

REVOLT, GOD, MONARCHY, AND CHANGE: THE INTERNATIONAL CONSERVATIVE REACTION TO THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

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Abstract

This paper will explore the international conservative reaction to the ideologies and events of the French Revolution. This reaction centered in Great Britain on the conservatism of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution*, Joseph Maistre's *Considerations on France*, and Benjamin Constant's *The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation and their Relations to European Civilization*. Each is a key addition to the history of the conservative reaction to the French Revolution and despite their differing opinions; they all fall within the political historiography as discussed by Keith Baker, Alfred Cobban, and Vivian Gruder.

Edmund Burke, an English statesmen and anti-revolutionary, embodied the conservative ideals of his time. His views of the French Revolution were formed by his support for the divine constitutional monarchy of England, his sentiments against political and social change, and his dislike of the revolution and the post-revolutionary Republic. Burke's arguments were largely formed in an attempt to keep Revolution from England and to encourage belief in the greatness of monarchy.

Joseph Maistre, born in French-speaking Savoy, was a combination of Enlightenment views, religious fervor and anti-revolutionary sentiment. He welcomed the work of Burke and wrote his own conservative musings in 1797, which attempted to return those who had lost their religious beliefs to the Church. He does this largely through the censure of those leading the revolution, a discussion of the evilness of Enlightenment philosophy, and a description of the post-revolutionary government's faults. Maistre's extreme religiousness adds a definitive layer to his political dialogue.

Henri Benjamin Constant de Rebecque was born in Switzerland and traveled extensively throughout Europe, ultimately moving to Paris in 1795 and becoming a French politician. Constant arrives from a later perspective than either Burke or Maistre and his main underlying theme is of the illegality of Napoleons rule. This is exhibited through his discussion on the uselessness of war and conquest, the illegality of usurpation, the impossibility for France to have a republic and the need for France to form a constitutional monarchy.

These three conservative reactions to the French Revolution are compared with the views of Maximilien Robespierre as illustrated through his *Report on the Principles of Political Morality*. Ultimately the contribution of these three individuals to the political dialogue and conservatism of their time is established, while the further effect on the historical political evaluations of the French Revolution are confirmed.

This paper will explore the international conservative reaction to the events and ideologies of the French Revolution as they are typified through the important works of Edmund Burke, Joseph Maistre and Benjamin Constant. Further, it will evaluate the manner in which these works contribute to the historical traditions of the political elements of the French Revolution and the resulting conservative ideologies.¹

¹ Thank you to Junko Takeda, Agatha Lutoborski, Ross Kemp and Michael Stuchlak for all your valuable assistance.

The first individual whose contribution to conservatism I will concentrate on is that of Edmund Burke. Edmund Burke was born in Ireland in 1729 and moved to London in 1750 where he took up writing, served as a private secretary, and eventually became a member of the House of Commons. Throughout his career Burke displayed strong support for the established order and was outraged at the expression of sympathy in England for the early stages of the French Revolution. To this effect he wrote his “Reflections on the French Revolution,” which was published in 1790 and was a combination of anti-revolutionary sentiments and conservative idealism. His emphasis on the superiority of a constitutional monarchy, change only through gradual reform, and the horror he felt at the atrocities of the French Revolution were the basis for a conservatism that lived on past his death. Burke died in Britain on 1797 and served as a conservative base for others writing on the political tradition of the French Revolution. He has been described as, “the greatest political thinker who has ever devoted himself to the practice of English politics,”² and serves as the instigator of a conservative tradition that is still built on today.

The second form of conservatism I will analyze will be based on the works of Joseph Maistre, especially his “Considerations on France,” which was published in 1796. Maistre was born in 1753 in Savoy and was a deeply committed Catholic. At the institution of the French Republic in 1792 Maistre moved to Lausanne and became the representative of the Sardinian King. He later lived in Italy and Russia, all the while writing political and religious essays. Though initially less virulently anti-revolutionary than Burke, Maistre became increasingly conservative and reactionary, only returning to France in 1817. Maistre’s religious zealotry, support for the Old Regime, and dislike of Enlightenment philosophy allowed for a slightly different element of conservatism. Over his time in exile Maistre’s writings became famous throughout Europe and gathered many anti-revolutionary followers. He died in 1821 and left a legacy of conservatism—Burke had served as a basis for his own work—which contributed to future writers. Maistre has been described as, “one of the first, the most influential and the most original of reactionary thinkers, he illustrates also the closeness of the right and left political extremes in modern political thinking.”³ Maistre contributed his own element of conservatism and is important in the political history of conservatism and of the French Revolution.

Finally I will evaluate the works of Benjamin Henri Constant de Rebecque, who was born in 1767 in Lausanne. Benjamin Constant is widely known for his literary novels *Cecile* and *Adolphe*, but his political works are equally if not more important. Specifically I will work with “The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation,” which was written in 1814 in response to Napoleon’s rise to power. Constant took part in the government of France during Napoleon’s rule and was elected as a deputy of Paris in 1824. His political ideology was much more liberal than those of Burke or Maistre and contributed a somewhat different Conservative element in reaction to the French Revolution and the rule of Napoleon. As the latest writer in a history of political commentary, Constant advanced his opinions past the Revolution and Napoleon to the general dissatisfaction with the political options of his day. “His [Constant’s] reputation was established as a political theorist whose republicanism distinguished him from the right while his emphasis on individual freedom, his feeling for property and his sense of social order separated him from the more extreme left.”⁴ Thus Constant was a more liberal type of Conservative who advanced the traditions of Burke and Maistre while creating his own tradition of political history.

Before considering these three main critical responses to the French Revolution, I will evaluate Maximilien Robespierre’s “Principles of Political Morality,” which was a main point of contention for all three of the primary authors. This analysis will provide a new addition to the political historiography on the French Revolution and the understanding of each of these individuals particular brand of conservatism.

Political Historiography

This research fits into the political historiography of the French Revolution. The analysis of works by Edmund Burke, Joseph Maistre and Benjamin Constant on the post-Revolutionary political conditions in France and the development of political conservatism falls squarely into the political history of the French Revolution. The shift from social history of class conflict to political history as discussed by Keith Michael Baker helps with my research into the conservatism which resulted from the French Revolution. Baker, in his *Enlightenment and Revolution in France: Old Problems, Renewed Approaches*, argued that the historical shift from social to political interpretations of the French Revolution is a product of many historians’ work and began with Alfred Cobban. In Cobban’s “Who were the revolutionary bourgeois?” in *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution*, he argued that the revolutionary bourgeois was actually composed of a variety of groups, not a singular, unified class which rose up in an idealized “en masse” manner to launch the French revolution. He emphasized that despite the assumptions of historical authors

² Edmund Burke, ed. *The Harvard Classics* (New York: P.F. Collier & Son Corporation, 1960), 6.

³ Joseph de Maistre, “Considerations on France,” *The Works of Joseph de Maistre*, ed. Jack Lively, (London: Gorge Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1965), 45.

