe-in-arms’: Joseph de Maistre’s critique of America

JOSEPH EATON

Though Maistre’s comments on the New World are scattered throughout his works, his views on America are noteworthy for the insights they provide into his broader political philosophy and as a portent of later European anti-Americanism. Maistre’s critique of the fledgeling American republic serves as a lens to understand the use of the New World in European polemics. Denial of America’s viability was a necessary component of Maistre’s critique of the French Revolution and republicanism.

Maistre’s critique of America combined severe Christian pessimism,1 echoes of the Enlightenment critique of America, and revulsion of the American experiment with republicanism. One can divide Maistre’s commentary on America into two parts: remarks on indigenous peoples throughout the Americas, and observations on the fledgeling North American republic.2 According to Maistre, both America’s natives and the United States’ experiment in representative government were doomed – the Indians from some unknown yet terrible crime committed by an ancient chieftain, the European Americans through their audacious attempts at building some components of their national government from scratch.

America’s natives

Maistre’s portrait of America’s natives refocused the eighteenth-century quarrel on the New World around his own perceptions regarding the causes for the regression of European civilisation. Enlightenment naturalists had concluded from Europe’s mostly disastrous encounter with

1. For an account of Maistre’s Christian thought, including its more Pelagian aspects, see Douglas Hedley’s article in this volume, ‘Enigmatic images of an invisible world: sacrifice, suffering and theodicy in Joseph de Maistre’.
2. Having no first-hand experience in America did not disqualify Maistre from speaking on the subject but instead gave him a claim to objectivity. As he explained of his second-hand expertise of France, ‘Parfaitement étranger à la France, que je n’ai jamais vue, et ne pouvant rien attendre de son Roi, que je ne connaîtrai jamais, si j’avance des erreurs, les Français peuvent au moins les lire sans colère, comme des erreurs entièrement désintéressées’. Maistre, Considérations sur la France in Glaudes (ed.), Maistre Oeuvres, p.253.
the Americas that the New World was a mistake; the degeneracy of animals and humans, a reduction in the size and fertility of both and corresponding abundance of poisonous plant and animal life, were indicators of a harsh climate. The French naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, the Comte de Buffon (1707-1788), explained that, in America, ‘La Nature vivante y est [...] beaucoup moins agissante, beaucoup moins variée, et nous pouvons même dire beaucoup moins forte. [...] Tous les animaux qui ont été transportés d’Europe en Amérique, comme les chevaux, les ânes, les bœufs, les brebis, les chèvres, les cochons, les chiens, etc. tous ces animaux, dis-je, y sont devenus plus petits’.3

According to Maistre’s schema, American degeneracy was due to causes other than climate. He instead posited a more sinister agent for the New World’s inferiority; some long forgotten chieftain had brought horrific consequences upon the indigenous Americans by some terrible sin.4 Maistre replaced Buffon’s tableau expressing the relative slightness of animals with a damning moral critique of New World savagery. Rather than being primitive, the Indians were ancient, separated from the mainstream civilisation by a second dose of Original Sin. The vagabond hordes of the Americas were a brutalised people. America was not the Eden thought by European republicans and radicals but rather a Bosch-like landscape of sin and suffering. America’s vast reaches ‘recèlent encore une foule de hordes sauvages si étranges au grand bienfait [de la révélation], qu’on serait porté à croire qu’elles en sont exclues par la nature en vertu de quelque anathème primitif et inexplicable’.5 Of Rousseau’s natural man, Maistre wrote, ‘Tout homme moral et sensible est révolté par l’abrutissement et par la cruauté de ces sauvages d’Amérique dont Rousseau ose nous vanter l’existence heureuse’.6

Maistre’s shift from climatic causes to moral causes is consistent with his broader view of historical causation, particularly with regard to Europe’s moral catastrophes. Moral degeneration destroyed a race in the Americas, a reminder of the terrible precipitants of the Enlightenment and French Revolution. Maistre blamed America’s decline on a single, unknown ruler, not surprising considering his emphasis on biography and the dominance of great men. The eighteenth century had asked if America was a ‘mistake’; to Maistre, America was worse than

---

4. Though Maistre did cite Buffon as an authority, Maistre’s quotation of eighteenth-century naturalists was selective. Maistre, for example, remarked that ‘Buffon a fort bien prouvé qu’une grande partie des animaux est destinée à mourir de mort violente. Il aurait pu, suivant les apparences, étendre sa démonstration à l’homme; mais on peut s’en rapporter aux faits’. *Considerations sur la France*, p.216.
a mistake. The people of an entire continent had degenerated into an inferior race.

