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From Bonapartism to Caesarism: The Mid-Century and Louis-Napoléon

4.1 The Revolution of 1848 and the Dawn of Caesarism

The growing political-institutional and constitutional ossification after 1814/1815 was contrasted by the changes that had been taking place in European societies throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. Political awareness had grown and was becoming increasingly popularized even where censorship tried to keep an ever more varied and active press scene under control, helping to make liberalism, nationalism, constitutionalism and—to a slighter degree—also socialism the prevalent ideas of public life. At the socio-economic level, (proto-)industrialization provided fertile soil not only for the redistribution of power and influence in society, but also for revolutionary unrest. This was manifest in the middle classes' tangible discontent that their growing economic and societal role was not matched by their political influence. Fast population growth during the first half of the nineteenth century contrasted with stagnating productivity, and the fact that agriculture was in a state of crisis increased discontent among the growing group of landless peasants and the emerging industrial proletariat. The "social question" thus helped to provide a new revolutionary basis that socialist ideas could impinge on.

Clearly, conflict was in the air, as even the Revolution of 1830 had demonstrated. The situation heated up from the mid-1840s onwards, with a series of economic downturns and crop failures in Europe, particularly those in 1846, triggering rising prices and starvation. Neither trade nor manufacturing were spared this socio-economic crisis and were hit hard by falling demand. The crisis resulted in popular protests, revolts and cases of "machine breaking", harbingers of the "European Revolutions" that were to take place in 1848. Widespread discontent with the existing conditions culminated in political uprisings against the Spanish Bourbons in Sicily and against the Habsburg Empire in Lombardy as early as January 1848. The initial spark for the Europe-wide revolutionary wave, however, was once again France, where the February Revolution ended the July Monarchy and led to the Second Republic.

In the 1840s, France represented a transition society: economy was still driven by agriculture; at the same time, however, there were already signs of a shift towards an "industrial economy". This ongoing transition was not without a distinct element of crisis and went hand in hand with economic difficulties, which from 1845 onward

“combined the features of a traditional subsistence crisis with those of over-production/under-consumption and loss of confidence in financial markets more typical of an industrial society, as well as the fears and aspirations which informed political activity”.¹ The situation was not eased by the pro-business “laissez-faire” policy advocated by the July Monarchy, favoring the interests of the *grands notables*, who made up the elite of the regime. Notables and the government alike were fully committed to maintaining both the social and the political *status quo*, thus hampering every initiative for substantial reform.² While this resistance to change might have been tolerated before, it now became a real obstacle when economic problems grew stronger in the second half of the 1840s.

Nevertheless, the sudden fall of the July Monarchy in early 1848 had hardly been foreseeable, not least because the opposition in the country—from Bourbon legitimists on the right to republicans on the left—had presented itself as generally weak and divided since 1830. What actually sparked the February Revolution in France was the suppression of the *campagne des banquets* by the Guizot government, whose authoritarian style had alienated it from the liberal wing of the Orléanists gathered behind Adolphe Thiers (1797–1877). As in July 1830, the French regime change of 1848, too, occurred at breath-taking speed: no more than three days, namely February 22–24, were effectively needed to end the monarchy of Louis-Philippe. Similar to the situation eighteen years earlier, a combination of ineffective crisis management on the part of the government and military ineptitude allowed public protest to turn into an insurrection and finally revolution.

February 26, 1848 saw the creation of the Second Republic by a small group of republicans, who had managed to assume power when governmental authority collapsed. In view of the militant crowds in Paris vociferously demanding political and social improvements, one of the first legislative acts of the new republic was the granting of universal male suffrage on March 2, increasing the number of voters almost forty-fold to around 10 million.³ This, however, did not help to improve the economic situation, which remained desperate, nor did it significantly contribute to a lessening of political unrest. The enfranchisement of the entire male population did favor the formation of radical leftist political societies and clubs in the urban areas that sought to instrumentalize the now “politicised masses”. One widespread postulation that was actively propagated by means of “political education” in newspapers, workers’ associations and cafés stressed the need for “social change” which would have to follow the construction of the republic. For many contemporaries this demand perhaps more than everything else revealed that the Revolution in 1848 was different from both the ones in 1789 and 1830. Among them was also Tocqueville, who emphasized the new “socialistic character” of the Revolution and provided a vivid picture of the political atmosphere and sentiments at the time in his posthumously published *Souvenirs (Recollections)*.⁴ Seeing the lower classes in control of political power in Paris, a mixture of uncertainty and dread about what would eventually come was predominant among the property-owning classes; a situation which, according to Tocqueville, “was only to be compared to that which the civilized cities of the Roman Empire must have experienced when they suddenly found themselves in the power of the Goths and Vandals”.⁵

Fear of a redistribution of property, but also of anarchy, helped to strengthen the ranks among “anti-socialists”, who won the majority in the National Constituent Assembly elected on April 23.⁶ This, in turn, caused great dissatisfaction amongst urban radicals, resulting in even more political agitation and turmoil. On May 15, an armed mob attempted, but eventually failed, to overwhelm the Assembly. This strengthened both government and parliament in their determination to take harsh counter-measures, eventually culminating in the civil-war-like June Days Uprisings (June 23–26, 1848). Their crushing, followed by intense political repression, marked the end of the hopes of a *République démocratique et sociale* and the defeat of the radical left. Still, even though the new constitution approved by the Constituent Assembly on November 4 lacked the guarantee of “social rights” and “welfare institutions” socialists had so adamantly fought for, it did not only stick to the ideal of a liberal democratic republic with a unicameral parliament, but also retained universal male suffrage.⁷ This ensured the continuation of political disquietude and sustained the anxiety especially among conservatives. All the bigger were the hopes that at least the new president, to whom the executive power was delegated and who was to be elected for four years by direct ballot, might serve as an institution granting predictability and stability both in political and social respect.

The new constitutional system of the Second Republic heightened the dilemma which had already been present in the First French Constitution of 1791 with both the legislative and the executive branch potentially asserting claims to represent the national will. In 1848, this was a quandary *a fortiori*, with the president being elected on a broader popular basis than the chamber and thus embodying “national sovereignty” at least to no lesser degree than parliament, no matter whether the president *de jure* remained subordinated to the legislative or not. Left-wing republicans like François Paul Jules Grévy (1807–1891) therefore had proposed to confer the chief authority to the president of the ministerial council, elected and removable by the Assembly, rather than a strong popular presidency. In the latter, he saw the inevitable risk of restoring a monarchy or even worse, as he outlined in the National Assembly on 6 October 1848, recalling the events of 1799.⁸

All initiatives for a true parliamentarization of the French political system, however, failed. Not least, because a strong presidency was also institutionalized expression of an overriding appetite for a “firm hand” after the rough-and-tumble of the previous months. In this respect, the situation in 1848 bore clear resemblances to 1799, and it was again a Bonaparte who was ready to take advantage of the situation: Louis-Napoléon (1808–1873), the nephew of the Emperor.

At the beginning of the Revolution it was not at all clear that the by then already 40-year-old son of Louis Bonaparte (1778–1846), former King of Holland, would play a decisive political role. Two bumbling attempts to seize power in 1836 and 1840 had been a farce, and in early 1848 not one of the influential newspapers in France supported Louis-Napoléon. However, even the success in the by-elections held on June 4, in which Louis was elected as a representative in no less than five departments, proved that he was a force to be reckoned with. He benefitted from the widespread Napoleon cult in the population, which had been fostered throughout the decades since the fall of the Empire in popular culture: through war veterans, heroic tales, mugs and pipes depicting the Emperor, lithographs, songs and plays. In the crisis of 1848, the legend of Napoleon I

took on political momentum to the benefit of Louis-Napoléon, favored by the widening of the electorate.⁹ The motives for the support of Louis and the hopes attached to him could be quite the opposite, as had already been the case with his uncle. While some considered him to be the master and halting force of the Revolution, others saw Louis as the personification of the very same Revolution. Paradoxically enough, after February 1848 cries of *Vive Napoléon, à bas la République!* and *Vive Napoléon, vive la République!* could be heard at the same time around France.¹⁰

What contributed to Louis' popularity was that during exile he had commended himself to the *Zeitgeist* with his writings, and during his imprisonment from 1840 to 1846 he had shown a clear awareness of the ever more burning social question. Louis' writings following his first publication, the *Rêveries politiques* of 1832, included *Des Idées Napoléoniennes* (1839), *L'analyse de la question des sucres* (1842) and *Extinction du paupérisme* (1844).¹¹ Thus, he had actually been able to prepare a comprehensive political program, which made him distinct not only from most politicians at the time, but also Napoleon I. Louis consciously devoted much of his writing to the social and economic challenges resulting from the effects of the Industrial Revolution and rapid population growth. This was not without political calculation. Louis envisaged himself following in the tradition of his uncle, though, but not as a cheap copy of Napoleon I, rather as someone with his own distinct personality and aware of the needs of the time. In this vain, Louis had made clear in his *Idées Napoléoniennes*, which would sell half a million copies by 1848,¹² that:

the Napoleonic idea is hardly one of war, but rather a social, industrial, commercial, humanitarian idea. If to some it always appears surrounded by the thunder of combats, that is because it was in fact for too long veiled by cannon smoke and battle dust. But now the clouds have dispersed, and we can spy, through the glory of arms, a greater and more enduring civil glory.¹³

However, Louis not only presented the "Napoleonic Idea" as a political vision and a peace project in times of political trouble in rather abstract terms, but he also made suggestions on how existing social and economic problems might be tackled. In his 1844 pamphlet on the *Extinction of Pauperism*, a melange of romanticism, authoritarianism and Saint-Simonianism, Louis-Napoléon advocated active state intervention in the economy.¹⁴ Therein, taxation was portrayed as the main means by which the state could promote industrialization and the emancipation of the workers at the same time. Louis did not acknowledge any fundamental difference between the interests of industry and those of the working classes. What was crucial, in his view, was the effective organization of labor. In this respect, he pushed for militarily organized "agricultural colonies" (*colonies agricoles*) to be set up.

