

Feelings of a Republican On the Fall of Bonaparte

I hated thee, fallen Tyrant! I did groan
 To think that a most unambitious slave,
 Like thou, should dance and revel on the grave
 Of Liberty. Thou mightst have built thy throne
 Where it had stood even now: thou didst prefer
 A frail and bloody pomp, which Time has swept
 In fragments towards oblivion. Massacre,
 For this, I prayed, would on thy sleep have crept,
 Treason and Slavery, Rapine, Fear, and Lust,
 And stifled thee their minister. I know
 Too late, since thou and France are in the dust,
 That Virtue owns a more eternal foe
 Than Force or Fraud: old Custom, legal Crime,
 And bloody Faith, and foulest birth of Time.

—by Percy Bysshe Shelley

gave themselves masters while believing they were opposing the aristocracy by following Caesar.²²

Despite your lowly birth, all History has been waiting for you!

There has never existed a sovereign family to which one can assign a plebeian origin; if this phenomenon should appear it would be epoch-making. . . . We often hear it said, 'If Richard Cromwell [son of Oliver Cromwell, who seized England—remember Mallet's scenario] had had his father's genius, he would have made the Protectorate hereditary in his family.' How true!²³

Napoleon took the advice, to see himself as such a Man of Destiny. By insane wars throughout Europe, and a series of coups, he made himself Emperor, his rule secured by a pervasive secret police, censorship, arrest of dissenters. And though he was short, he made himself God. The Pope was forced to sign a treaty putting Napoleon in charge of the Church in the French Empire. Bishops and priests had to teach as he said, swear loyalty to him, take their pay from him, report political conspiracies to his spies. And he did as Cromwell did not, creating Kings and nobility out of his heirs, family and friends (a Mallet became a French Baron).

22. Ibid, p. 80.
23. Ibid, p. 101.

'America Is Not Possible!'

The fourth chapter of de Maistre's *Considerations*, entitled "Can the French Republic Last?" was, according to de Maistre's editors, "apparently a direct response to Benjamin Constant's 'Objections Drawn from Experience Against the Possibility of a Republic in a Large State.'" ²⁴

Benjamin Constant was the lover of Germaine Necker de Staël from 1794 until 1806. When de Maistre's book was published, Constant and de Staël were in Paris sponsoring Barras, and Constant took part in the 1799 coup establishing Napoleon's rule.

In this fourth chapter, de Maistre insisted that "nature and history together prove that a large indivisible republic is an impossibility . . . a large and free nation cannot exist under a republican government." He "proves" this assertion: "If we are told that a die thrown a billion times had never turned up anything but five numbers—1, 2, 3, 4, and 5—could we believe that there was a 6 on one of the faces? NO . . . one of the faces is blank or . . . one of the numbers is repeated. . . . Fortune tirelessly throwing the die for over four thousand years. Has LARGE REPUBLIC ever been rolled? No. Therefore that *number* is not on the die." [emphasis in the original]²⁵

Note the queerly hysterical cheapness of this argument. He first hints at the real problem: "There is nothing but violence in the universe; but we are spoiled by a modern philosophy that tells us *all is good*, whereas evil has tainted everything, and in a very real sense, *all is evil*. . ." [emphasis in the original].

His editors explain, "de Maistre is castigating the 'best of all possible worlds' optimism that seemed to characterize some Eighteenth-Century thinkers. Of course de Maistre was not alone in this reaction; Voltaire's *Candide*, for example, included a brilliant satire on philosophical optimism."²⁶

"This is the best of all possible worlds," is the loving idea Gottfried Leibniz gave the modern world from Plato and Christ, for which Voltaire mocked him in *Candide*. This Platonic, Leibnizian heritage, carried through the America of Cotton Mather and Benjamin Franklin, is the central issue.

De Maistre lets the underlying rage of his faction spill out in a way that shocks us across the centuries:

Not only do I doubt the stability of the American government, but the particular establishments of English America inspire no confidence in me. The cities, for example, animated by a hardly respectable jealousy, have not been able to agree as to where the Congress should meet; none of them wanted to concede the honour to another. In consequence they have decided to build a new city to be the capital. They have chosen a

24. Editorial note in de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, op. cit., p. 32.
25. *Considerations*, op. cit. p. 33.
26. Ibid, p. 31.