⁴ John Cruickshank, *Benjamin Constant*, (New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1974), 44.

like Mathiez and Soboul, the bourgeoisie class was not a unified and homogenous group of revolutionaries.⁵ Thus if the Revolution was not one of unified social interest, its ideology must be based on something else, that being the political language of the revolution.

One of the greatest contributing historians according to Baker is Francois Furet, who argued that despite the importance of the social conditions in France at the time of the Revolution, the Revolution was in itself political in nature because it redefined the public order.⁶ These interpretations of the ideological basis for the Revolution in political language is further discussed in the work of Mona Ozouf on revolutionary festivals and how it has also led the historical tradition into a more political frame through her “approach [to] revolutionary action in terms of the dynamics of political symbolization.”⁷ Her study on symbolism and festivals as a product of the political order rather than of the social has further advanced the political basis of the Revolution. Baker argued for the influence of works such as that of Daniel Roche on the political sociability of the provincial academies reflecting the values of absolutist society⁸ and the work of Robert Darnton on the circulation of eighteenth century Enlightenment texts and the implications of their circulation on the Revolution.⁹ All of these historians have moved the Revolution from one considered in a primarily social manner to one considering the political situation in which the ideology of the Revolution was created.

This shift from social to political is also discussed by Vivian Gruder. “Public policy in its relation to public opinion, and public opinion in its response to public policy—played out dialectically in the public arena—are key subjects in investigating how the ancient regime ended in the Revolution.” She further argued that despite the shift to a more political model, the social interpretation should not be ignored. Instead they should be added to the political analysis.¹⁰ My work falls into this discussion of the political ideology of the French Revolution as each of the authors whose works I focus on, Edmund Burke, Joseph Maistre and Benjamin Constant viewed the political climate of the French Revolution as the most influential element and largest cause of the French Revolution. Each created their own individual conservatism based on their understanding of the political motives and ideologies of the French Revolution.

Baker and Gruder provide a broad basis for the political interpretation of the French Revolution and Bruce Frohnen, Isaiah Berlin, Biancamaria Fontana, and Pierre Manent contribute to my research on the specific addition of the works of Burke, Maistre and Constant to the political tradition in historical research on the French Revolution. Bruce Frohnen, in his *Virtue and the Promise of Conservatism: The Legacy of Burke and Tocqueville*, emphasizes that Burke’s conservatism was based on the belief that man has a limited human nature and must be controlled by historical institutions, thus society is essentially valued over the individual.¹¹ Burke’s emphasis on the need for human nature to be controlled by institutions illustrates how he argued that the structuring of society in a politically controlled manner, as through ranks and estates creates the most successful government. This indicates Burke’s intense dislike of the French Revolution and emphasizes the political language of the Revolution which Burke finds so dissimilar to his own conservative ideologies.

Isaiah Berlin, in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, discusses Joseph Maistre’s conservatism and his contribution to the political tradition. Berlin argues that Maistre contributed to the political language of conservatism through his discussion of the survival of completely sinful humanity to be possible only through the absolutist tyrannical hierarchy of politics and government.¹² This indication of the success of totalitarian governments adds to the political dialogue of the French Revolution in the comparison of the Old Regime and the new Republic, through Maistre’s view of God ordained power as exhibited through the triumph of a government’s political superiority over its people.

⁵ Alfred Cobban, “Who were the Revolutionary Bourgeois?” *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution*, (1999), 54.

⁶ Keith Baker, “Enlightenment and Revolution in France: Old Problems, Renewed Approaches,” *The Journal of Modern History* 53 (1981), 284.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 291.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 296.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 302.

¹⁰ Vivian Gruder, “Whither Revisionism? Political Perspectives on the Ancien Regime,” *French Historical Studies* 20, no.2 (1997), 285.

¹¹ Bruce Frohnen, *Virtue and the Promise of Conservatism: The Legacy of Burke and Tocqueville*, (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 90.

¹² Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 174.

Finally, Biancamaria Fontana's *Political Writings*, and Pierre Manent's *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, contribute to the discussion of Benjamin Constant's influence on the political history of the French Revolution. Manent argues, "Constant's political position is that opposition, his intellectual attitude criticism, his weapon irony. When all its contradictions and tensions are considered, his liberalism is that of a parliamentary orator belonging to the opposition."¹³ I would contend that despite the truth of some of Manent's argument, and despite Constant's much more liberal leanings, compared to Burke and Maistre, he was in essence a conservative, which can be seen in his addition to the political interpretation of the French Revolution. Fontana argues that Constant viewed the causes of the revolution as ultimately political in nature and the product of the failure of traditional sources of authority in the Old Regime.¹⁴ This discussion of the causes of the French Revolution as purely political in nature greatly contributes to the dialogue between historians on the origins of the French Revolution as primarily political. This work will contribute to this discussion of the political ideologies and conservatism of these three specific individuals as well as adding new information to the political historiography of Baker and Gruder.

The Terror and Maximilien Robespierre: the Wrongdoer According to All

It is important that I discuss the views of Maximilian Robespierre before analyzing Burke, Maistre and Constant. Each of these political conservative thinkers hated the Terror and the arguments of *The Report on the Principles of Political Morality*, by Maximilien Robespierre which evaluates the stage of the Revolution, exhorts the people to vigilance, warns his enemies and justifies his reign of terror. "It is time to mark clearly the goal of the revolution, and the end we want to reach; it is time for us to take account both of the obstacles that still keep us from it, and of the means we ought to adopt to attain it."¹⁵ Robespierre, in quest of support for his policies and executions, urged the people to realize that the revolution is not over, reminding them of the danger that surrounds them which threatens the new Republic. "How frivolous it would be to regard a few victories achieved by patriotism as the end of all our dangers. Glance over our true situation. You will become aware that vigilance and energy are more necessary for you than ever."¹⁶ He was reminding the French people that they needed him and his guidance, and that all of the reforms instituting terror in France are in an effort to protect the people and the Republic from its enemies at home and abroad. This suggestion that only through terror and extremism could France be regenerated contradicts the conservative political ideas of Burke, Maistre and Constant.

Robespierre blamed foreign powers for interfering in France because ultimately he viewed civilization as hierarchical, France being the pinnacle. He maintained that foreign powers would do anything to usurp France's rightful place. This denunciation served as half of his dual attack against foreign powers and his enemies at home, and was an attempt to justify his executions of Danton, Hébert and a variety of other revolutionaries who did not share his views on how the new Enlightened France should evolve. "If all hearts are not changed, how many countenances are masked! How many traitors meddle in our affairs only to ruin them?"¹⁷ This statement echoed his fear of those he thought threatened his power, but by projecting this fear on all the citizens of France, Robespierre was able to assert control on the people, allowing him to persecute at will. "Democracy perishes by two kinds of excess: either the aristocracy of those who govern or else popular scorn for the authorities whom the people themselves have established...and bring the people through excessive disorders, to annihilation."¹⁸ With this urging, Robespierre achieved his main goal, that of terrorizing and frightening the citizenry of France into letting him remain in power, while making the good citizens feel guilty for ever having doubted his intentions.