That reflected Louis-Napoléon's conviction that in modern societies it was virtually impossible to rule without the masses. Rather than "self-determination", however, the masses required "guidance":

Today, the reign of castes is over: one can govern only with the masses; they must therefore be organized so that they can formulate their wishes, and be disciplined

so that they can be guided and enlightened about their own interests. To govern is no longer to dominate the people by force and violence; it is to lead them to a better future, by appealing to their reason and to their heart.¹⁵

The Napoleonic legend together with Louis-Napoléon's reputation as a political and social reformer ultimately paved the way for his overwhelming triumph in the presidential elections on December 10/11, 1848. With 5.5 million votes (74.2 percent), Louis-Napoléon outclassed his rival Louis-Eugène Cavaignac (1802–1857), who—as the suppressor of the June Days uprising and current *Président du Conseil des ministres* with far-reaching executive powers represented an alternative “republican dictatorship”—received less than 1.5 million votes (19.5 percent).¹⁶ “France has appointed Louis Bonaparte President of the Republic because it is tired of parties,”¹⁷ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–1865) noted on the impressive support shown for Louis-Napoléon not only in the countryside, the basis of Bonaparte's electoral strength, but also in the cities.¹⁸ The elections could be interpreted as an expression of widespread Bonapartist sentiment and a vote for a man heralding a better future, but also as a vote against the republican and parliamentary establishment. Louis was willing to capitalize on popular mood for his own benefit, exploiting the presidential powers entrusted to him by popular vote and the widespread idea of him as the “man of providence”. In the following months and years, Louis systematically strengthened his political position, thus preparing the *coup d'état* that was to take place in December 1851.

While Louis-Napoléon was engaged in satisfying his personal ambitions and in putting his political program into practice, the events of the 1848 Revolutions in France and elsewhere were reflected in various politico-theoretical studies. One of the most pressing questions was how the rising power of the lower and working classes so forcefully demonstrated during the Revolutions could best be dealt with, and which style of government would be best suited to address the new “social challenge”. Not surprisingly, very different answers were provided.

For the German economist and social thinker Lorenz von Stein (1815–1890), “industry” was the characteristic feature of his era, providing a new dimension for the traditional relationship between a proprietary and ruling class on the one hand, and the unpropertied and ruled on the other. It was in this vain that he had addressed the *Socialismus und Communismus des heutigen Frankreichs* as early as 1842.¹⁹ Under the impact of the Revolution of 1848, he refined and expanded his analysis, leading to his three-volume opus *Geschichte der socialen Bewegung in Frankreich von 1789 bis auf unsere Tage* in 1850.²⁰ Stein argued that the attempts of the non-ruling class were quite naturally directed “to change their social position by means of the state so that they are no longer dependent, that is, to make their members participants in the capital of the nation”. However:

If it [...] can be neither denied nor prevented that this merely working class gains its place in state power [*Staatsgewalt*], then it will quite unavoidably and quite tirelessly put forward the question everywhere within that power of whether and in what way it is possible to make the position of this class (which is necessarily dependent upon the nature of mere labor) independent and materially free, using

the state power and especially the state administration. It will make the answer to this question the task of the entirety of state life, it will consider all who obstruct work toward this answer its enemy to be persecuted.²¹

Thus, “the task and the power of the state power in relation to the dependency of the simply working, unpropertied class is the real social question of our times”, the resolution of which was “the greatest task of history.”²² Unlike socialism and communism, the social question was not one dealing with “purely abstract, unworkable ideas”, but actually addressing “real conditions.”²³

What Stein argued for was a “kingship of social reform” (*Königthum der socialen Reform*).²⁴ Due to its independence from the ruling class, only the monarchy—conceptualized as a constitutional monarchy occupying the role of a *pouvoir neutre*—was in a position to devote itself to the welfare of the underprivileged who did not have the means themselves to make progress; rather, they were in the dilemma of becoming ever more dependent on those who had these means. If the monarchy would wisely use its power for the benefit of the lower classes, it could be certain to win overwhelming approval and allegiance. By identifying “the throne with the idea of liberty [*Freiheit*]”, the monarchy would provide the former with “the most secure support human affairs can find”, and “wear a double crown, insofar as it finds its true divine purpose in its people!”²⁵

Consequently, social policies was the most promising strategy to gain legitimacy for the monarchy and to thwart political “extremism”. By expanding the *Rechtsstaat* (“state of law”) to a welfare state, not only social revolution would be effectively thwarted; also dictatorship would be evaded, characterized by “absence of any constitution” and “exclusive rule of state power.”²⁶ This had been the case under Napoleon I. Nevertheless, his regime, too, was—as every other form of government—only a product of “social development”:

Napoleon was not born a despot; he became one. [...] It was not choice, not Napoleon's character that made him a despot; it was the undeniable need of society. This society [...] needed a man who had the courage to put his personality in place of a constitution [...] It is an incontrovertible certainty that without his despotism, Napoleon would not have had the support of all the people, nor would he have served his country as well as he did. Society made him an absolute ruler.²⁷

The fact that Napoleon's dictatorship, similar to that of Oliver Cromwell, had developed “organically out of the life of the people” made it significantly different from those dictatorships that “arise in the blink of an eye, and are only occasioned by either administrative or military expediency”, and which were thus being destined to be shortlived:

These [i.e. dictatorships *à la* Napoleon; MJP] are permanent because they are generated by a particular condition of society; the principle which dominates this class of dictatorships appears to be that the disintegration preceding a new social order makes dictatorship of the singular individual [*Einzelnen*] desirable, and that

the initial period of the new social order is always the true beginning of a dictatorship, which we might call the “social”.²⁸

At the end of the third and last volume of his study, Stein also tackled the new presidency of Louis-Napoléon. He abstained from speculating on what would eventually happen, and was reluctant to give a personal assessment of the new president. What seemed obvious to Stein, however, was that the key factor which had secured Bonaparte’s electoral victory in 1848 was the French nation’s wish for a surrogate monarch; a man who, “standing outside of all parties, could provide assurance against the future rule of parties in the country by his very name and singular personality. This man, who should be a king, without the name, power and dignity of a king, was Louis Napoleon”. But no matter how commendable “the elevation of the state above the rule of political parties” might be *per se*: Stein saw the constitution of the new political system as suffering from a fundamental malady, which was not so much the fact that it had created a head of state which “had slightly too much power for a president, definitely too little anyways for a monarch”. Rather, the main problem was the “contradiction [...] between the legal validity of universal suffrage with the present form of French society”. The constitution conflicted with the order of society insofar as “the lower class of society had a political right which it did not fulfill due to its social status”.²⁹ Further struggles between proprietaries and non-proprietaries were thus predestined. Out of self-interest, Louis had already made his decision in favor of the former.³⁰ Stein cited the harsh repression of socialists after Louis’ assuming office as unambiguous evidence for the president’s partiality. But while the eventual outcome of the fight just about to start was open, it was clear to Stein that it was “from now on no simple fight between labor and capital, but the fight of the social democracy [*sociale Demokratie*] with the industrial reaction”.³¹

No less—if not even more—than on Lorenz von Stein, the revolutionary upheavals of 1848 made a deep impression on the Spanish politician, diplomat and theorist Juan Donoso Cortés, marqués de Valdegamas (1809–1853).³² While Stein considered a moderate “social monarchy” the best alternative to deal with the revolutionary potential of modern industrial society, Donoso Cortés arrived at very different conclusions. For him, dictatorship had become the only reasonable political alternative in the present state of Europe.

Before the Revolution, Donoso Cortés had in fact been a spokesman of the Spanish liberal-conservatives (*moderados*). Like them, he had been a proponent of doctrinary liberalism à la Guizot and Pierre Royer-Collard. 1848, however, demonstrated the weakness of a class rooted in the Revolution, while at the same believing in their finitude, not only in France, but also Spain and other European countries. In this respect, Donoso Cortés was in agreement with the diagnosis of many other observers at the time that the social and political order was now severely unstable. While offering very different remedies, most of his fellow contemporaries shared the belief that a new and durable stability could be found, and that liberty would survive or could be restored in one way or another. But not so Donoso Cortés: for him, the ideals of liberty and freedom were essentially dead. This was the key message of Donoso Cortés’ philosophy of history so decidedly pessimistic and apocalyptic, which he

developed in his post-1848 theoretical contributions and which made him a defender of dictatorial rule on the basis of pragmatic rather than ideological reasoning.³³

In a much-noticed speech in the Spanish *Cortes* on January 4, 1849,³⁴ Donoso Cortés used the opportunity for a general analysis of the Revolutions which had so mightily shattered the political foundations of Europe. He criticized the “lamentable lightness with which the deep causes of the revolution have been discussed”, the seed of which he saw “in the populace’s overexcited desires caused by the publicists that exploit and benefit from them.”³⁵ For Donoso Cortés there was no doubt that “The world [...] walks with the quickest steps towards the constitution of the most gigantic and desolate despotism that there has ever been in the memory of mankind”, and that everything was prepared “for a gigantic, colossal, universal, immense tyrant.”³⁶ This was the ultimate consequence of centuries of decline in the Western World since the days of Jesus Christ; noticeable, among other things, in state power having become ever more extensive and penetrating. The actual reason for this political downfall was the demise of Christianity, as Donoso Cortés argued: “[...] it was necessary [...] that the thermometer of political repression went up because the thermometer of religion continued to fall.”³⁷ The only means which could possibly prevent disaster was not the granting of more rights and liberties, more guarantees, or new constitutions: “the catastrophe [...] will [only] be avoided if everyone tries, as far as our forces suffice, to provoke a salubrious, religious reaction.” However, he deemed it most unlikely that such “religious restoration” could succeed: “I have seen [...] and known many individuals that abandoned faith and have come back to it: unfortunately, I have never seen a people who have come back to their faith after having lost it.”³⁸

The only thing that remained was to offer the biggest possible resistance against the revolutionary powers. This was especially since the question from time immemorial whether preventing revolution by resistance or concession was the better alternative had been unmistakably answered in favor of the former in 1848: “In France, the monarchy did not defend itself and was defeated by the republic [...]; [but] the republic, that barely had any force to move, defeated socialism because it offered resistance.”³⁹ In the present time of decay and crisis, Donoso Cortés concluded, the remaining choice was no longer between liberty and freedom on the one hand and dictatorship on the other, in which case there would hardly be disagreement about which one to choose:

[...] it is a matter of choosing between the dictatorship of insurrection and the dictatorship of the government. In this case, I choose the dictatorship of the government as less burdening and less contentious. It is a matter of choosing between the dictatorship that comes from below, and the dictatorship that comes from above. I choose the one that comes from above because it comes from cleaner and more serene regions. It is a matter of choosing, in the end, between the dictatorship of the dagger and the dictatorship of the sword: I choose the dictatorship of the sword because it is the noblest one.⁴⁰

In other words, an “orderly” governmental dictatorship was preferable to an anarchical dictatorship of the mob. This dictatorship had to go beyond the forms of a

temporary “legal dictatorship” as practised in the previous months in Spain by General Ramón María Narváez (1800–1868), which seemed no longer sufficient to combat the poisonous delusions and doctrines instilled into the European nations by the abusive means of freedom of expression and liberty of the press.