One should not take Maistre’s accusations against the indigenous peoples of America literally but instead consider his broader purposes. Maistre’s racism was polemical, not systematic. The Americas were a choice battleground for European controversies, the naturalists and Rousseauian believers in the idea of the noble savage being the prime targets of Maistre’s comments. The idea that a horrific sin, rather than climate, was the cause of American degeneracy undermined the scientific pride of the natural scientists and the political fantasies of the primitivists. In attacking America’s natives, Maistre cast doubt on notions of the goodness of man and reminded that sin could contaminate an entire continent. He wrote about America while thinking about Europe.

A revisionist reading of Maistre allows for a more complex view of his opinions of America’s natives. In her recent work, The More moderate side of Joseph de Maistre (2005), Cara Camcastle refers to Maistre’s defense of American Indian culture in connection with Western impatience with Russia’s slow embrace of science. Camcastle explains that Maistre believed that both America’s natives and the Russians should enjoy a separate path from that of Western Europe. In Russia’s case, rapid adoption of modern science might have its disadvantages; reference to the distinctiveness of American cultures helped to make that point. Camcastle sees Maistre’s comments on Russia and indigenous Americans as evidence of a ‘pluralistic approach to politics’. Maistre was capable of adding examples from non-Western civilisations to his repertoire in order to make valuable points regarding the shortcomings of contemporary Europe, though his purpose most often had less to do with showing the relativity of civilisations than the arrogance of his intellectual opponents.

America’s natives were particularly violent, according to Maistre, but perhaps that was not such a bad thing in his violence-strewn world. The savages had no revealed religion but were no more violent than the French revolutionaries who had brazenly forsaken Christianity. The French had shown ‘la barbarie savante, l’atrocité systématique, la corruption calculée, et surtout l’irréligion’. Indians, in their relative

---

9. Camcastle, The More moderate side, p.126. I see Maistre’s occasional tolerance of America’s natives, which, according to Camcastle includes an endorsement of cannibalism, as ammunition for debates about Europe.
innocence, could hardly be as guilty as the French who had deserted revealed religion. Their situation left America’s natives less culpable for their violent tendencies. Maistre paralleled the bloodbath of the French Revolution with the violence of American Indians:

Maistre measured the savagery of America’s natives relative to the declension of European civilisation. Such comparisons allowed Maistre to emphasise the brutality of the French Revolution. Whether the subject was the false opinions of Rousseau, the relativity of Russian civilisation or the unique guilt of French radicalism, Maistre’s comments about American natives were really an extension of his opinions on post-1789 Europe. Maistre’s focus was Europe’s inhumanity, not America.

Maistre only saw one vehicle to civilise/humanise a savage people – the Church: ‘Jamais les nations n’ont été civilisées que par la religion. Aucun autre instrument connu n’a de prise sur l’homme sauvage’. Of secular efforts to change America, Maistre wrote, ‘Depuis trois siècles nous sommes là avec nos lois, nos arts, nos sciences, notre civilisation, notre commerce et notre luxe: qu’avons-nous gagné sur l’état sauvage? Rien. Nous détruisons ces malheureux avec le fer et l’eau-de-vie’. The philosophe admirers of the American savages had failed Europeans and Indians alike: ‘Ils ont composé de beaux livres pour prouver que le sauvage était l’homme naturel, et que nous ne pouvions souhaiter rien de plus heureux.

que de lui ressembler’.

By a twist of interpretation, Maistre had connected New World violence with the carnage in Europe and made the Church the solitary agent for the salvation of the New World.

The *philosophes* had lamented the consequences of America’s discovery – imperialistic wars, syphilis, and the vast expansion of slavery. Maistre shifted the debate over the New World, decrying the use of America in philosophical debates to prove the inherent goodness of man while making the American Revolution a catalyst for Europe’s disasters. Recent history was a better guide to the real nature of humankind than were European fantasies about America’s natives, or even North America’s republicans.