This piece, though a call to continue the revolution, was not necessarily revolutionary in nature. It was a speech demanding absolute power couched in Rousseauian terms of virtue and good citizenship. "If the mainspring of popular government in peacetime is virtue, amid revolution it is at the same time [both] virtue and terror: virtue, without which terror is fatal; terror, without which virtue is impotent. Terror is nothing but prompt, severe, inflexible justice; it is therefore an emanation of virtue."¹⁹ By describing the Revolution in these terms, he justified his rule of terror by suggesting that terror was virtuous and lead to a state where equality reigned supreme. He used Enlightenment ideas of equality, love of country and those of the idealistic perfect civilization achieved through Revolution to raise support from the citizens of France, for his despotic actions. "What is the fundamental principle of popular or

¹³ Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 91.

¹⁴ Biancamaria Fontana, *Political Writings*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 17.

¹⁵ Maximilien Robespierre, "Report on the Principles of Political Morality," *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, ed. Keith Baker (Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press, 1987), 369.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 377.

¹⁷ Robespierre, "Principles of Political Morality," 379.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 381.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 374.

democratic government...It is virtue...—that virtue which is nothing other than the love of the nation and its laws.”²⁰ Thus Robespierre not only protected his own actions but encouraged the public to behave in an enlightened way as good citizens of the Republic. This language made it more likely that the people would see him as an enlightened leader rather than as a despotic ruler, and by continually mentioning the Republic and contrasting it to the monarchy; he further separated the two ideas. This further emphasized the dichotomy between Robespierre’s democratic and Enlightenment ideas and his Francocentric and tyrannical rule. He twisted the ideas of the Enlightenment to support his rule of terror and suggested that through the ideas of virtue and good citizenship all those who disagreed with him were enemies of the Republic.

His emphasis on equality for all people was in direct opposition with his belief in the superiority of France. It was clear that though he professed the ideals of equality in the language of the Enlightenment, he really only meant equality for the citizens of France and even more so, only equality for the good citizens of France. “The French are the first people of the world who have established real democracy, by calling all men to equality and full rights of citizenship; and there, in my judgment, is the true reason why all the tyrants in league against the Republic will be vanquished”²¹ In essence Robespierre contradicted his ideals of universal equality by limiting it to the French citizenry that supported him.

This piece was intended as a message for the “Citizen-representatives of the people”²² but it was equally a message to Robespierre’s enemies. Robespierre wrote this as a way to justify his actions to the public and exhort them to support the Revolution and his leadership. “By your formal approval you sanction the moral and political truths upon which your internal administration and the stability of the Republic ought to be founded....Thereby you will rally all good citizens you will take hope away from the conspirators; you will assure your progress, and you will confound the kings’ intrigues and slanders; you will honor your cause and your character in the eyes of all peoples.”²³ Thus he gained the support of the people, while warning his enemies that he had absolute power and could do with them as he wished. Robespierre’s manner of governance and institution of the Terror is a primary element that Burke, Maistre and Constant disagree with and censure in their own writings.

Reaction, Monarchy and the English Way: The Conservatism of Edmund Burke

Edmund Burke embodied the conservative reaction to the French Revolution in Great Britain. A man with a long political history, Edmund Burke was staunchly anti-revolution and against any sort of abrupt change, unless it were perpetrated gradually through reforms. Ultimately his views of the French Revolution were formed by his support of divine monarchical authority, his anti-revolutionary and anti-Republican sentiments tailored to his audience of English readers, typically supporters of the Revolution. He viewed the revolution as a complete subversion of the authority of the state and the Republic as a completely illegitimate authority. “I can never consider this Assembly as anything else than a voluntary association of men, who have availed themselves of circumstances to seize upon the power of the state.”²⁴ Burke argued that this new government was nothing more than power-hungry individuals who usurped the natural rights of the monarchy. This reflected his fear that a revolution similar to that of France would happen in England, with status seeking individuals using their power to overturn the absolutist monarchy of England.

Burke strongly argued for the necessity of a monarchical authority, appointed by God to control and support the people’s rights and liberties. The revolution and subsequent Republic he wrote, were completely antithetical to the natural order of the world, and were the downfall of France. “Society requires not only that the passions of individuals should be subjected, but that even in the mass and body...the inclination of men should frequently be thwarted, their will controlled, and their passions brought into subjection. This can only be done by a power out of themselves.”²⁵ This simply stated tenet was central to Burke’s conservative ideology. His strong belief in the divine rights and abilities of Kings, which was present in the form of the constitutional monarchy of England, led Burke to view man as one unable to control their society or support their own rights and liberties. Burke viewed history as the greatest teacher, and he strongly believed that absolutist monarchy was the best manner in which to maintain a government and lead it to thrive.

²⁰ Robespierre, “Principles of Political Morality,” 371.

²¹ Ibid., 372.

²² Ibid., 369.

²³ Robespierre, “Principles of Political Morality,” 384.

²⁴ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the French Revolution*, (New York: P.F. Collier & Son Corporation, 1960), 297.

²⁵ Burke, “Reflections on the French Revolution,” 198.

Burke further supported the right of the monarchy through the constitution, a pact between the people and the government (monarchy) which allows for the exchange of an individual but retains a concrete static system of authority. "Though a king may abdicate for his own person, he cannot abdicate for the monarchy...the engagement and pact of society, which generally goes by the name of the constitution, forbids such invasion and such surrender."²⁶ This pact of society was sacred to a politician of Burke's conservative nature, and despite the Enlightenment fervor throughout Europe, was widely supported by the political statesmen of his day.

Though conservative in nature, Burke was not of the state of mind that tyranny and despotism were appropriate and should be forborne by the people. "The punishment of real tyrants is a noble and awful act of justice," he wrote, "it has with truth been said to be consolatory to the human mind. But if I were to punish a wicked king, I should regard the dignity in avenging the crime."²⁷ Thus it is not the deposing of a tyrannical monarch that Burke finds fault with, rather it is the manner in which this overthrow took place. Hardly a simple removal of an individual despotic authority, the French Revolution violated the institution of the monarchical government. Regicide; the killing of a king, a crime viewed as an abomination throughout history, became an event thought of as common and acceptable during the Revolution, which Burke claimed the French people had glossed over in their attempt to resume post-revolutionary life. "The murder of a king, or a queen, or a bishop, or a father, are only common homicide; and if the people are by any chance, or in any way, gainers by it, a sort of homicide much the most pardonable, and into which we ought not to make too severe a scrutiny."²⁸ Burke considered it elemental, that if the French people reflected on their destabilization of a system steeped in authority throughout history, they would realize that they had not only ruined their country but had further completed this change in a foolhardy manner.