While one might still discern some hopes Donoso Cortés nourished in early 1849, this was less the case one year later. In another parliamentary speech on January 30, 1850⁴¹ he arrived at an even more pessimistic assessment than before, painting a disillusioning picture of contemporary Europe. He bewailed that while the revolutionary movement had been defeated in most parts of the continent, the reprieve gained had not been used properly to address the sole issue of true relevance: the re-establishment of Christianity. Outlining a powerful political theology, Donoso Cortés saw “affirmative civilization”, mainly characterized as “progressive and catholic”, in the state of transcending to a negative and revolutionary period. Three negations fundamentally challenging the three divine affirmations that 1) there was an omnipresent God, 2) that this God ruled heaven and earth, and 3) that this God ruled godly and human affairs alike featured this period. The first negation, put forward by deists, claimed that “God exists, God rules; but God is so high above that he cannot govern human things”, which in the political sphere would correspond to “the king exists, the king rules; but he does not govern”.⁴² The second negation was the pantheist’s denying God’s personal existence, correlating to political republicanism:

power exists; but power is not [bound to a] person, nor does it rule or govern; power is everything that lives, everything that exists, everything that moves; thus, it is the crowd, and it follows that there can be no other means of government than universal suffrage, no other form of government than the republic.⁴³

The third negation, finally, to go beyond which in terms of radicalism was impossible, was the atheist’s assertion that: “God does not rule or govern, nor is he a person, nor is he the crowd; he does not exist.” In political terms, this was the justification for non-governance and anarchy.⁴⁴ The whole of Europe was just about to enter the second of these negations, and on its way to the third: a course of events, which Donoso Cortés saw no legitimate hope to be able to change anytime soon.

Against the backdrop of his critical attitude that became increasingly fatalistic in the last years of his life, Donoso Cortés’ judgement of Louis-Napoléon and his regime remained slightly ambivalent, too. He was to appreciate Louis’ coup in late 1851, which he actively supported in his function as Spanish ambassador in Paris and from which he seemed to hope some positive impulses for a religious restoration he saw European civilization in such dire need. However, his hopes pinned on the politician who he once compared with Augustus, a nephew of Caesar as Louis was a nephew of Napoleon I, soon waned, and were perhaps more due to amicable sentiments for the man whose groomsman Donoso Cortés’ should eventually become.⁴⁵ His reports from Paris reflect growing concern about the feasibility of Louis’ daring political experiment, and the personal abilities of the Emperor. After all, the damage already done by the diabolic forces of liberalism and socialism as well as pantheism and atheism, polemically attacked in Donoso Cortés’ perhaps best known work *Ensayo sobre el catolicismo, el*

liberalismo y el socialismo considerados en sus principios fundamentales (1851),⁴⁶ seemed all too advanced to be remedied.

Donoso Cortés' political thought, which made him one of the nineteenth-century masterminds of conservative authoritarianism, was to find many recipients in Europe and beyond. Quite a few of them, however, shared the Spaniard's gloomy attitude that in the world's disastrous state its destiny could no longer be influenced by human action, but was rather subject to God's final judgement. Among those who did not call the directing force and power of political action into question as Donoso Cortés did was his perhaps most direct disciple: François-Auguste Romieu (1800–1855), a Frenchman, whose overall legacy as a politico-theoretical writer can be described as modest, but who is commonly seen as the first to introduce into intellectual discourses the term "Caesarism" in its modern meaning, describing a genuinely new and clearly defined political concept.⁴⁷ Romieu also made headway in theory construction, specifically by turning the concept of Caesarism into a central element of anti-revolutionary as well as pro-Bonapartist propaganda and by using it in a deliberately polemical way.

Romieu rose to the post of prefect during the July Monarchy and was later to be appointed general director of the French libraries (1853). As with so many other contemporaries, the Revolution of 1848 had made deep impact on Romieu, the written result of which was the publication of *L'ère des Césars* in 1850, arguing for "Caesarism" (*césarisme*) as the only form of government suitable under the present circumstances.⁴⁸ In line with Donoso Cortés, Romieu's overarching argument was essentially that in the interest of the nation, power had to prevail over debate. In times without legitimacy and faith, without social and individual morale, only authority and force could guarantee the minimum of order essential for survival: "Men have two kinds of respect: for what is holy and for what is strong. The holy no longer exists in this century; the strong is eternal, and it alone can restore the holy."⁴⁹ As for his Spanish paragon, the concentration of all state powers was thus not only a means to avert anarchy and civil war, but also the prerequisite for keeping the chance of restoring religion alive.

Romieu's intellectual energies were directed against the noxious socialist aberrations,⁵⁰ but no less so against liberalism. For him, socialism and the rise of the new "inner barbarians"⁵¹ had been made possible only by the spread of liberal ideas, shattering the moral foundations of Europe. Under the banner of "reason" and "progress" as the alleged guiding forces of man, the liberal doctrine had poisoned the mind of France and all other European nations, fostering nothing else but unending discord, uncertainty and chaos.⁵² In the political and constitutional arena, the liberal principle had found its clearest expression in the growing fashion for parliamentary government; a form of government not only noxious in that it deprived a body politic of resolute leadership in favor of a cacophony of conflicting opinions producing only blarney and vacillation, but also unnatural:

I have never seen anyone attempt to trust an assembly with the management of a ship, and I know why: the ship and the assembly would sink two leagues from the port. In that case, the danger of the institution would be immediate [...]. But in politics, foolishness is only evident after months or years. One soon forgets the

cause. Likewise, it has not occurred to anyone to put a regiment under the command of a committee. [...] When men are directly concerned, they only advance by a unified, single will, so certain are they that they cannot do better or faster. And in this serious matter of conducting the state, men manage, with an incomprehensible incongruity, to reject this natural rule, which is as enduring as humanity!!⁵³

In outlining the disastrous state of the present world, in which tradition was openly abandoned or ridiculed and everything prepared for chaos and ruin, Romieu stressed analogies to ancient times: he compared the Roman Empire being threatened by the barbarian invasions with the current dangers represented by bourgeoisie and proletariat alike, and considered contemporary European civilization “situated in conditions almost similar to those that characterized the time when the Caesars appeared”. Along the lines of this great parallel, Romieu therefore also compared Julius Caesar with Napoleon Bonaparte, that modern Caesar, whose strong arm had restored order in France after the “revolutionary orgies” and put into motion again “the eternal workings of all human society, faith, justice and authority”.⁵⁴

Which political alternative did these historical examples suggest for the present crisis? While going back in history and restoring the past was impossible, to place one’s hope on monarchical legitimism was no alternative either. Not because the idea of legitimism was bad *per se*, but because traditional monarchical legitimacy had become inanimate and could not be effectively revitalized.⁵⁵ The return to the forms of a constitutional monarchy as during the era of Louis-Philippe was doomed to failure as well. The simplistic formula of the constitutional monarchists that France was “monarchical by its instincts and liberal by its ideas”⁵⁶ would disregard existing realities. To restore constitutional monarchy would mean nothing else but the tranquil installation of all elements of a future revolution.⁵⁷

More than everything else, however, the dramatic loss of faith, spiritual convictions and honor made any restorative endeavor moribund right from the beginning: “Morality, belief, respect, everything is destroyed. [...] And one would like to build on such ground! It will suffice to pitch a tent.”⁵⁸ Romieu therefore concluded that the only system of government that could guarantee stability and establish a new, promising order of things with some durability was “Caesarism”: “Studying the past and present simultaneously has made me believe that there is a point of extreme civilization among people, when the obligatory outcome is CAESARISM.” For Romieu, Caesarism was not to be confused with “kingship”, “Empire”, “despotism” or “tyranny”, but had a very particular and—so far—quite unknown meaning.⁵⁹ Caesarism, proposed as the “general form of the very near future”, differed from monarchy in one crucial aspect: “[the monarchy; MJP] is founded and endures on the condition of beliefs.—The other survives by itself.” In actual fact, Caesarism had the tendency to move towards a monarchical system without ever actually achieving it; it was a wild-goose chase of base dynastic aspirations on unprepared ground.⁶⁰ Rather than some kind of monarchy, Caesarism should be thought of as a modern rule of force replacing the principle of discussion as well as heredity. Since in the foreseeable future no ruler would be able to establish a permanent dynasty, the characteristic feature of the “age of the Caesars” was

both naked power and vicissitude: "[...] I cannot imagine not so much another end, as another outcome of our troubles than a succession of masters suddenly springing up, who last only as long as their fortune, and who are powerless to found, but quick to dominate. This is what I call THE CAESARS."⁶¹

Romieu acknowledged that some might find his open defense of power rude. However: "I wanted, in these times of sophisticated arguments, to utter a dirty word of truth, one that many think."⁶² The danger in which not only France, but European civilization as a whole, found itself, demanded ruthless candour. Civil war was in the air, as any reasonably minded person could sense: "Blind are those who do not assist with the preparations! Deaf those who do not hear the rustle of the masses, tempted by the great orgy!" Dramatic times, however, required and justified drastic solutions: "It is cruel to live in such times; but we cannot choose our epoch, and God only grants us the freedom to witness it."⁶³

Even in his *Lère des Césars*, Romieu portrayed the proletarian populace as the looming danger which France would have to face in 1852 at the latest, when the presidency of Louis-Napoléon was supposed to come to an end.⁶⁴ He became more explicit in his pamphlet *Le Spectre rouge de 1852*, written in the run up to the expected elections of 1852 and addressing more directly than his former work the particular French situation, in which Romieu portrayed the year as the moment of fate for France and Caesarism as the only means to fight the "red menace":

The red menace of 1852, which no one wanted to see and which I mention again, appeared to a stupefied society. Every day and every hour its threatening proportions increase; it seems that a great act of nature must be concluded, and that every creature has an instinct for it.⁶⁵

The present situation was described as desolate, while the future held out no hope and heralded worse things than just civil war:

It is no longer only civil war that awaits us; it is the Jacquerie. The work of depravity was carried out steadily, in the midst of this mild peace that June's repression had half-heartedly imposed on the destroyers. They understood that their battlefield was the Constitution; they have retreated there, and have begun to undermine it, with unavoidable effects.⁶⁶

Not despite, but because of the constitutional-parliamentary form of government that spent time with endless jabber called "politics", France was on the brink of disaster. To believe that this danger could be banned within and by the means of the present representative political system was tomfoolery: "[...] to want, when faced with a universal outbreak, to oppose arguments and legislative processes shows a lack of understanding of the powerlessness of elected assemblies in the presence of great human upheaval."⁶⁷