The dangerous new republic

While America’s natives embodied an old, degenerate civilisation, North America’s republicans were representatives of a nation that might fail to survive to full maturity. Maistre linked the American and French revolutions, making the former a cause for the European cataclysm. The thirteen British North American colonies shared some of the blame for the French Revolution: ‘Après quinze ans de repos, la révolution d’Amérique entraîna de nouveau la France dans une guerre dont toute la sagesse humaine ne pouvait prévoir les conséquences. On signe la paix en 1782; sept ans après, la révolution commence; elle dure encore; et peut-être que dans ce moment elle a coûté trois millions d’hommes à la France’.

Maistre brought up the subject of America within a polemic regarding Europe’s political situation in the *Considérations sur la France*. He asked, ‘La république française peut-elle durer?’ His answer was a resounding ‘NON!’ Maistre gave a memorable rejoinder to those who thought otherwise: ‘Ainsi, il n’y a rien de nouveau, et la grande république est impossible, parce qu’il n’y a jamais eu de grande république’. Maistre dismissed the notion of representative government entirely: ‘Cette représentation est une chose qu’on n’a jamais vue, et qui ne réussira jamais’.

Having linked the Atlantic revolutions, Maistre needed to answer

---


those in Europe who explained the United States to be a feasible model for republican government. In a short paragraph, he rejected America as an example: ‘On nous cite l’Amérique: je ne connais rien de si impatientant que les louanges décernées à cet enfant au maillot: laissez-le grandir’. Though Maistre did not elaborate, he showed an impatience for positive views of the United States.

A selective reading of some of Maistre’s comments on the United States allows the infant New Republic some chance for survival. Like many French observers of the new republic, Maistre found English traits in America. In doing so, he gave American political practice a firmer grounding. Select passages within the *Considérations sur la France* have Burkean qualities. Maistre argues that, in proclaiming independence, Americans were defending their historic rights as Englishmen. In a chapter entitled ‘La république française peut-elle durer?’, Maistre alluded to the French revolutionaries’ attempt at ‘la représentation perfectionnée’.

To Maistre, the French experiment at republicanism and popular sovereignty was perfectly radical (and unhistorical). In dismissing the United States as a viable example of a republic with representative government, Maistre de-radicalises America; America’s practice of ancient political habits did not provide an example to prove the viability of ‘ce système chimérique de délibération et de construction politique par des raisonnements antérieurs’. America was rather English, and ordinary.

This impulse to see America as an extension of England coexists with other comments by Maistre that indicated a strong republican foundation in the United States. Maistre had made a similar argument a few years earlier (*Fragments sur la France*, 1794) where he argued that American revolutionaries had not been innovators. Richard Lebrun has pointed to an even more positive view of America as a refuge for freedom in a September 1775 work, the *Eloge de Victor-Amédée III*: ‘La liberté, insultée en Europe, a pris son vol vers un autre hémisphère; elle plane sur les glaces du Canada, elle arme le paisible Pensylvanien; et du milieu de Philadelphie elle crie aux Anglais: pourquoi m’avez-vous outragée, vous qui vous vantez de n’être grands que par moi?’ As Charles Lombard explained of Maistre’s views, ‘Basic institutions in America remained intact and only the executive was changed. While the federal system had yet to be fully evaluated Maistre had to credit

the Americans with far more restraint than their counterparts in France’.19

In giving American republican political practice a historical and less abstract foundation, Maistre portrays the fledgeling republic as less monarchical and more democratic in spirit than the Mother Country. Though Maistre noted that the time had not yet come to cite the United States as an example, he would provide a few illustrations of America’s unique republican nature:

1. L’Amérique anglaise avait un Roi, mais ne le voyait pas: la splendeur de la monarchie lui était étrangère, et le souverain était pour elle comme une espèce de puissance surnaturelle, qui ne tombe pas sous les sens.
2. Elle possédait l’élément démocratique qui existe dans la constitution de la métropole.
3. Elle possédait de plus ceux qui furent portés chez elle par une foule de ses premiers colons nés au milieu des troubles religieux et politiques, et presque tous esprits républicains.
4. Avec ces éléments, et sur le plan des trois pouvoirs qu’ils tenaient de leurs ancêtres, les Américains ont bâti, et n’ont pas fait table rase, comme les Français.20

America, though republican, was conservative in its political practices. The United States was less experimental, less radical than the French attempt at republicanism. Whether Maistre portrayed America as English or republican, he consistently argued that the United States was a unique case with its own complexities, inapplicable as a model for France.