This argument for the Old Regime resided in Burke's conservative ideals of reform over revolution. "When all the frauds, impostures, violences, rapines, burnings, murders, confiscations, compulsory paper currencies, and every description of tyranny and cruelty employed to bring about and to uphold this Revolution, have their natural effect, that is, to shock the moral sentiments of all virtuous and sober minds, the abettors of this philosophic system immediately strain their throats in a declamation against the old monarchical government of France."²⁹

Regardless of the state of the monarchy in the Old Regime, Burke emphasizes that the Old Regime was only blamed in an effort to make the atrocities of the Revolution seem less terrible. Burke emphasizes that reform was possible, and could not imagine a government so corrupt or tyrannical that revolution and the breakdown of a firm and stable system would be the only option. He further viewed this call to arms against the monarchy of France as a reactionary measure of the new Republic in an attempt to support the Revolution and their new regime.

In his attempt to exonerate the monarchy of the Old Regime, Burke argued against the new Republic. "It is not with much credulity I listen to any, when they speak evil of those whom they are going to plunder. I rather suspect that vices are feigned or exaggerated, when profit is looked for in their punishment."³⁰ As the system had now been overthrown, Burke viewed the Republic's justification the monarchy's cessation as a pretext to allow revolutionaries to maintain an equally tyrannical authority without challenge. This element of Burke's text could be viewed as contradictory. Burke firmly argued for a constitutional monarchy and against change, but he did agree that the overthrow of a tyrannical monarch was a necessary duty of the citizens of a state. Though he explained this contradiction through his emphasis on the sustainability of the system, it was still conflicting that he supported the ending of tyranny while firmly denying people their right to use revolutionary measures.

Burke criticized the Revolution and the First Republic, and his use of Enlightenment language reflected his extreme dislike of philosophical principles to support revolution.

"France has not sacrificed her virtue to her interest, but she has abandoned her interest, that she might prostitute her virtue....France when she let loose the reins of regal authority, doubled the license of a ferocious dissoluteness in manners, and of an insolent irreligion in opinions and practices; and has extended through all ranks of life, as if she were communicating some privilege, or laying open some secluded benefit, all the unhappy corruptions that usually were the disease of wealth and power. This is one of the new principles of equality in France."³¹

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 160.

²⁷ Burke, "Reflections on the French Revolution," 219.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 214.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 258.

³⁰ Burke, "Reflections on the French Revolution," 273.

³¹ Burke "Reflections on the French Revolution," 176.

Through the use of classical Republican language of virtue and equality, Burke discredits the Enlightenment philosophes espoused by the revolutionaries as a fraud that the Republic is perpetuating. This dissoluteness of character and immorality was a direct result of the atrocities of the revolution which Burke believed should never have come to pass. The French Republic, “composing an ignoble oligarchy, founded on the destruction of the crown, the church, the nobility, and the people. Here end all the deceitful dreams and visions of the equality and rights of men.”³² This phrase was a direct attack on the manifesto, “Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen,” by the National Assembly of August 26, 1789. Article 2 states, “The aim of every political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man. These rights are liberty, property security, and resistance to oppression.”³³ Burke pointed out that despite their protestations and attempts at equality; they had in fact stripped the rights of the people and become a despotic oligarchic authority.

This anti-Republican argument was firmly based in Burke’s claim that the Republic actually had no legitimate authority to create their own government. “The Revolution is built...upon a basis not more solid than our present formalities, as it was made by a House of Lords, not representing any one but themselves; and by a House of Commons exactly such as the present, that is, as they term it, by a mere “shadow and mockery” of representation.”³⁴ Burke’s firm belief in monarchy as the only stable authority system made his reaction to the revolution extremely relevant. Furthermore the creation of a system which allowed for extreme corruption and its own form of despotism was wildly apparent to Burke. “Those persons are exempted from the power of the laws, who ought to be the most entirely submitted to them.”³⁵ Burke argued that a government which had no controls or limits on the power of its administrative bodies was a government prone to tyranny, despotism and oppression.

Through the overthrow of the monarchy, the revolutionaries had destroyed everything which Burke viewed as the basis for a stable society.

“Laws overturned; tribunals subverted; industry without vigour; commerce expiring; the revenue unpaid, yet the people impoverished; a church pillaged, and a state not relieved; civil and military anarchy made the constitution of the kingdom; everything human and divine sacrificed to the idol of public credit, and national bankruptcy the consequence; and to crown all, the paper securities of new, precarious, tottering power, the discredited paper securities of impoverished fraud and beggared rapine...when the principle of property...was systematically subverted.”³⁶

This argument led to another side of Burke’s conservatism, which must be considered. Burke was an English statesman and a member of the noble class, with all of the views inherent to that title and role. As a deeply conservative man who disliked change and encouraged it only gradually through development of industry and other capitalist systems, Burke could not imagine that the complete destruction of the economic situation in France due to the Revolution could ever have positive consequences, or even that France could recover from such an event. This could again be viewed as a challenge to the Enlightenment principles espoused in the “Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen” as Article 17 established property as an inviolable and sacred right.³⁷ Burke showed this to be a false proclamation, as the rights to property were not maintained for the Crown, Church or nobility.

The destruction of the Church, killing of the clergy and confiscation of church lands led Burke, a good Christian man, to view the Revolution and its aftermath as a sin against God. “This new ecclesiastical establishment is intended only to be temporary, and preparatory to the utter abolition...of the Christian religion, whenever the minds of men are prepared for this last strike against it, by...bringing its ministers into universal contempt.”³⁸ Though Burke’s emphasis on God was limited to his discussion of divine monarchy and the destruction of the French Church, it is important to emphasize that he was not overly religious (see section two on Joseph Maistre,) rather he was a typical noble statesman of his day, against rapid change and with a firm belief in God. His belief in God was as an individual and also as a statesman, he ultimately viewed the destruction of the Church as the annihilation of France. His role as a statesman affected his censure of the Republic.

³² Ibid., 327.

³³ “Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen” *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* ed. Keith Baker, (Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press, 1987), 238.

³⁴ Ibid 195.

³⁵ “Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen,” 340.

³⁶ Ibid., 177-178.

³⁷ Ibid., 239.

³⁸ Burke, “Reflections on the French Revolution,” 282.

An element of the Republic which further aggravated Burke's views of the new government was the destruction of the parliament. As a member of the English parliament and a firm proponent of checks and balances on the power of all central government officials, including the monarch, Burke could not help but view the destruction of parliament as the end of French equality and legality. "To bring the whole under implicit obedience to the dictators in Paris, the old independent judicature of the parliaments, with all its merits, and all its faults, was wholly abolished."³⁹ This destruction of the only check on the system of government greatly affects Burke, as he imagines it happening in his own beloved Britain.

This was where it was extremely noticeable that though this treatise was written as a letter to a gentleman in Paris, it was in actuality a message to Englishmen who supported the Revolution. He first affirmed the rights of all individuals to protection under the law.