More than anything else it was the ruling elite itself that had to be blamed for the loss of the venerable principles that had guided former generations, namely religious faith, fidelity and honor. With their *philosophisme* they had prepared the ground for the "blood spectacle" which was soon to come.⁶⁸

We have simply listened too much, learned too much, retained too much. We know what we have left: an inconceivable disorder of ideas, a confused confrontation of opinions, the absolute death of the heart, scornful laughter at beliefs, merry and derisive laughter at the old word *virtue*.⁶⁹

Blind idolatry of “progress,” “reason” and “natural law” since the Revolution of 1789 had obfuscated the people and perverted society, which allowed for one conclusion only: “That society must die.”⁷⁰ The bourgeoisie was neither entitled nor able to fight the inevitable battle to come: “The conflict will be between the furious madness of the masses and the vigorous discipline of the army. Your books, your speeches, your Constitutions, your principles must vanish into the smoke of this great fight. The duel is between ORDER and CHAOS.” In brief, the remaining alternative was to choose between “the reign of the torch and the reign of the sword.”⁷¹ Romieu saw a rigorous military dictatorship under the lead of a new Caesar as indispensable not only in stabilizing France and restoring order, but also to put the dissolute masses once and for all in their historical place: “I will not regret having lived in these sorry times if I can finally see the CROWD chastised and condemned. It is a cruel and stupid beast, which I have always abhorred.”⁷²

Romieu was noncommittal on who the leader against the red menace might eventually be; but whoever it was, his role would be simple:

To take, with a firm hand, the most absolute dictatorship, and to replace all the texts that have governed us for sixty years. [...] Simply by blowing on the house of cards of 1789, and then announcing, THE STATE IS ME, one could give France the only government that is uniquely French, and the only that France could love, despite the rhetoricians who have turned it around for their advantage—in other words, a strong, brilliant, glorious government, like those of Louis XIV and Napoleon.⁷³

At the end of the day, Romieu concluded, a new era of authority would start which might not be perfect, but would have achieved to bring an end to the aberrations of philosophy and ban the red menace:

[...] at the end of these great disasters, which I believe can be short, a strong power will take hold to usher in a new era of authority. It will pass through many hands, which will engage in armed combat. But at least sophistry will no longer be in play, with its terrible consequences. It is better to see the people fight for Caesar than for National Workshops.⁷⁴

Romieu’s key message, like that of Donoso Cortés earlier,⁷⁵ was as simple as it was plausible, especially since it gave the impression of being largely “de-ideologized”: European civilization in its contemporary post-revolutionary state was facing a crisis which asked for dictatorial rule. The crisis, however, was so fundamental, and the existing problems were so overwhelming, that a “commissarial” form of dictatorship was no longer adequate. Only a “sovereign” dictatorship could deal with the challenges of the time. In his suggestions, though, Romieu concretized and went beyond the ideas

of Donoso Cortés: emphatically, the Frenchman demanded Caesarism be raised to a new, lasting and independent form of political rule. According to Romieu, Caesarism was the only possible response to the social question, for which he saw no other realistic solution after bourgeois liberalism had set the stage for the insurrection of the populace: by abandoning traditional values, by teaching the masses dissatisfaction through the abusive means of rampant freedom of expression and liberty of the press, and by fuelling their greed.

Romieu's writings had a clear Bonapartist drift, and helped to prepare the intellectual ground for the *coup d'état* of Louis-Napoléon in December 1851, not least due to wide dissemination in the country. Together with other advocates of Bonapartism like Jean Gilbert Victor Fialin, duc de Persigny (1808–1872) and Adolphe Granier de Cassagnac (1806–1880),⁷⁶ who essentially shared the concept of rule outlined by Romieu, the latter thus appears as one of the intellectual pioneers of the Second Empire.

Yet it is remarkable that while Napoleon I is portrayed as a great leader who performed deeds similar to those of the ancient Caesars and as a harbinger of Caesarism throughout Romieu's work, Louis-Napoléon is assigned a much more humble role. This was partly since Romieu did not want his writings to appear as propaganda, but as an objective analysis of his time. But it might also be taken as an indication that Romieu himself had personal doubts about whether Louis-Napoléon represented the kind of Caesar he yearned after. His recourse to antiquity and the great parallel fairly obscured what was effectively "new" about the imminent *césarisme à la Louis-Napoléon*, namely the ascendancy of social politics. This, however, was perhaps less due to a neglect of Louis-Napoléon's political positioning since the 1830s by Romieu, than the expression of distinct differences of opinion. At several instances, Romieu did voice his concerns that the contemporary political system in France was not plagued by a lack of "social awareness" and corresponding legislation, but, on the contrary, had already become much too "social".⁷⁷

Nonetheless, even if the conclusions as to what concrete measures had to be taken might not have been identical, both Louis-Napoléon and Romieu shared the conviction that the social question was *the* central challenge of the time that could best be mastered within the realms of a new political order. And in different respects, both rendered great service to the "making" of Caesarism: while Romieu's writings introduced Caesarism as a clear-cut notion into French and European politico-theoretical discourses, it was Louis-Napoléon's *coup d'état* and the establishment of the Second Empire which made for the swift dissemination and definite assertion of the term as a political concept and typology throughout the continent and beyond.

4.2 The Coup of 1851 and the Birth of the Second Empire

The elections of the National Assembly in May 1849 proved to be highly politicized, with a clear right-left division emerging. Even though the conservative *Parti de l'ordre* gained a comfortable majority of 53 percent of the popular vote, the success of the far left, with about 25 percent of popular votes being cast for the "Mountain" (*La Montagne*, also known as *démocrate-socialistes* or *démoc-socs*), the platform of the radical

republicans and socialists, as opposed to only 11 percent for moderate republicans, alarmed conservatives and centrists alike.⁷⁸ In May 1850—following weak by-election results in March—the rightist majority in the Assembly adopted restrictive legislative measures, including a new electoral law disenfranchising the poorest.⁷⁹

Meanwhile, Louis-Napoléon steered a course of his own: measures were taken against the media and organizations considered left-wing or to oppose government policies. By the means of growing state repression, which made it difficult to distribute the republican and socialist message through newspapers, publications or pamphlets and organize political activities by legal means, the left was incrementally squeezed out of the public sphere and forced underground. At the same time, however, Louis-Napoléon carefully distanced himself not only from legislative efforts to drastically infringe upon universal suffrage, but also from the majoritarian Party of the Order, primarily composed of Orléanists and Legitimists. He thus dashed the expectations of Adolphe Thiers and others that the President would be weak and easy to manipulate. Rather than a puppet in the parliament's hand, Louis-Napoléon proved himself a cunning politician, not only breaking away from the control of parliament, but also willing to risk open conflict by filling important posts with friends and declared allies and transforming the government into an extra-parliamentary body. Even so, continuing tensions as well as animosities between Orléanists, Legitimists and moderate republicans hampered joint and decisive action in the right camp and left Louis-Napoléon in an increasingly strong position, notwithstanding the fact that the constitution ruled out a second presidential term. Unable to agree on another candidate, the conservative factions' fear of a radical-socialist electoral victory in 1852 and the "red menace", which Romieu and others so dramatically summoned, made the incumbent president look almost without alternative and increased the willingness among the population to accept even drastic measures to safeguard political and social order.

Louis-Napoléon for his part was determined not to hand over the reins of power, doing his best to orchestrate Bonapartist propaganda in order to increase popular support and come across as a "man of the people". In June 1851, he declared during a public event in Dijon:

France neither wishes to return to the *Ancien Régime*, whatever form may disguise it, nor to try out fatal and impracticable utopias. It is because I am the most natural adversary of both that France has placed its trust in me.⁸⁰

In his speech, he skillfully combined the assurance of stability with what might best be described with the later term "populism", that is accusing the political establishment of betraying the people and neglecting their wellbeing by thwarting beneficial legislation and initiatives. While Louis-Napoléon was preparing the nation for constitutional change, he was nevertheless still nourishing hopes that the political elite represented in parliament might be brought back to "reason" in view of the loud "popular voice".⁸¹

However, the president's hopes for a constitutional change, which would have allowed him to be re-elected, foundered in July 1851. Although the initiative for a

revision of the Constitution gained a majority of the representative in the assembly, it fell short of the three-quarter majority required by law. Therewith the course for a *coup d'état* was set, even more so after presidential initiatives to restore universal suffrage and a request to reconsider constitutional reform were turned down by the National Assembly. Preparations for a coup were meticulously being made from summer 1851 onwards, with the installation of loyal Bonapartists in military and administrative key positions being a central element of the planning. Tellingly, the coup bore the name "Operation Rubicon", alluding to Julius Caesar's famous crossing of the eponymous river in 49 BC that started the Great Roman Civil War and ultimately led to the establishment of the Empire. It was scheduled to take place on December 2, the anniversary of the coronation of Napoleon in 1804 and the battle of Austerlitz in 1805.⁸²

That very day, the army occupied strategic points in Paris, and preventive arrests removed both top republicans and potential leaders of the monarchical opposition. In public addresses to the nation and the army, Louis-Napoléon declared the National Assembly dissolved and elaborated on the motives for his action. He described the coup as necessary to safeguard the state endangered by the Assembly, which had become a platform for political complots and anti-national activity.⁸³ Louis-Napoléon asked for the support of the nation to accomplish the "great mission"⁸⁴ he envisaged. Stressing the "legitimate needs of the people" and proclaiming "the people" the "only sovereign I recognize in France", Louis-Napoléon held out the prospect of re-establishing universal suffrage, but also outlined key elements of a new constitution. Above all, there would be "a responsible leader appointed for ten years". Moreover, unlike the unicameral system, which was blamed for the recent trouble and disorder, a tripartite legislation was proposed. Louis-Napoléon left no doubt as to the historical model he had in mind for the new political system: "This system, created by the First Consul at the beginning of the century, has already given France respite and prosperity, and it still guarantees them."⁸⁵

The coup did not remain without reaction from oppositional forces and triggered revolts in Paris and other places across France. The insurgents, however, were soon defeated by the army, which stood loyal to the President. All in all, the coup was welcomed positively or at least received indifferently by the majority of the population. Even among the workers there were only a few who were prepared to risk a repetition of the June uprisings of 1848. This was hardly surprising since they would have been defending a conservative assembly against a president who staged himself not only as the defender of popular sovereignty, but also promised to restore universal male suffrage and benefitted from the legend of the Emperor whose name he bore.⁸⁶

Not only how Louis-Napoléon assumed power and its justification that the age of the Revolution needed to be closed and stability restored were akin to the eighteenth Brumaire; also in legitimizing the regime change the nephew traced the path his uncle had chosen fifty-two years earlier, namely by opting for public approval in order to give the coup the appearance of being democratically wished. A plebiscite was scheduled to take place on December 20/21, 1851, in which the nation was asked to vote on whether it wished to maintain the authority of Louis-Napoléon and delegate to him the powers

of establishing a new constitution, following the five principles outlined already in the public address of December 2: a head of state in office for ten years, ministers exclusively dependent on the executive body, and a legislation consisting of three distinct bodies.⁸⁷ Clearly, it was the acclamation of the nation, not its decision, that both Napoleons sought, and arguably they would not have been willing to accept a negative vote. Unlike 1799, however, no electoral fraud was needed in 1851 to guarantee an overwhelming majority of around 7.5 million “yes” to only 650,000 “no” votes.⁸⁸ Even areas which in the parliamentary elections of 1849 had voted “red” now showed strong Bonapartist sentiments,⁸⁹ the expression of a strong identification of Louis-Napoléon with the “doer” necessary in the present situation, or the much needed “saviour” of the nation.