Maistre’s comments foreshadowed the second chapter of Alexis de Tocqueville’s De la Démocratie en Amérique (1835). Like Maistre, Tocqueville looked to early colonial history to find the character of the United States:

Examinez l’enfant jusque dans les bras de sa mère; voyez le monde extérieur se refléter pour la première fois sur le miroir encore obscur de son intelligence; contemplez les premiers exemples qui frappent ses regards; écoutez les premières paroles qui éveillent chez lui les puissances endormies de la pensée; assistez enfin aux premières luttes qu’il a à soutenir; et alors seulement vous comprendrez d’où viennent les préjugés, les habitudes et les passions qui vont dominer sa vie. L’homme est pour ainsi dire tout entier dans les langes de son berceau.21

Again, one sees the infant analogy. By Tocqueville’s account, the American baby had grown into an adolescent harbinger of the Atlantic democratic revolution.

Both Maistre and Tocqueville believed that the mainstream of America’s political heritage represented only a slice of that of Britain. In granting America a special republican bent, what Tocqueville described as propitious circumstances, Maistre distanced the United States further from French republicanism. To Tocqueville, America’s democratic nature was providential, a harbinger for Europe; for Maistre, this democratic tendency made the United States an anomaly amongst nations. If America succeeded, it would be due to its own causes and was no real test of the durability of republicanism.

Having offered praise for America’s moderation, Maistre then damned the new United States Constitution: ‘Tout ce qu’il y a de véritablement nouveau dans leur constitution, tout ce qui résulte de la délibération commune, est la chose du monde la plus fragile; on ne saurait réunir plus de symptômes de faiblesse et de caducité’.22 The last three decades of the eighteenth century was an era of constitution drafting, with the constitutions of even some of the American states having achieved some notoriety in Europe. Maistre was undoubtedly responding to this constitutional Americophilia, particularly the blatant political materialism of Thomas Paine. Paine bragged about the utility of a written constitution as a guide for Pennsylvanian legislators: ‘Every member of the government had a copy; and nothing was more common, when any debate arose on the principle of a bill, or on the extent of any species of authority, than for the members to take the printed constitution out of their pocket, and read the chapter with which such matter in debate was connected’.23 To Maistre, constitution drafting was no substitute for the wisdom of ages. He was intrigued by the unwritten nature of the English constitution:

Si l’on s’avisait de faire une loi en Angleterre pour donner une existence constitutionnelle au Conseil privé, et pour régler ensuite et circonscrire rigoureusement ses privilèges et ses attributions, avec les précautions nécessaires pour limiter son influence et l’empêcher d’en abuser, on renverserait l’Etat. La véritable constitution anglaise est cet esprit public admirable, unique, infaillible, au-dessus de tout éloge, qui mène tout, qui conserve tout, qui sauve tout. – Ce qui est écrit n’est rien.24

America’s recent Constitution and Bill of Rights, written and less mysterious, would not provide a similar foundation. The eighteenth century

---

had gone too far in making America an example both in its savage and republican forms. Radicals were wrong to use a ‘babe-in-arms’ to rally against the established order of things.

Plans for a new federal capital on the Potomac River did not impress Maistre: ‘Essentiellement il n’y a rien là qui passe les forces du pouvoir humain; on peut bien bâtir une ville: néanmoins il y a trop de délibération, trop d’humanité dans cette affaire; et l’on pourrait gager mille contre un que la ville ne se bâtira pas, ou qu’elle ne s’appellera pas Washington, ou que le congrès n’y résidera pas’. The proposed capital was a scheme, as was the entire nation. Although at first glance Maistre’s prediction seems ridiculous, there was truth to his calculation. The city failed to thrive in any meaningful sense or to rid itself of its nickname – ‘city of magnificent distances’ – for many decades. The lack of an American metropolis bothered foreign travellers, and many Americans, for at least another generation.

Maistre failed to comment specifically on any important people of late eighteenth-century America. Franklin, Washington, Adams, Jefferson and the other American Founders – Maistre does not mention any of them by name. This omission of Washington seems especially significant considering Maistre’s belief in the importance of eminent politicians in building durable government, usually by fiat through the reconciliation of a nation’s laws to the reality of preordained societal nature. The United States had no lawgiver or creative genius to give the nation a durable government, no founding Father. The North American republic, like the indigenous tribes of America, was feeble. The United States might not pass the test of time.