"The dislike I feel to revolutions...the total contempt which prevails with you, and may come to prevail with us, of all ancient institutions, when set in opposition to a present sense of convenience... [we must]...call back our attention to the true principles of our own domestic laws...that we should continue to cherish them."⁴⁰

This was a message to British supporters of the French Revolution, that if they value their rights and their equality and peacefulness under the constitutional monarchy, it was important to condemn the revolution. He further remonstrated with the English people in a message exclusively geared at the protection of the status of the nobility, "But among the revolutions in France must be reckoned a considerable revolution in their ideas of politeness...to say, to the most humiliated creature that crawls upon the earth, that great public benefits are derived from the murder of his servants, the attempted assassination of himself and of his wife, and the mortification, disgrace, and degradation, that he has personally suffered."⁴¹ This emphasis on the humiliation and murder of the aristocracy is attempting to sway the British nobility to his point of view. This was also a reminder to all of the citizens of England that they are in Burke's estimation better than their revolutionary counterparts in France, and were too chivalrous to even consider revolution.

Burke called on the British to show France that a constitutional monarchy was the most effective form of government, and that Britain was the top tier, hierarchically speaking, in all of Europe. "The people of England will show...that a free...nation honours the high magistrates of its church; it will not suffer the insolence of wealth and titles...to look down with scorn upon what they look up to with reverence; nor presume to trample on that acquired personal nobility...which often is, the reward, of learning, piety, and virtue."⁴² This idea of virtue was in direct opposition to the classical republican definition of virtue espoused in the revolution by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. By linking it with piety, Burke argued that England's virtue is stronger than the virtue of the classical republican, as it was derived from the moral support of the Church and the state. He challenged those who would compare the newly formed Republic's constitution and system of government with that of Great Britain. "Your new constitution is the very reverse of ours in its principle; and I am astonished how any persons could dream of holding out anything done in it, as an example of Great Britain."⁴³ These reactionary statements by Burke were completely streamlined to challenge those in Britain who supported the Revolution and who viewed it as a positive element. His deathly fear of revolution in England was one element that his critics found to detract from his essential arguments.

Burke was viewed as a great statesman during his political career but many of his contemporaries challenged his reactionary views of the French Revolution. Initially described as, "the extraordinary depth of his detached views, and the curious felicity of expression with which he unfolds principles, and traces resemblances and relations, are separately the gift of few, and in their union probably without any example."⁴⁴ Burke's tone in his *Reflections on the French Revolution* led to criticism. Henry Lord Brougham, a contemporary of Burke's, argued that Burke's old age had weakened his judgment and increased his imagination, allowing him to be haunted by his fears...an alarmist blinded by passion.⁴⁵ Lord Brougham introduced an important point—was Burke a senile old man, blinded by his fears? I emphatically argue that Burke was in fact completely relevant for his time. Though he was alarmed by the events in France, his argument is one geared toward a populace warming to French revolutionary fervor. Furthermore, Burke

³⁹ Ibid., 257.

⁴⁰ Burke, "Reflections on the French Revolution," 164-165.

⁴¹ Ibid., 207.

⁴² Ibid., 239.

⁴³ Burke, "Reflections on the French Revolution," 320.

⁴⁴ Lord Henry Brougham. *Historical Sketches of Statesmen who Flourished in the Time of George III.* (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1842), 134.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 140.

died early in July of 1797 and did not live to see the remainder of the revolution or the institution of Napoleon's rule. His views were warranted by what he saw building in a country not very different from his own. Finally, Lord Brougham wrote in 1842 and had the benefit of hindsight, which showed that the revolution and creation of the republic were not catastrophes which France would never recover from. Edmund Burke created a vivid defense of the political conservatism and censured a revolution which was potentially cataclysmic at the time. Ultimately these revelations created a strong foundation of the conservative system which evolved over time and is present today.

God, Robespierre and Revolution: The "Considerations on France" of Joseph Maistre

Joseph Maistre, born in French-speaking Savoy, was an interesting combination of Enlightenment views, religious fervor and anti-Revolutionary sentiment. He welcomed the work of Burke and wrote his own conservative musings in 1797 titled "Considerations on France." Unlike Burke who discussed religion mainly in an attempt to support England's constitutional monarchy and his own sensibilities, Maistre was an extremely religious man who urged caution to those who had abandoned their religious beliefs. This central political treatise was laid out in three main points. First, it was an illustration of the folly of the people leading the revolution and of the French Revolution as its own divine force. Second, Maistre argued that Enlightenment rationalism was evil and that the glorious monarchy would be triumphant in post-Revolutionary France. Third, Maistre discussed the post-revolutionary government and its faults. Maistre established a dialogue between his religious views and his conservative political views, which were interesting when compared with the views of Robespierre, as illustrated through his "Report on the Principles of Political Morality."

Joseph Maistre argued that the French Revolution was unavoidable as it was the direct reaction to the will of God. This made the Revolution something which men had little control over and which in fact used men as puppets. "The French Revolution leads men more than men lead it... The very villains who appear to guide the Revolution take part in it only as simple instruments; and as soon as they aspire to dominate it, they fall ingloriously."⁴⁶ Joseph Maistre showed the Revolution as a movement with its own life force, granted by God, which carried it through and destroyed everything and anything in its path.

As for the leaders of the French Revolution, he viewed them as men who tried to usurp the power of God and in effect were crushed by the Revolution, an expression of God's unyielding will. This is a direct contradiction of Robespierre's views of the Revolution as perpetuated by the people for the people, and his exhortations of the people to vigilant defense of the Republic. This view of the Revolution as something man made and controllable is completely countermanded by Joseph Maistre's conservative view of a divinely ordained and led revolution. Though Joseph Maistre viewed some of the events of the Revolution as the excesses of vile men, he ultimately presented the Revolution as being a divine reaction to the excesses and depravity of the Old Regime. "Never has the Divinity revealed itself so clearly in any human event. If it employs the most vile instruments, it is to regenerate by punishment."⁴⁷ His language of 'regeneration by punishment' was biblical in nature and emphasized how Maistre's religious beliefs strongly influenced his political arguments on the Revolution. This statement also contradicts the opinions of Robespierre who also viewed the regeneration of France as important. Where these two individuals diverged is in Robespierre's view of the regeneration of the Republic through the destruction of the corrupt elements of society and the citizenry's maintenance of Rousseauian virtue. Maistre in contrast used this language of regeneration to support the return to the established French Church and the moral religious ideologies of the Christian Church.

One of the most eloquent of his statements revealed even further how his political and religious views combined to create an entirely new conservative attitude. "A great revolution cannot come about without some distress. But when a thinker justifies such means by the end in view; when he says in his heart, A hundred thousand murders are as nothing, provided we are free; then, if Providence replies, I accept your recommendation, but you shall be one of the victims, where is the injustice?"⁴⁸ Many others central to the Revolution would have viewed this statement as completely antithetical to the revolutionary cause. If they were rising up against a despotic government and saving the people through the Revolution then they would live on and lead the people to a new order, created by them. Maistre refuted this revolutionary sentiment through a simple statement of logic.