Backed by the strong popular support, the new French Constitution was drafted within three weeks under the direction of Eugène Rouher (1814–1884) and proclaimed on January 14, 1852.⁹⁰ It established the institutional structures for the Second Empire, but without yet actually declaring it. In the preamble-like proclamation accompanying the constitutional document, Louis-Napoléon re-emphasized that the model followed were the Constitutions of the Consulate and Empire.⁹¹ Louis-Napoléon claimed that “everything that has been organized since the Revolution and that still exists was made by Napoleon”, enumerating, among other things, national unity, administrative and social reforms, the reorganization of education, and the *Code Napoléon*. “[...] the framework of our social edifice”, Louis-Napoléon concluded, “is the work of the Emperor, and it has survived his downfall and three revolutions”. Why then, it was asked rhetorically, should the political institutions of the Empire not get the same chance of durability?⁹² These institutions were deemed most fit for a “country of centralization”, the roots of which dated back centuries in history. Despite its focus on the executive’s authority, accountability was declared a key component of the new political order. Accountability, however, required the *chef* to be free and unrestricted in his actions. Moreover, the principle of accountability would not characterize the relationship between the executive and legislative, but only apply to that between the leader and the sovereign people.⁹³

It was along the lines of these guiding ideas that the 58 articles of the Constitution gave legal form to the second Napoleonic regime, which had clear traits of a hereditary monarchy right from the beginning. While guaranteeing “the great principles proclaimed in 1789, [...] which are the basis of the public law of the French” (Art. 1), the Constitution provided for a head of state to be elected for ten years (Art. 2), with the right to nominate his own successor (Art. 17). The “President of the Republic”, as he was still called, was entrusted with comprehensive executive and legislative powers. This included his role as head of the armed forces and freedom of action in all aspects of foreign affairs as well as the right to enact personal ordinances and other legal acts (Art. 6), the right to declare a state of emergency (Art. 12) and the prerogative to initiate and sanction laws, which was his alone (Art. 8 and 10). Ministers were responsible to the head of state alone. In many respects, the President’s prerogatives were patterned on the regulations of the Bourbon *Charte constitutionnelle* of 1814, frequently even verbatim, thus demonstrating parallels between constitutional monarchism and the Napoleonic system.⁹⁴ At the same time, however, the provision of Article 5 that the

President was responsible directly to the people, to who he could always appeal in form of plebiscites, gave the office of the “President King” and the constitutional system as a whole a very distinct character. In contrast to the authoritative President, the three bodies involved in legislation lacked powers and independence. This was particularly true for the *Conseil d’État* (Art. 47–53), whose main task was the preparation of laws, and for the *Sénat* (Art. 19–33), envisaged as “guardian of the basic covenant and public liberties” (Art. 25). Both of them were more or less directly controlled by the President, who had essentially a free hand in nominating its 40 to 50 (Council of State) and 80 to 150 members (Senate) respectively. Only the elected *Corps législatif*, composed of 275 deputies (Art. 34–46), could claim some autonomy, limited by the President’s privilege to nominate the chamber’s president and vice-presidents (Art. 43) and his right to convoke, adjourn or dissolve the *Corps législatif* (Art. 46).

From within parliament, effective resistance against a further strengthening of Louis-Napoléon’s personal position and the restoration of the Empire in particular was thus not to be expected. Pro-Empire demonstrations and public acclamations of the Prince-President—partly organized by the prefects, but partly also expressions of true popular sentiment—convinced Louis-Napoléon that the Empire was not only desirable, but the nation’s will. It was in this vein that in a speech at Bordeaux on October 9, 1852 he publicly announced his commitment to an imperial restoration.⁹⁵ At the same occasion, he emphasized the objectives of the Empire, reciting the mantra outlined in his previous political writings that the “Napoleonic Idea” was not one of war, but essentially peace, national reconciliation and progress.⁹⁶

Only one month later, imperial dignity was established by the same means as under the rule of Napoleon Bonaparte, namely a formal revision of the existing Constitution through the procedure of a *sénatus-consulte*. The constitutional change of November 7, by which a hereditary Empire was established and Louis-Napoléon made Napoleon III,⁹⁷ was subjected to another plebiscite taking place on November 21 and 22. The approval rate was even more impressive than it had been eleven months earlier, with 7.824.189 official *oui* votes outnumbering the 253.145 *non* votes by more than thirty times.⁹⁸ Thus, the Second Empire had now become political fact. Endowed with plebiscitary legitimation and strengthened by further constitutional modification on December 25, 1852 that sought to reinforce the power of the Emperor while encroaching on that of parliament,⁹⁹ Napoleon III could now proceed to put his political visions into practice, which in the two decades to come were to keep not only France, but the whole of Europe in suspense.¹⁰⁰

4.3 The Reception of the Coup and Napoleon’s Rule

Louis-Napoléon’s coup in 1851 and the establishment of the Second Empire was eagerly received throughout Europe. The regime change and its possible consequences loomed large not only because of France’s importance, but also because the country had once again become *the* “laboratory” of dealing with a distinctly revolutionary situation. Given many obvious parallels, the events of 1851 rekindled memories of Napoleon Bonaparte’s seizure of power, which had eventually resulted in dramatic

consequences for France and the European political order. A central question therefore was in how far the situation of 1851 could be compared to that of 1799, and to what extent the two Napoleons were similar or different in their personalities and political ideas. Louis-Napoléon's advent to power also raised anew the question as to whether Bonapartism and Caesarism were indeed a universal, or only a specifically French phenomenon. People arguing in the latter vein could fall back, among others, on Chateaubriand, who in his *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* emphasized the peculiar national character of the French that had been perfectly matched by Napoleon (I):

[...] the French are instinctively attracted by power; they have no love for liberty; equality alone is their idol. Now, equality and despotism are secretly connected. In those two respects, Napoleon took his origin from a source in the hearts of the French, militarily inclined towards power, democratically enamored of the levelling process. Mounting the throne, he seated the people there, too; a proletarian king, he humiliated kings and nobles in his ante-chambers; he equalized social ranks not by lowering them, but by elevating them: levelling down would have pleased plebeian envy more, levelling up was more flattering to its pride. French vanity was inflated, too, by the superiority Bonaparte gave us over the rest of Europe.¹⁰¹

In what follows, attention will first be paid to some of the reactions to Louis-Napoléon's seizing power and its assessment among French intellectuals. Subsequently, the reception of the events and the new political regime abroad will be taken into closer examination, with a focus on Germany.

4.3.1 French Voices

In France itself, the reception of Louis-Napoléon's seizure of power was of a dichotomous nature: in the majority, one could find positive assessments or even openly propagandistic pieces, part of which were certainly steered by the regime, but part of which were also the expression of true relief and satisfaction in educated circles about the end of political uncertainty; in the clear minority remained works by declared opposition members, most of whom had been forced into exile or underground, that were all the more critical and pejorative in their tone and as such faced tight state restrictions. Since the first group of pro-Napoleonic writings largely aligned themselves with and repeated earlier arguments for a "Caesaristic" or Bonapartist regime present in authors like Romieu and the works of Louis-Napoléon himself, some examples in the second group of anti-Napoleonic utterances should now be examined.

The best known—and perhaps most influential—French intellectual who raised his voice against Louis-Napoléon was Victor Hugo (1802–1885). Even in the run-up to the coup, Hugo—an elected Member of Parliament—was a decided critic of Louis-Napoléon and an eloquent defender of the republican cause. As early as in July 1851, in a debate taking place in the *Assemblée nationale législative*,¹⁰² Hugo coined the famous *Napoléon le Petit*, which was to become the title of Hugo's most outspoken account of Napoleon and Bonapartism one year later and turned into a common denominator of

the “would-be Napoleon” in opposition circles. As one of the figureheads of the republican opposition, Victor Hugo actively resisted Louis-Napoléon’s coup in December 1851 and had to leave the country, relocating first to Brussels, then Jersey and finally Guernsey, where he was to live until 1870. It was in exile that between mid-June and mid-July 1852 *Napoléon le Petit* was drafted.¹⁰³ The manuscript that went to print quickly and was soon smuggled into France was a virulent pamphlet, in which Hugo elaborated on the methods used to achieve the coup. At the same time, it was a ferocious personal attack on Louis-Napoléon.

Under Louis-Napoléon, for whom to describe Hugo falls back on the concepts “dictatorship” and “despotism” rather than Caesarism, the words independence, enfranchisement, progress, popular and national pride, and greatness could no longer be pronounced. He would treat France like a conquered country: “He effaces the republican inscriptions; he cuts down the trees of liberty, and makes firewood of them.”¹⁰⁴ Political went hand in hand with moral degradation, for which Bonaparte had to be blamed as well. Hugo accused him of having done more than kill people: “he has caused men’s minds to dwindle, he has withered the heart of the citizen. [...] an indescribable gangrene of material prosperity threatens to cause public honesty to degenerate into rotteness.”¹⁰⁵ True, Louis-Napoléon could refer to the majority of Frenchmen having cast their vote in his favor. But *who* had voted? Frightened citizens and ignorant peasants, according to Hugo. And what was the choice offered to them by Bonaparte? No real one:

Choose between beauty and the beast; the beast is communism; the beauty is my dictatorship. Choose! There is no medium! Society prostrate, your house burned, your barn pillaged, your cow stolen, your fields confiscated, your wife outraged, your children murdered, your wine drunk by others, yourself devoured alive by the great gaping-jaws yonder, or me as your emperor! Choose! Me or Croque-mitaine!

