MAISTRIAN THEMES IN WALTER BENJAMIN’S SOCIOLOGY

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Introduction

The aim of this article is to shed some light on Joseph de Maistre’s influence on Walter Benjamin (1892–1940). This is not an easy task, because the latter never devoted any work to the former. However, in his essay *Das Paris des Second Empire bei Baudelaire* (1938), Benjamin mentions Maistre as such: “Belief in original sin protected him [Baudelaire] from believing in the knowledge of human nature. He shared this opinion with Joseph de Maistre, who, for his part, had united the study of dogma with that of Bacon.”  

This tells us that Benjamin had at least read one of Maistre’s most important works: *L’examens de la philosophie de Bacon*. It can be said that Benjamin was directly influenced by this work, because Maistre’s anti-Baconian idea is a key element of his text on Baudelaire (as we will see in the following section). Now, in 1938, the same year in which he wrote his essay on Baudelaire, Benjamin cited Maistre in a personal letter to his friend Gershom Scholem: “There is no one, says Joseph de Maistre, who cannot be won over by moderating his advice.”  

He wrote this letter on 12 June 1938, while he was composing his essay on Baudelaire from April to the end of September in the same year. The letter enables us to assume that, in 1938, Benjamin was endeavouring to read Maistre’s works in order to write his essay on Baudelaire.

Moreover, Benjamin mentions Maistre in his essay entitled *Critique théologique* (1931). This text would provide a clue to clarifying Benjamin’s interpretation of Maistre. The essay enables us to conclude

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1 This article was translated from French by Richard A. Lebrun.


that Benjamin considers Maistre as a thinker who interprets modernity in a theological manner. In his *Theologisch Kritik* (1931), Benjamin comments on Willy Haas’ work entitled *Gestalten der Zeit*, in which the latter speaks about Franz Kafka and Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Benjamin appreciates Haas well and he considers him a ‘disciple’ of Joseph de Maistre: “In any case, Haas, the editor of a left-leaning weekly in the daily struggle of literature, is as a researcher, a disciple of Adam Müller, Burke, or Maistre rather than Voltaire, Gutzkow or Lasalle.”

Benjamin understood Haas’ work as follows: “The main reason for this study is that theological understanding of works is the proper interpretation of their political meaning as well as their modern [modischen], economic, and metaphysical meaning.” This also means that this is the way Benjamin understands Joseph de Maistre. In other words, for Benjamin, Maistre’s work consisted in interpreting modern things in a theological way. From this, one could say that Benjamin was interested in Maistre, despite being a Marxist who hoped for the Revolution, because the axis of his thought is to elucidate the theological in modernity.

The relationship between modernity and theology is the central interest in Benjamin’s own reflections. Here, the question concerns the loss of theological authority in modernity and of the theological solution to this loss. In *Erfahrung und Armut* (1933), he emphasises the impoverishment of the experience of modern men. Experience is a key notion that appears in his many works and that he sees as being related to the concepts of religious authority and intersubjectivity. Technological progress deprives the Catholic Church of authority and since Kant the idea of the Enlightenment has separated religious knowledge from the subject of knowledge (*noumenon*). In addition, according to Benjamin, the First World War declared that technological progress managed to annihilate experience insofar as experience is linked to religion and truth. Benjamin describes the phenomena that occurred after the war in this way:

This frightful deployment of technology plunged men into a totally new poverty. The reverse side of this was the oppressing profusion of ideas that was created among people (or rather: that spread through them):

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5. Ibid., 277.