Maistre's argument for the French Revolution as an illustration of God's divine will in action was contradicted in his "Considerations on France." He viewed the Old Regime as one that had lost its way and its religious faith, "First, when the human spirit has lost its resilience through indolence, incredulity, and the gangrenous vices that

⁴⁶ Joseph de Maistre, "Considerations on France," *The Works of Joseph Maistre*, ed. Jack Lively, (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1965), 49.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴⁸ Maistre, "Considerations on France," 51.

follow an excess of civilization, it can be retempered only in blood.”⁴⁹ Here we see his particular view of God as avenger, taking the world and fomenting rebellion and revolution until it settled into a form with proper respect for God and true religious sentiment. This was Maistre’s main argument: God is in charge, and the ancient regime was antireligious and needed to be replaced, so God started a Revolution.

Maistre contradicted himself yet again with a discussion of the French Revolution as inherently evil, “what distinguishes the French Revolution and what makes it an event unique in history is that it is radically evil; no element of good relieves the picture it presents; it reaches the highest point of corruption ever known; it is pure impurity.”⁵⁰ Initially this gave me pause as it seemed to indicate that he believed God’s will was evil, but as I read further it became clear that Maistre believed man is innately evil. Though the Revolution was God’s will and the result of ‘bad Christians,’ the excesses of the Revolution were a consequence of man’s vices alone, as in situations like the killing of a king, which Maistre never believed could be God’s will. “Each drop of Louis XVI’s blood will cost France torrents; perhaps four million Frenchmen will pay with their lives for the great national crime of an antireligious and antisocial insurrection, crowned by a regicide.”⁵¹ This was where the contradictions were further exacerbated in “Considerations on France.” Joseph Maistre was a completely conservative, anti-Revolutionary believer in divine monarchy. It was clear that the contradictions inherent in his views of the revolution as both the expression of God’s will and of the most horrible and immoral of man’s vices was his attempt to reconcile his belief that God must have had a part in something that swept through his nation with such force, but that God would never have condoned regicide, or, in Maistre’s view, the killing of a God-appointed King.

To form a compromise amongst these views and continue unshaken in his support of God and monarchy, Maistre chose to blame the culture of enlightened philosophy for the evils of the revolution. “Institutions are strong and durable to the degree that they partake of the Divinity. Not only is human reason, or what is ignorantly called philosophy, unable to replace those foundations ignorantly called superstitions, but philosophy is, on the contrary, an essentially destructive force.”⁵² Joseph de Maistre viewed religion and philosophy as completely antithetical forces, one backed by God and the other backed by the transgressions of men. He viewed it as an epic battle of good versus evil and it is clear here that the evil he referred to as present in the Revolution was that of Enlightenment philosophy. “The present generation is witnessing one of the most dramatic sights humanity has ever seen; it is the fight to the death between Christianity and the cult of philosophy. The lists are open, the two enemies have come to grips, and the world looks on.”⁵³ Maistre viewed the outcome of this battle as completely known, God would win, and philosophy would fall, which made sense because God was good and philosophy was evil. In this way Maistre removed the responsibility for any of the atrocities of the French Revolution from God or religious men, and attributed them solely to the immorality of irreligious men and the evil nature of philosophy. “To carry through the French Revolution it was necessary to overthrow religion, insult morality...and commit every crime...to restore order, the king will call together all the virtues...His most pressing interest will be to unite justice and mercy...”⁵⁴ Thus the outcome was clear, the monarchy supported by their divine right to rule, granted by the power of God, would regain power and in their infinite goodness save France.

This directly contradicted the ideals of Robespierre in his “Principles of Political Morality,” which demanded absolutist power in the new Republic, but argued for this power in the Rousseauian language of virtue. The arguments of Robespierre, written in the spirit of Rousseau, supported the creation of a new, strong nation of enlightened citizens by forcing the citizenry to be free. This was contradicted by Maistre. “It is a pity, but the people count for nothing in revolutions...Perhaps four or five people will give France a king...If the monarchy is restored, the people will no more decree its restoration than they decreed its downfall or the establishment of the revolutionary government.”⁵⁵ It showed that Maistre’s faith in the power of the people was extremely limited. God ultimately controlled all things, except for the excesses of base men, and Robespierre’s virtue through terror had no place in a country, which, according to Maistre, was supposed to be ruled by a monarchical authority. Maistre was uniquely interesting, in that, unlike Burke, he did not argue that the Old Regime could have been fixed through reform. He showed that their irreligiousness led to God’s demanding their downfall, but even less did he believe that a Republic would work in any way and he cast doubt on the legitimacy of the new government.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 62.

⁵⁰ Maistre “Considerations on France,” 69.

⁵¹ Ibid., 53.

⁵² Ibid., 71.

⁵³ Maistre “Considerations on France,” 74.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 89.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 87.

The third element argued by Maistre was of the post-revolutionary government and its faults. This illustrated that his intended audience was the leaders of the new Republic and all those who he viewed as having turned against God. He argued that France was oppressed under this new government and did not agree with its principles.

“This government is thought to be strong because it is violent, but strength differs from violence as much as from weakness, and this government’s astonishing method of operation at this time furnishes of itself sufficient proof that it cannot endure for long. The French nation does not want this government, it suffers it, and remains submissive either because it cannot shake it off or because it fears something worse”⁵⁶

He believed the God ordained nature of the revolution, but Maistre as a firm proponent of the monarchy throughout the entirety of his “Considerations,” continually mentioned the ascendance of the monarchy and the illegality and unsuitability of the new Republican order. The new laws and treatises of the Republic had no authority behind them and the nation could not give themselves equal rights, only God could. “No nation can give itself liberty if it has not it already... Human influence does not extend beyond the development of rights already in existence.... In consequence, it is necessary to innovate only rarely and always moderately and cautiously.”⁵⁷ Thus the power of people was limited to instituting the laws which were not considered absolute. Here we find the outline of Maistre’s conservatism: change is unhelpful and if performed should be done in moderation. He believed that everything about the Revolution was an excess which could only act as an affront to God.

Conquest, Usurpation, and the Imminent Demise of Napoleon: the Conservatism of Benjamin Constant

Henri Benjamin Constant de Rebecque was born in Switzerland and traveled extensively throughout Europe, ultimately moving to Paris in 1795 and becoming a French politician. In *The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation and their Relations to European Civilization*, Constant argues three main themes. The first was on the uselessness of war and conquest and the illegality of usurpation. The second was the discussion of how Enlightenment ideals had shaped the modern age and made an ancient Republic impossible. The third argued the efficacy of England’s constitutional monarchy in place of the illegal despotism of Napoleon’s rule. Through all of the dialogue, Constant’s anti-Napoleonic sentiments provided a fundamental base on which his arguments were based.

The greatly anti-Napoleonic sentiments of Benjamin Constant were vividly apparent in his discussion of the illegality of usurpation, the offensiveness of war and conquest, and the despotism which usurpation relies on.