This, in turn, also highlighted *what* people had actually been “voting” for on December 20, 1851:

Dictatorship, autocracy, slavery, the republic a despotism, France a pashalik, chains on all wrists, a seal on every mouth, silence, degradation, fear, the spy the soul of all things! They have given to a man [...] omnipotence and omniscience! They have made that man the supreme, the only legislator, the alpha of the law, the omega of power! They have decreed that he is Minos, that he is Numa, that he is Solon, that he is Lycurgus! They have incarnated in him the people, the nation, the state, the law!¹⁰⁶

For Hugo, there were axioms in probity, honesty and justice as there were axioms in geometry. Accordingly, moral truth was no more at the mercy of a vote than algebraic truth, a conviction he condensed in the sentence:

[...] cause seven million five hundred thousand voters to declare that two and two make five, that the straight line is the longest way, that the whole is less than a part;

cause eight millions, ten millions, a hundred millions of voters so to declare, and you will not have advanced a single step.¹⁰⁷

Hugo's widely read work was witty and intellectually stimulating, providing inspiration to the regime's opponents and setting the tone for future republican historians of the Empire. However, it remained an invective against Louis-Napoléon rather than a politico-theoretical treatise trying to develop a more complex understanding of the coup and Bonapartism. This was also the view of the *Westminster Review*, which in its October issue of 1852 bluntly stated: "Of explanation we have little in this volume. The poet revels in images; the orator in apostrophes and epigrams; the philosopher is nowhere to be found. Page after page of splendid writing; not a page of careful thinking. It is a cry, a protest, an appeal."¹⁰⁸ In a similar vein, Karl Marx (1818–1883) later criticized Hugo's description of the events of 1851 "like a bolt from the blue", as "the violent act of a single individual" only, whereby Hugo—against his very intentions—made Louis-Napoléon "great instead of little by ascribing to him a personal power of initiative unparalleled in world history".¹⁰⁹

The verdict to be first and foremost a personal diatribe against France's new leader holds true for other works, too, including Victor Schoelcher's (1804–1893) *Histoire des crimes du 2 décembre* (1852), whose title speaks volumes.¹¹⁰ Contemporaries acknowledged that the work "wants the splendid rhetoric and sarcasm [*sic!*] of 'Napoleon le Petit'; but it compensates the deficiency by presenting a circumstantial, animated, detailed history of the *coup d'état*".¹¹¹ Narrative in its approach, the pamphlet—in spite of the palpable indignation of the author—is indeed written with slightly more impartiality than Hugo's. Nevertheless, Schoelcher, too, essentially describes the "crime of December 2" as a personal one of Louis-Napoléon, while absolving the French people, who—looking upon Bonaparte as the armed solution of their difficulties—had been duped by his artful restoration of universal suffrage and promises of amelioration.

All in all, an objective and impartial assessment of Louis-Napoléon could hardly be expected in mid-century France with its sharp ideological divisions, even less so among his political adversaries. Quite remarkable is therefore Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's *La Révolution sociale démontrée par le coup d'état du 2 décembre* (1852), which saw four editions in just two months.¹¹² Appearing at the same time as Hugo's and Schoelcher's pamphlets, the work of Proudhon as the mastermind of French socialism at the time is special: his was not written in exile, but while serving a three-year sentence for anti-governmental activities and *offense au Président de la République* in particular (June 1849 to June 1852); his book could only be published in France after Proudhon had intervened against its initial ban with a personal letter to Louis-Napoléon; and his did not lapse into a furious attack against the Emperor-to-be and offering a predominantly "individualized" analysis of the coup. Rather, Proudhon's book accepted the coup as another step towards the final triumph of socialism, and was less of a critique than an appeal to Louis-Napoléon to work for the revolution and embrace a progressive political program.

For Proudhon, "Louis Napoleon is, like his uncle, a revolutionary dictator, but with the difference that the first Consul had closed the first phase of the revolution, while the President opened the second". To denounce the president as a counter-revolutionary

was declared absurd: “not only does Louis Napoleon bear, on his forehead and his shoulder, the stigmata of revolution; he is the agent of a new era, he expresses a superior expression of the Revolution”.¹¹³ The coup of December 2, 1851 was “the signal of an advancing march in the revolutionary way”, its significance “the democratic and social Revolution”.¹¹⁴ Whether Louis-Napoléon actually wanted to be in the forefront of the revolutionary movement and whether he would be able to master this challenge in the end was a different issue. Nevertheless, the “idea” he and his coup represented was genuinely revolutionary.

The regime change of 1851 was—according to Proudhon—the natural consequence of three years of reaction with permanent preaching against socialism, and the need for a restoration of authority, the absorption of individual liberty in the state. The December 2 coup had only been possible because Napoleon had internalized the one secret that explained all previous revolutions in France: the problem of the proletariat, *l'idée sociale*. The perception of him as the representative of the social idea together with the defense of universal suffrage had granted public support and made his success possible.

These views were coupled with his theory of non-government or “anarchy”, which this coup illustrated anew, given that it “highlights the contradiction of governmentalism and the economy, of state and society, in today’s France”.¹¹⁵ Under the present state of affairs, Proudhon concluded, “Caesarism” was no true alternative to “anarchism” or “socialism” any longer, as Romieu and others had suggested. The (geo-)political and even more so societal conditions *vis-à-vis* Roman Caesarism were too different. For Proudhon there was no doubt whatsoever: “we are in total socialism.”¹¹⁶ The decisive question was just how socialism would be continued and finalized in the future.

Proudhon’s work did try to provide a “structural” understanding of Louis-Napoléon and his regime by emphasizing the peculiar characteristics of mid-century industrial society. A French contemporary one might have expected to choose a similar approach or even to provide a full-fledged theory of Bonapartism in post-revolutionary societies was Alexis de Tocqueville. He had not only submitted a pioneering assessment of Bonapartism as one possible form of modern-day illegitimate rule in his *Democracy in America* (1835–1840), but also recognized at an early stage the genuinely “socialist” character of the 1848 Revolution, distinguishing it from previous revolutionary upheavals. Yet Tocqueville did not present a monographic study on the subject. This does not imply a lack of concern with Louis-Napoléon’s seizing power and Bonapartism in general, however. On the contrary, the experience of the 1851 coup was a crucial stimulus for starting his study of the old regime and the French Revolution (*L’Ancien Régime et la Révolution*, 1856),¹¹⁷ to be followed by a second volume on the French Revolution as such and to be completed by a third analyzing the regime of Napoleon Bonaparte and its effect on government and political culture in France. But his early death in 1859 frustrated these plans. Nevertheless, it might be worthwhile to extract Tocqueville’s attitude towards Louis-Napoléon and the Second Empire from the assessments he made in his *Souvenirs* and in his correspondence.¹¹⁸

Tocqueville’s utterances in the late 1840s and 1850s reveal that he was aware of the equivocal aspects which made the “Napoleonic system” appealing to many: its combination of revolutionary and conservative qualities, the promise of stability alongside progress, peace alongside national *grandeur*. None of these aspects, however,

seemed tempting to Tocqueville, since the price the nation had to pay for the new political system was the loss of liberty. Indeed, as regards personal liberty, Tocqueville deemed the situation worse under the nephew than under the uncle, and he had even less sympathy for the former than the latter. In view of what Tocqueville held in high esteem throughout his life, namely steadfast attachment to the principles of regulated liberty and a dedicated respect for legality, Louis-Napoléon's coup was illegitimacy and illegality in essence. To Tocqueville—among 230 parliamentarians voting for the immediate deposition and impeachment of the usurper on December 2—the legitimization *a posteriori* of the coup by plebiscite seemed a farce as well, as he made clear in a letter to the editor of the London *Times*:

[...] never was a more odious mockery offered to a nation. The people is called upon to express its opinion, yet not only is public discussion suppressed, but even the knowledge of the facts. The people is asked its opinion, but the first measure taken to obtain it is to establish military terrorism throughout the country, and to threaten with deprivation every public agent who does not approve in writing what has been done.

All in all, the condition France faced after Louis-Napoléon's act of violence could only be described as miserable:

Force overturning law, trampling on the liberty of the press and of the person, deriding the popular will, in whose name the Government pretends to act—France torn from the alliance of free nations to be yoked to the despotic Monarchies of the Continent—such is the result of the coup d'état.¹¹⁹

What seemed a characteristic feature to Tocqueville was the decisive role of the army in the December coup. In this respect, he saw a clear difference even to Bonaparte's 18 Brumaire, as he explained in a conversation with Nassau William Senior (1790–1864) on December 22, 1851. For Tocqueville, Louis-Napoléon's coup was unique since this was “the first time that the army has seized France, bound and gagged her, and laid her at the feet of her ruler”. In contrast, every previous revolution had been made by a political party, including the 18 Brumaire: it had ended, but not begun in “military tyranny”, since there had been widespread support among the educated classes for the removal of the Directory. 1799 had thus been “almost as much a civil as a military revolution”, while Louis-Napoléon was a much more isolated figure whose real support lay in the army. For a real parallel one would have to go back 1,800 years in history.¹²⁰ However, Tocqueville saw “militarism” not only as a crucial element of the regime's coming into being, but the very heart of the whole system, which would inevitably result in expansionist and belligerent endeavors.¹²¹

Despite the distaste of Louis-Napoléon and his regime, whose establishment Tocqueville considered a national humiliation and disaster, he did not exclusively cast the blame for the misery on the second Bonaparte, as Hugo, Schoelcher and others did. In his view, society played an important part. As early as in 1849 Tocqueville remarked that the current situation would “result from the crude and unintelligent aspiration

of the popular masses for a constitution of any power whatsoever and from the discouragement of the enlightened classes, who hardly know any longer what to wish for".¹²² December 2, 1851 as well as the Second Empire then only continued and accelerated the corruption of the French *mores*. The longer the new regime was in power, the more disenchanted Tocqueville became, convinced that France had lost her aspirations for noble ideals, moral principles and great deeds. Instead, citizens had become subjects dreaming only of petty affairs and material comforts. This, Tocqueville argued, included the learned elite of the country. Yet the best men of his time would learn to accommodate themselves to the empire and even learn to acquire a "taste for servitude".¹²³

In September 1858, Tocqueville wrote to Arthur de Gobineau (1816–1882) about the intellectual climate in France: "People believe strongly in nothing, they love nothing, they hate nothing, and they hope for nothing [. . .]"¹²⁴ However, until the very end of his life, Tocqueville did not abandon himself to fatalism or even acquire a taste for the "government of the sabre" and the "baton". Rather, he held the hope that things could take a turn for the better, that "a better upbringing could redress the evil that a bad upbringing has accomplished".¹²⁵

Severity and objects of criticism varied considerably among French intellectuals in opposition to Louis-Napoléon, but arguments for the coup and the Napoleonic system by supporters were not uniform either. This holds true for the domestic reactions in France and the tremendous reaction the meteoric rise of Louis-Napoléon provoked abroad. Taking a look beyond the French borders will provide an additional outside perspective on the perception of Louis-Napoléon and provide an idea how the debate about Caesarism was developing in a mid-century environment of "national awakening" and "nation building". An example of particular interest in this respect is—once more—the German-speaking world.