Maistre decried America’s fragility: ‘Ainsi les Etats-Unis d’Amérique ne seraient pas un Etat sans le Congrès qui les unit. Faites disparaître cette

26. Americans did respond to these criticisms of the District of Columbia, the most prominent rejoinder probably being David Bailie Warden’s A Chorographical and statistical description of the District of Columbia, originally published in Paris in 1816.
28. See Darrin McMahon’s article ‘The genius of Maistre’ in this volume.
29. Maistre’s estimation of the uncertainty and fragility of the American experiment is reminiscent of the comments of my colleagues in Taiwan who point to the brevity of American history, a subject too short for study, and the thinness of American culture generally.
assemblée avec son président, l’unité disparaîtra en même temps, et vous n’aurez plus que treize états indépendants, en dépit de la langue et des lois communes’.30 Though the United States had in fact grown to nineteen states, Maistre’s point was clear: America had no organic unity. Crévecœur’s image of a pluralistic, amalgamated people – ‘melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world’ – becomes an incoherent, miscegenational nightmare.31

Maistre’s comments on the lack of American unity remind of his diatribes against Protestants who, he laments, have ‘malheureusement divisé l’Europe’ where half of a continent had lost its religion.32 Though Maistre does not seem to have commented specifically on the religious situation in America, one might compare his condemnation of the United States’ lack of organic unity with that of later far-right French Catholic critics of America.33

Maistre was dismissive of the chances for American republicanism but did not paint the worst-case, doomsday scenarios as he had with the French Republic. It was not obvious where the Americans stood in what Maistre depicted as the fight to the death between Christianity and philosophisme.34 Though Maistre linked the Atlantic revolutions, he did not explicitly say that the connection was ideological. He did not deify America nor completely vilify her either.

Maistre’s comments on America pale in comparison with the harsh terms he used to describe the French Republic: ‘Dans quelle page de l’histoire trouve-t-on une aussi grande quantité de vices agissant à la fois sur le même théâtre? Quel assemblage épouvantable de bassesse et de cruauté! Quelle profonde immoralité! Quel oubli de toute pudeur!’34 Maistre does not accuse Americans of being bloodthirsty Jacobins but just reckless in their fetish for putting their ideas to paper. Questions remained: would the American Revolution have a catastrophic ending? Would the New World become a new altar for the sacrifice of humanity? America’s natives suffered because of the sins of an ancient father: would the political innovation of the Founding Fathers doom the United States to a similar fate of eternal misery?

Unlike most Francophone commentators, Maistre did not react to a specific American behavior, for example Jay’s Treaty with Britain, which seemed to betray the 1778 Alliance with France. Maistre’s criticisms of

the New World’s inhabitants were essentialist, damning America’s Indians just because they were Indians and descendant of an immoral chief, and critical of America’s republicans just because they chose republicanism. Neither would be able to reform. Most importantly, both the New World’s natives and republicans had to be wrong in order for Maistre’s analysis of recent European history to be right.

In comparison with other Francophone writers, Maistre was by no means alone in depicting the United States in an unfavorable light. Directory era accounts of America were full of ‘disappointments and doubts’ regarding the New Republic, a ‘very French wave of unfavourable reports’ that were, as an important French critic has noted, important predecessors to Jacksonian-era British accounts. However, there was a qualitative difference in Maistre’s denigration of the United States and British criticism.

The most damning British critics were not so denigrating in their assessment of the United States. Even extreme Tory observers such as Thomas Hamilton (Men and manners in America (1833)), who saw both class warfare and democratic mediocrity as threats to America’s future, were not so damning. According to Tory critics, Americans were country bumpkins who, though fooled by faulty ideas of politics and lacking manners and culture, were still capable of building a great country. To Maistre, America’s republicans had set themselves largely outside the mainstream of European civilisation.

If Maistre had not been so quick to doubt America’s ability to exist as a republic, he, like most foreign commentators, might have elaborated on American lack of progress in the arts. In the January 1820 issue of the Edinburgh review, Sydney Smith asked: ‘Who reads an American book?’ An honest answer from a Scottish Whig perspective would have been ‘no one [...] for now’. It would be decades, perhaps centuries, before Americans could give their efforts to literature and the arts but America would advance along recognisable lines of progress. Maistre made no allowance for progress. A later English emigrant to the American West (Illinois) praised the absence of castles in the United States:

Here are few public buildings worthy of notice. No kings going to open Parliament with gilded coaches and cream-coloured horses. [...] No old castles which beautify the rural scenes of the country. [...] No cathedrals or old Churches to ornament the cities as well as the counties of England. [...] America has none of these costly ornaments or beautiful monuments of

35. Roger, American enemy, p.37.
oppression. I thank God she has not; and hope she may be exempt from them.37

It is probable that Maistre doubted whether Americans could create beautiful castles had they wanted to. Whereas other critics believed that good things would come with material progress, Maistre’s America might never mature from its infancy. America’s youth becomes a negative. Rather than being void of societal and political ills as America’s defenders in Europe claimed, young America was uninteresting and probably doomed.