“How much treachery, violence and perjury usurpation requires! The usurper must invoke principles only to trample upon them, contract engagements only to break them, deceive the good faith of some, take advantage of the weakness of others, awaken greed where it slumbers, embolden injustice where it hides, corruption where it is timid, in a word, he must put all the guilty passions as if in a hothouse, so that they may ripen faster, and yield a more abundant harvest.”⁵⁸

Constant’s argument against usurpation was very reflective of the arguments used against the Old Regime of France during the French Revolution. It is important to note, that despite the change in time period, much of the rhetoric of loss of morality and deception remained the same. Constant suggested that the liberty which was available under usurpation was not real freedom and did not affirm the individual rights of the people. “This counterfeiting of liberty combines all the evils of anarchy with all those of slavery... This agitation no more resembled moral life than the hideous convulsions, which an art, more frightful than useful, inflicts upon corpses without reanimating them, resembles physical life.”⁵⁹ His apt and rather disturbing imagery ridiculed the apparent moral life of the French citizenry who had assented to the rule of Napoleon and had not challenged his abuses of the rights that they had fought for in the Revolution. Constant pointed out to the French citizenry that despite the show of individual liberties, they were actually powerless in the government of Napoleon. “The people will elect their magistrates, but if they fail to elect them in the way prescribed in advance, their choices will be declared null. Opinions will be free, but any opinion in opposition not only to the general system, but even to trifling circumstantial measures, will be

⁵⁶ Maistre, “Considerations on France,” 70.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 78.

⁵⁸ Benjamin Constant, “The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation and their Relation to European Civilization,” *Political Writings*, ed. Biancamaria Fontana, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 89.

⁵⁹ Constant, “Conquest and Usurpation,” 95.

punished as treasonable.”⁶⁰ Thus Napoleon was the worst kind of despot, one who covered his tyranny with a shroud of respectability and freedom of the people. These arguments build strongly on the traditions of Burke and Maistre’s censure of Robespierre.

Constant envisioned the evil of Napoleon’s conquest and wars spreading and not ceasing until the people stood up and refused to countenance his reign. He drew attention to the illogical conquest on the basis of the rights of France, which were further exacerbated by his denial that these rights actually existed. “It would talk of national independence, as if the independence of a nation were in jeopardy because other nations are independent. It would talk of national honour, as if a nation’s honour were injured because other nations retain their own.”⁶¹ Constant argued that this justification of wars was evil and was only an attempt to spread the despotic reign of Napoleon across the continents. Despite his anti-war rhetoric, Constant was not against war, rather he was against the illegal wars of a usurper such as Napoleon. “No doubt all our inferences apply only in the case of gratuitous and useless wars. No such considerations could outweigh the necessity to repel an aggressor. In that case all classes must hasten to respond since all are equally threatened.”⁶² Thus in this way Constant allowed himself to retain his conservative ideals of the defense of the Patrie, the importance of citizenship and the slow progress of mankind, while still claiming that Napoleon was an evil despotic usurper with no legitimate basis for his rule, who had started wars which would breed further wars, forever. Constant added a pointed assault on all those who supported Napoleon, as in essence they were supporting usurpation and in its turn despotism. “Those who claim that they want despotism are in fact saying either that they want to be oppressed, or that they want to be oppressors. In the first case, they do not understand what they are saying; in the second, they do not wish others to understand them.”⁶³ Thus all of those who will not be stirred to action by his piece were stupid or wanted to subjugate others with their own tyranny and that of their friends. Finally Constant reiterated that the despotism of a conquering usurper must be destroyed, and would cease, in one of three ways, “in this case the people will overthrow it; it may exasperate the people and then, if it is attacked by foreigners, it will be overthrown by them; or, if no foreigners attack it, it will decline, more slowly but in a more shameful and no less certain manner.”⁶⁴ Thus the Napoleonic government would naturally and slowly fade and would be destroyed. Constant urged the people to be the ones to overthrow it, so as to recover their own morality and dignity which they had lost under the rules of the post-revolutionary governments.

Constant was not inherently anti-Enlightenment; he argued that intellectual pursuits were very important to the civilization of a nation, but believed that the classical republican idea of “general will” that Rousseau theorized the Republic would create, was an impossibility. Further, Constant argued that the worst abuses in France had occurred through the government’s use of Rousseauian rhetoric to support their tyrannical regimes.

“During the French revolution, when the tide of events brought to the head of the state men who had adopted philosophy as a prejudice, and democracy as fanaticism, these men were seized by a boundless admiration for Rousseau, Mably and all the writers of that school...It was for them a precious authority that writers who, disinterested on this matter, and declaring royalty to be anathema, had, long before the overturning of the throne, made axiomatic all the maxims necessary to organize the most absolute despotism under the name of republic.”⁶⁵

Thus Constant viewed the Enlightenment period and ideologies of writers such as Rousseau as the primary catalysts of the Revolution. He thought Rousseau’s Social Contract was impossibility in his Enlightened modern age as the nation could not be separated into parts so as to satisfy particular aims. He asserted that the rule by a “general will” was only the sacrifice of one element of society to another.⁶⁶ The loss of individual rights and independence involved in the Rousseauian precept of general will was unfathomable to Constant and he did not believe that it was possible in the then-Enlightened French citizenry. Constant argued that people should cease to use these principles of the mass triumphing over the individual right, to advance their own power and opinions, as in the popular violence of the Revolution and the tyranny of Robespierre. “If Robespierre’s government was anarchy, then Napoleon’s government is anarchy too. But no-Napoleon’s government is despotism, and we must acknowledge that Robespierre’s was nothing but despotism.”⁶⁷ Rousseauian ideals lead to despotism, which can not survive in Constant’s modern age and could not survive in the age of Robespierre, they were in effect one of the elements which contributed to his demise.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 111.

⁶¹ Ibid., 64.

⁶² Constant, “Conquest and Usurpation,” 69.

⁶³ Ibid., 131.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 133.

⁶⁵ Constant, “Conquest and Usurpation,” 108.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 77.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 130.

Like Maistre, Constant argued that the cult of philosophy led to the revolution, but herein a contradiction is apparent. Despite his anti-Rousseauian diatribe, Constant argued for the importance of the intellectual advancement of a civilization. "The real cause of these vicissitudes in the history of peoples is that man's intelligence cannot remain stationary; if you do not stop it, it will advance; if you stop it, it will go backwards"⁶⁸ Constant further discussed this idea in his description of the citizens of France as a group of Enlightened individuals similar to the society of ancient Greece or Rome. In this Constant can be contrasted with both Burke and Maistre in that he viewed intellectual and Enlightened societies as the proper step on the teleological path to civilization. When compared to his anti-Rousseauian and Enlightenment literature assertions, a contradiction was visible, which could only be explained by Constant's specific time period. Constant lived through the post-Revolutionary period where leader after leader took power and used the language of the Enlightenment, especially that of Rousseau, to allow for their despotic actions. "It was a great mistake on the part of those who described the revolutionary government of France to call it anarchy...the absence of government....In the revolutionary government, in the revolutionary tribunal, in the law of suspects, there was no absence of government, but rather the continuous and universal presence of an atrocious government."⁶⁹ Constant's natural reaction to these years of hostility was an abandonment of Rousseauian ideals and encouraged further intellectual advancement beyond that of the Enlightenment. Constant was also an advocate of change through intellectual advancement which should be gradual, quick changes were fundamentally opposed to Constant's conservative politics.