4.3.2 Perception Abroad: German Reactions

It is striking that the examination of the December coup and the engagement with Caesarism on a European level ensued particularly swiftly and thoroughly among German intellectuals of the time. Several factors, both domestic and foreign, favored an intensified perception in the German-speaking world. On the one hand, it was the geographic proximity of France—a nation gradually assuming the role of the *Erbfeind* ("Hereditary Enemy") in German public opinion since the *Befreiungskriege* ("Wars of Liberation")—which made for the immediacy of French political developments in Germany. Closely linked to that was the unresolved national question and the realization of Germany's continued inferiority as long as it was not able to confront *La Grande Nation* united and strong. Such fears seemed anything but unreasonable if Louis-Napoléon should pursue a foreign policy as expansive as his uncle. At the same time, however, Louis-Napoléon's agenda of a militarization and centralization of rule and society also commanded some admiration, commending itself as a possible model for developing and strengthening the German nation.

Another factor that made for the intensity of the debate on French politics and Caesaristic forms of government was that the Revolution of 1848/1849 had marked a

particularly dramatic caesura for the German-speaking world, given the massive political concussions that all German states—including Austria—had undergone, and which had brought some of them to the brink of downfall. These verberations at the end of the 1840s appeared all the more spectacular bearing in mind the decades of political quiescence and attempted depoliticization since the Congress of Vienna under the reactionary Metternich System, a period also known as *Biedermeier*. The Revolution itself had ended in somewhat of a draw without a clear political decision that would have offered a map for future developments. Conscious of the immediate revolutionary danger, German rulers had made concessions to the liberal and democratic movement, manifest in granting wide-ranging constitutional and legal guarantees. Many of these concessions, however, were revoked as soon as revolutionary energy had abated or the insurgent movements had been crushed with military power, which was often followed by clear neo-absolutist policies. A true democratization and constitutionalization of the political systems hence failed, but a restoration of the *status quo ante* proved to be impossible as well. Consequently, political uncertainty was perpetuated beyond 1848/1849.

Against this backdrop and in view of obvious social and economic transformation processes, the question as to the compatibility of progress and stability, democracy and despotism gained new dynamic in Germany with the rise of Louis-Napoléon. It speaks for the *Zeitgeist* and the similarity of political concerns in mid-century France and Germany that Romieu's works on *L'ère des Césars* (1850) and *Le Spectre rouge de 1852* (1851) were almost immediately translated into German.¹²⁶ It was above all due to the translation of Romieu's books that "Caesarism" finally entered German political language (*Cäsarismus*).¹²⁷

After the coup of Louis-Napoléon, this concept swiftly gained currency and soon became a fixed component in German political thought, the widening usage going hand in hand with increasing theorization, but also differentiation of the concept. The sheer multitude of opinions expressed in an intellectual environment turning not only growingly "public," but also complex, makes it difficult to locate clearly discernible "schools of interpretations." Even at the individual level, a clear distinction of positions for and against Caesarism and Bonapartism sometimes proved problematic, since both could be expressed by one and the same person, depending on the context in or the intention with which the phenomenon was assessed. In view of these challenges, the following is not intended to offer a systematic reception history, but rather an attempt to demonstrate the wide range of interpretations the coup of Napoleon III and (French) "Caesarism" experienced in the German-speaking area during the 1850s and 1860s.¹²⁸

One of the earliest and most elaborate attempts to evaluate the coup of 1851 in depth was Constantin Frantz's (1817–1891) *Louis Napoleon* (1852), the result of a trip he had made to France in order to get first-hand experience of the political situation and to study the comparatively new phenomena of socialism and communism *in situ*.¹²⁹ The text not only reflects Frantz's strong aversion to parliamentary democracy, but also offers one of the clearest justifications of the recent coup carried out by Louis-Napoléon as both republican and democratic.

In the introduction, Frantz made clear that his ambition was not to provide a biographical study of the French leader. Rather, his aim was to assess the underlying

principles of which Louis-Napoléon was not only a bearer, but which even carried him.¹³⁰ This was the principle of *Napoleonismus*,¹³¹ its characteristic feature being the ambivalent parallelism of monarchical and republican elements:

[...] a body politic that is neither a true republic nor a true monarchy: one-man rule, which as such is similar to a monarchy, but because it is not founded on its own right but rather emerges from the will of the people, makes the whole just appear to resemble a monarchy.¹³²

Frantz argued that the Revolution had created irremovable precedents in France, and perhaps the most important *sine qua non* in France was acknowledging the principle that “public power must emanate from the people”. However, Frantz discounted the belief of “democrats” that a representative body (*Volksvertretung*) or parliamentary government would be best suited to determine “ends and means of this power”.¹³³ In a post-revolutionary society as centralized and atomized as the French, he claimed, parliamentarism could only produce “organized demagoguery”.¹³⁴ The only feasible answer to the political challenge of a people “which destroyed the entire substance of its previous political life [*Staatsleben*] and has been without a shared perspective on the state ever since, but is nevertheless in need of public order”, was the following:

This people puts one man at the peak, who represents the collective will of the people in his very being, and this man provides a constitution which is ratified by the people. This man does not rule on the strength of his legitimacy, or any other moral legitimacy, but rather in the name of a physical necessity, since he rests upon the majority and there is the necessity for the minority to submit itself.¹³⁵

This was the very essence of Napoleonism. According to Frantz, the “substantial form” of such a system, whose superiority to the alternatives arose from its ability to integrate popular sovereignty, the popular will and reason—thus crucial elements of republicanism—in a single ruler, was necessarily “dictatorship” (*Dictatur*): not an “exceptional dictatorship” (*exceptionelle Dictatur*), as seen in other historical moments, but a “dictatorship in principal” (*prinzipielle Diktatur*), “exactly because the French Republic is a very singular body politic such as has never been seen before”.¹³⁶ More consciously than most other political thinkers of the nineteenth century, Frantz hence pre-empted and argued for Schmitt’s later distinction between sovereign and commissarial dictatorship.

For Frantz, Napoleonism was not only distinctively republican, dictatorial and permanent, but essentially based on democratic principles, too: “The state power must have the majority of the people behind it, [...] only then does the collective will, united in the leader, have the power of a physical necessity.” For that reason, suffrage had to be universal, since “universal suffrage is the official expression of equality, and because equality is the only clear political vision of the French people”.¹³⁷

All in all, Napoleonism was more than just an alternative to parliamentarism, it was its inversion:

[...] according to the parliamentary system, the people choose to be represented, but here they choose to be governed; there, the so-called executive power is subordinate and serves parliaments, here, it is superordinate and controlling; There the state power rests in the parliament, here it rests in the leader [*Chef*].¹³⁸

As much as Napoleonism was a counter model to parliamentarism, it was the negation of the “principle of discussion” and “dialectics”.¹³⁹ Human nature was first and foremost manifested in “will” (*Wille*), only a derived and secondary activity of which was “thinking” (*Denken*). Never in history had states and empires been instituted by doctrines, and never had doctrinaires blessed mankind, but men with true strength of will. In fighting the wrong philosophy of thinking and discussion, eventually a single man would take the lead, having a sabre in his hand: “Sic jubeo, sic mando, stat pro ratione voluntas.”¹⁴⁰ That man was Napoleon (I). It had been his historical achievement, “to seal the crater of the Revolution with the throne of the Caesars”.¹⁴¹ The “Napoleonic principle” was now to be perpetuated by Louis-Napoléon, who was predestined to take over the role of his uncle not because of his family relations, but because he had dared to be the living proof of his uncle’s principle.¹⁴² He had demonstrated the indispensable will to power in earlier attempts to usurp and even more so in the successful coup of 1851. In assuming power, however, he had not acted against the *volonté générale*. On the contrary, he had been elected president to undertake a coup. The crucial task that remained to be achieved in France was to crack “egoism” (*Eigenwille*) and help turn it into an “ethical will”: “If the people elect a leader to whom they deliver up their own self-will in order to obey this leader, and if in turn this leader forgoes his own self-will in order to serve the people, then a moral bond develops between both parts.”¹⁴³ Even though Napoleonism was not without its risks, as Frantz had to acknowledge, it was the inevitable principle of contemporary France: the “left path”, via parliamentarism, would lead to communism; the alternative to the right, via legitimism and restoration, to another abyss of Revolution.¹⁴⁴ Therefore the middle path embodied by the Napoleonic principle was the only one that could reasonably be chosen: “Resting on the debris of factions, it is the only system that is not directed toward party building, but rather to the organization of the state.”¹⁴⁵

Making a strong plea for “Napoleonism”, Frantz clearly recognized the interconnectedness of dictatorship and *volonté générale*. This, together with the incisiveness and cogency of his analysis, elevated Frantz’s study above the average assessments by German conservatives at the time. Quite a few of them wavered between uncritical expressions of appreciation that Louis-Napoléon had terminated the danger of revolution on the one hand, and strict rejection of everything that could be subsumed under Caesarism or Bonapartism, respectively, on the other.¹⁴⁶ In this vein, the Prussian statesman and general Joseph Maria von Radowitz (1797–1853) declared “modern Caesarism” to be “a mere rule of violence”¹⁴⁷ and the most obnoxious form the reaction to the Revolutions of 1848 had taken, the other two represented by the *altständische* model (estates-based corporatism) and the *Patrimonialstaat* (patrimonial state).¹⁴⁸ However, though Radowitz declared that every other party in France could claim more legitimacy than Louis-Napoléon, whose basis was “really nothing more than the most impure, most reprehensible, personal ambition of a

human being", he still desired the usurper's triumph. Caesarism was, after all, a lesser evil than a victory of the Reds, the only likely alternative. Full of disillusionment, Radowitz remarked on the present state of affairs: "justice, reason, moral law have lost their right."¹⁴⁹

Radowitz, as most other contemporary observers in the conservative camp, eventually approved of the coup of 1851 for at least preventing even worse. At the same time, there was widespread agreement that Bonapartism and Caesarism was a genuinely French phenomenon that was both unfeasible and even less desirable for Germany. Many declared liberals and democrats shared this opinion.