Though it seems unlikely that Maistre influenced his American contemporaries, one might contrast Maistre with American conservative thinkers of his era.38 Maistre’s criticisms of the durability of the United States resembled contemporary conservative American opinion. Neither the universalism of the Declaration of Independence nor the deliberative mechanisms of the Constitution have a place in Maistre’s schema. In the Federalist papers (no.11), American conservative leader Alexander Hamilton addressed the quarrel over American nature: ‘Men admired as profound philosophers have, in direct terms, attributed to her inhabitants a physical superiority, and have gravely asserted that all animals, and with them the human species, degenerate in America – that even dogs cease to bark after having breathed awhile in our atmosphere’.39 Little could Hamilton have anticipated Maistre’s fierce moral criticisms of the New World and harsh dismissal of the Constitution.

Some aspects of Maistre’s commentary would have appealed to American conservatives. If few Americans doubted the desirability of written constitutions, some of them had misgivings concerning the wisdom of creating a new capital from scratch and many more questioned whether the city would ever match Philadelphia, the premier American city. Orestes Brownson, a Catholic convert, led the American discovery of Maistre in the 1840s. The very impossibility of an American republic had been useful to Maistre in his polemics against the philosophes; by the mid-nineteenth century, the United States was self-assured enough for Brownson to cite Maistre’s writings as a remedy to rampant individualism.40

38. An ordinary search of the extensive databases of ‘Early American imprints’ (Readex) fails to turn up American references to Maistre during his lifetime.
39. Federalist no.11, ‘The utility of the Union in respect to commercial relations and a navy’.
Conclusion

Despite his extremely negative observations on America, Maistre was less concerned with constructing a coherent view of the New World than with combating the forces of revolution in the Old World. America was useful in contemporary polemics over the recent European past and future. Maistre’s comments regarding indigenous Americans lacked specificity; his comments on the United States were out of date. For his information on the Americas, Maistre depended upon William Robertson’s History of the discovery and settlement of America, a work that first appeared in 1777. Though Maistre was a vigorous, urbane reader, he did not bother to find the preeminent contemporary sources of information on the New World. Maistre’s grand approach to America suited the continuing great debate over the New World in European intellectual life.

Remarks on the impossibility of the proposed new capital and the appalling depiction of indigenous Americans demonstrate the colour and memorable nature of Maistre’s writing but should not be isolated outside the substantive themes of his *œuvre*. The hellish landscapes of post-Reformation, post-French Revolution Europe were Maistre’s main purview; the New World was only a useful topic in these larger battles. The supposed degeneracy of the original inhabitants of the Americas was a valuable weapon to attack Enlightenment fantasising about the state of nature; the young United States provided a convenient target for disabusing notions of popular sovereignty and republicanism. Cursing America was a means to challenge the republicans, the primitivists and the natural scientists. The Church represented the only civilising force in the New World. Maistre’s comments are really about Europe, both in combating the legacy of the French Revolution and increasing the chances for a future rejuvenation of traditional European monarchy.

Maistre’s United States was malleable, sometimes moderate and English and sometimes innovative and self-destructive. Though Maistre found many examples in America, some of which appear contradictory, all of his illustrations were consistent with his larger worldview. Lessons pulled from the American example were helpful in polemics about European politics and science. It was Europe, not a ‘babe-in-arms’, which sustained Maistre’s interest.

41. Maistre’s employment of the New World to illustrate the follies of the Old had a long tradition. As historians of the quarrel over America remarked, ‘With each passing year it became increasingly clear that those who took sides on the Problem of America were really using America as a kind of stalking horse for their own battles, campaigns, and crusades’. Commager and Giordanetti, *Was America a mistake?*, p.23.

42. Likewise, Tocqueville acknowledged after his visit to Jacksonian America that America was only the object of *Democracy in America*. His broader subject was the future of democratic government on both sides of the Atlantic.