From his discussion of Rousseau and the post-Revolutionary republic Constant concluded that a Republic was not a possibility in France, under the usurpation of Napoleon. "Republics live through that deep sense which each citizen has of his rights, and the happiness, reason, calm, and energy that the enjoyment of liberty procures for man; monarchies, through time, habits and the sanctity of past generations. Usurpation can establish itself only through the individual supremacy of the usurper."⁷⁰ Without these precepts of legal rights and individual liberties as well as the power and support of legitimacy, proved throughout history, a Republic could not prevail. Constant encouraged the citizens of France to realize that through a unified effort their true government could be restored, "Tyranny, immorality and injustice are so much against nature that one single effort, one courageous voice is sufficient to rescue man from this abyss. He returns to morality through the unhappiness which results from forgetting it... No nation's cause is ever truly hopeless."⁷¹ This admonishment allowed Constant to encourage the people to end the power of Napoleon, the usurper, and led to the discussion of the proper government for France. If Napoleon's despotic government did not work, as Constant argues it did not, and a Republic was out of the question, France was left with the best choice, which, according to Constant, was a constitutional monarchy like that of England.

Though Constant's avowal of support for constitutional monarchy was similar to Burke and Maistre's defense of the constitutional monarchy as the best and only suitable manner of government, Constant's emphasis on the constitutional monarchy's effectiveness, specifically in the case of England, was largely in an attempt to support his anti-Napoleonic sentiments. Constant challenged those who equated a classic monarchy and the rule of Napoleon.

"Thus, despite the deceptive resemblance that there appears to be between usurpation and monarchy, both regarded as forms of government in which power is in the hands of one man, nothing could be more different. Everything which strengthens the latter threatens the former; everything which in a monarchy is a cause of union, harmony and peace, is in usurpation a cause of resistance, hatred and upheavals."⁷²

Constant viewed monarchies of the past as inherently legitimate due to their history and inherited responsibility as leaders of a nation. In contrast Napoleon was simply a degenerate who used despotism to retain his position as leader of France.

Constant argued that without despotism, usurpation could not survive, and further that a usurper, regardless of his personal merit, would become a despot. "Violence has become so easy to them, that they think it is always necessary. Under monarchy you see the same institutions lasting for centuries. You see, on the other hand, no usurper who has not twenty times repealed his own laws and suppressed the forms he has just instituted, as an inexperienced and impatient workman breaks his own tools."⁷³ This was an indication of Constant's conservative anti-change ideas which echoed the thoughts of Burke from several years before. Though Burke's conservatism was embodied in a

⁶⁸ Constant, "Conquest and Usurpation," 124.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁷⁰ Constant, "Conquest and Usurpation," 97.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁷² Constant, "Conquest and Usurpation," 94.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 91.

much more reactionary vein than Constant, they were both arguing that change without legitimacy could not ever be effective. The inability of a usurper to maintain the laws of a nation in order to institute his own, which he in turn could change when they no longer suited him, was one of the largest areas in which Constant criticized Napoleon. The lack of legitimacy of his rule could only be further exacerbated by the lack of legitimacy of his laws as they pertained to his citizenry.

Arguing Napoleon's complete lack of legitimacy, Constant relied on England's constitutional monarchy as the best governmental model.

"Similar considerations may be applied to those assemblies that, in some monarchies, defend or represent the people. The King of England is venerable in the midst of his parliament. But this is because he is not, we repeat, a simple individual. He represents also the long line of kings who have preceded him. He is not eclipsed by the representatives of the nation. But a single man, emerged from the crowd, is of too diminutive a stature, and to sustain the parallel that stature must become fearsome. Under a usurper the representatives of the people must be his slaves, lest they should be his masters. Of all political curses the most terrible is an assembly that is but the instrument of a single man."⁷⁴

The legitimacy of Kings was extremely apparent in the government of England, which despite its brief revolutionary period, returned to monarchy and retained their involvement in government. Constant argued that England's government was something which had the power and legitimacy granted to it by its people through a long history of Kingship and supported by the Parliamentary powers of the government.

Constant's urge toward a constitutional monarchy appeared to be simply because he could not support a despotic usurper in power, but also did not view a Republic, as described by Rousseau, as a possible option. Thus ultimately Napoleon must fall,

"All will unite against him. Peace, independence, justice, will be the general rallying cry; and just because they have been proscribed for so long, these words will have acquired an almost magical power. Men, no longer the playthings of folly, will become enthusiasts for good sense. A cry of deliverance, a cry of unity, will ring out from one end of the earth to the other. The sense of public decency will spread to the most indecisive and will carry along the timidest. Nobody will dare to remain neutral, lest he should betray himself."⁷⁵

Constant urged his audience, the citizenry of France, to remember that they were French and should unify against their common enemy, the usurper, who, in their midst, ruled through despotism. As he argued throughout his text, conquest and usurpation were illegal and could only be maintained through despotism, and despotism had to fall because of the natural liberty of the people. "Usurpation then is unable to subsist either without despotism, as all interests would rise up against it, or through despotism, as despotism itself cannot last. Consequently it is impossible for usurpation to endure,"⁷⁶ and thus Napoleon's empire and his personal rule was doomed. It is important to note that this piece was written in 1813 immediately following the failed Napoleonic campaign into Russia, which ended in crushing defeat and massive casualties. Though Constant's rosy forecast of the overthrow of Napoleon had not yet come to pass, in his conservative principles and the current times, Constant could not have believed that his ideas of overthrow were anything other than imminent.

The political arguments of Edmund Burke, Joseph de Maistre and Benjamin Constant create a unique amalgamation of conservative political thought and greatly contribute to the assertions of historians such as Baker and Gruder on the importance of the political historiography. The arguments affirmed by these individuals of gradual change, the importance of constitutional monarchy and the inability for despotism to survive support the political causative elements of the French Revolution, and post-revolutionary Republic. Further they support the insistence of other historians that the revolution was largely a product of the politics of its time. The conservative ideologies of Burke, Maistre and Constant add to this political tradition and emphasize the importance of historical research and how it has influenced the conservatism of today. Without the reactionary writing of individuals like these would our conservative tradition be as strong as it is today? I suggest that these three international authors and their response to one of the most cataclysmic events in history created a path which began a conservative legacy, impacting the individual political views and assertions of future generations of politicians, and affecting the lives of all those who live in a political society.

⁷⁴ Constant, "Conquest and Usurpation," 93.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 80.

⁷⁶ Constant, "Conquest and Usurpation," 183.

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