In the 1850s and 1860s, there were still a few liberal-minded figures with Napoleonic sentiments in the German states; but altogether, German "Bonapartism" (in the classical sense of the word) was already a descending branch when Napoleon III assumed power. This was above all due to the growing nationalistic *Zeitgeist*, in the context of which Louis-Napoléon was perceived not so much as a symbol of political change and an alternative "Caesaristic" system, but as Emperor of the French and thus potential enemy of Germany. The range of critical encounters with French Napoleonism encompassed abstract-philosophical contributions, such as Karl Christian Planck's (1819–1880) *Deutschland und der Napoleonismus* (1860),¹⁵⁰ and down-to-earth pamphlets alike. Many of the authors opposing the regime of Napoleon III made an effort to contrast more generally "Romanism" with "Germanism", a distinction that was anything but unfamiliar in contemporary scholarship.¹⁵¹ Among them was Gustav Diezel (1817–1858), whose publications of the 1850s attracted considerable attention and a wide readership.

In his works, notably *Deutschland und die abendländische Civilisation* (1852) and *Frankreich, seine Elemente und ihre Entwicklung* (1853),¹⁵² Diezel critically addressed French post-revolutionary politics and the challenges Europe and Germany faced in an age of Napoleonic Caesarism (*Kaiserthum*). He detected a distinction between two different forms of democracy.¹⁵³ The first form was French and neo-Roman, rooted in the principle of equality and compatible with both the ancient ideal of Empire and the French *Ancien Régime*. Eventually, this kind of Romanic democracy had to take the form of "absolutism of the people, that ancient Roman lust to rule",¹⁵⁴ which found its most explicit expression in the regimes of the two Bonapartes. The path leading to the establishment of a Caesaristic regime under Napoleon I, in Diezel's eyes a representative of "absolute Romandom",¹⁵⁵ appears as a repetition of classical Rome's transition from "republic" to "empire", marked by violent battles over property distribution. This was the necessary outcome of France's long-term history of centralization, despotism and lack of any true sense of liberty (*Freiheit*). The similarity of the events in 1848 and 1851/1852 led Diezel to conclude *a fortiori* that a Roman-Caesaristic type of dictatorship was the only possible form of government in modern-day France, a nation declared unfit for "a freer constitution and for any kind of self-government".¹⁵⁶

Diezel contrasted Romanic democracy, associated with Rome, Caesarism and the principle of equality, with "true" (*wahr*) and "reasonable" (*vernünftig*) democracy, termed "Germanic". *Germanische Demokratie* was grounded on property, free labor, and—above all—individual liberty (*individuelle Freiheit*). According to Diezel, Germanic liberty and democracy in the modern world found its clearest expressions in

the constitutional systems of Britain and the United States. On the basis of such presumed antithesis, Diezel arrived at what he deemed a "universal dialectic".¹⁵⁷ Indeed, Britain and the United States might be seen to have assumed the role of institutionalized expressions of Germanic liberty and democracy. The nation, however, to which these principles were the most natural and intrinsic for Diezel was the German one. The pressing challenge was thus to revive the Germanic spirit in Germany by eradicating all Romanic and Caesaristic elements which had been injected into the system not only by the French and by political thought in the tradition of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, but also by the Habsburgs and the papacy. Only by wiping out the neo-Roman elements in the body politic could a powerful German national state be successfully built, which would be a prerequisite for the durable defense of liberty and security in Germany against both French Caesarism and Russian absolutism. France, whose historical fate was "foreordained by its culture [*Bildung*] and emergence, by the nature of its national spirit", and whose development had been inevitable, lacked every prospect of national development. Not so Germany, which faced a potentially bright future: for Diezel, it was at the discretion of Germans to decide upon their own destiny and "to arrive at a form appropriate to the national character, guaranteeing the free movement of the individual".¹⁵⁸ This was not only in the interest of Germany, but of Europe as a whole, since "the further development of civilization on the Continent depends upon the constitution of the German nation".¹⁵⁹

Disqualifying Caesarism as a "French peculiarity" and the expression of distinct "Romanism" prevailed beyond the German-speaking world proper. One noteworthy example is the German-American liberal thinker Francis (originally Franz) Lieber (1800–1872), who in his work *On Civil Liberty and Self-Government* (1853) sharply distinguished between republicanism and democracy, allowing him to praise American republicanism and self-government while describing the affinities between absolutism and democracy as a French particularity.¹⁶⁰ Even more explicitly than Diezel, Lieber made an attempt to understand both the first and second Napoleonic Empire in ancient Roman rather than in modern terms, thus reviving the grand parallel which had been so prominent at the turn of the century. In particular, he analyzed the question of legitimacy from the point of view of the ancient Roman *lex regia*, arguing that post-revolutionary French politics and Caesarism were in the end nothing less than the outcome of the transmutation of that ancient Roman legal fiction as manifest in the social contract theories of Hobbes and Rousseau. For him, the imperial regimes established by the two Napoleons were simply modern repetitions of the ancient practice of transferring *maiestas* from the *populus romanus* to the emperors. Lieber concluded that the "transition from an uninstitutional popular absolutism to the imperial sovereignty" was not only "easy and natural", but indeed nothing essentially new.¹⁶¹

Underlining the neo-Roman character of contemporary Caesarism and Bonapartism or their parallels to the ancient world, which was fairly common in intellectual encounters at the time, did not remain unchallenged. Even more than in the context of the late eighteenth century, the prerequisites as well as the social and political framework of "ancient" and "modern" Caesarism struck contemporaries as being very different in the mid-nineteenth century. Perhaps the most distinguished

intellectual authority arguing against equalizing modern Caesarism with the ancient rule of the Caesars was Theodor Mommsen (1817–1903), one of the greatest classicist of the nineteenth century and later honored with the Nobel Prize in Literature 1902 for his work on Roman History.

The third volume of Mommsen's *Römische Geschichte* (1856) ended with a most positive, if not glorifying, depiction of Julius Caesar, whom Mommsen described as a "perfect statesman" with a world-historical mission, namely the transformation of the *Imperium Romanum*.¹⁶² While Mommsen was thus clearly in the tradition of Hegel's idea of "great men in history", he emphasized that Caesar could not easily be compared with figures like Alexander or Napoleon. What made him distinct was that despite his military genius, he had remained first and foremost a statesman: unlike them, he had started and pursued his career as a politician (*Demagog*) like Pericles and Gaius Gracchus, aiming—whenever possible—to reach his objectives without force of arms. The one person he could most likely be compared with was Cromwell, someone who managed to climb from being leader of the opposition to head of the army and then "democratic king" (*Demokratenkönig*), and who "in his development, as in his objectives and successes, perhaps among all statesmen most resembled Caesar".¹⁶³

Despite the qualifications made, Mommsen's positive depiction of the historical Caesar could be interpreted as an appraisal of modern Caesarism and Bonapartism, and of the regime of Napoleon III in particular. In the second edition of his *Römische Geschichte* Mommsen therefore felt compelled to object especially against the practice of "reinterpreting judgement about Caesar into judgement about so-called Caesarianism [*sic!*]". Rather, Mommsen considered the "history of Caesar and Roman Caesarism" as "a more bitter criticism of modern autocracy than a human hand is able to write".¹⁶⁴

If [...] in Caesar's own soul the hopeful dream of a union between free national development and absolute rule still prevails, then the rule of the very gifted emperors of the Julian dynasty has taught in a dreadful way how feasible it is to carry fire and water in the same vessel.

For Mommsen, Julius Caesar's dictatorial form of rule was legitimate only because it had been the necessary outcome of the particular conditions of the time. In other contexts, however, Caesari(ani)sm lacked such historical legitimacy and was "simultaneously a hideous face and a usurpation".¹⁶⁵

In a review of Adolphe Thiers' work *L'histoire du consulat et de l'Empire* one year later (1858), Mommsen drew a clear distinction between the rule of Caesar and Napoleon Bonaparte, dismissing the latter's: "The mysterious connection between nation and ruler, as it existed between Caesar and the Romans, between Cromwell and the English nation, never transpired between Napoleon and the French."¹⁶⁶ Napoleon might have been a great ruler, Mommsen admitted; but in essence, he had always remained an autocrat: "He did not become an autocrat, he was one."¹⁶⁷

On the person and regime of the Emperor's nephew, Napoleon III, Mommsen seems to have had a less clear attitude. A certain personal admiration for the second Bonaparte on the French throne shines through at least in private correspondence.¹⁶⁸ All in all, however, Mommsen kept critical distance to the "Caesarism" of Louis-

Napoléon. This was not least since he, as so many fellow countrymen, remained biased towards French politics for national-political reasons. Against the background of both his scholarly and national reservations, Theodor Mommsen declined the invitation to collaborate in writing a history of Julius Caesar with Napoleon III, who was smart enough to identify the German classicist as a potential intellectual ally of much international weight for creating his own “legend”. Ultimately, Napoleon III realized his publication project—following in the footsteps of his uncle’s *Précis des guerres de César*—with the support of French classical and military scholars. Yet the result in the form of a two-volume *Histoire de Jules César* (1865/1866), which was translated almost instantly into a number of European languages, turned out to be a very conventional piece.¹⁶⁹ It did not include anything particularly novel concerning either the ancient Caesar or modern Caesarism, even though the preface contained the unambiguous remark that the very aim of this book was to demonstrate that figures like Caesar, Charlemagne and Napoleon were destined by providence to lead the way for the peoples of the world.¹⁷⁰ Accordingly damning was Mommsen’s criticism, who found not only fault with the “miserable script”, which gave “quite the impression of being a brief sketch of Roman history for upper secondary students”, but also declared his expectations belied of “seeing Caesarism defended by a practitioner”.¹⁷¹

Mommsen was not the only one who disapproved of Napoleon III’s attempt to underpin his regime with ancient analogies. An unknown reviewer of Napoleon’s work in the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums* expressed not only his discomfort about the latent anti-Semitism in the introduction, but also called to mind that “circumstances, situations, personalities and events never repeat themselves in history”.¹⁷² Roman Caesarism had been built on the ruins of a republic which had prospered for centuries and managed to make Rome the center of the world; a republic, which had crossed its zenith and was no longer suitable for the time. Napoleon Bonaparte, on the other hand, had appeared on the scene of history:

when an absolutism riddled with feudal institutions had been overthrown and the short-lived republic had not yet gained the time and strength to arrange the debris and the agitated elements into an organism, to shape and establish itself; he did not appear when the French Republic had defeated and subjugated the peoples, so that he would only have faced subjected and degenerate peoples, but rather he himself strove to subjugate the nations and failed in this attempt; even less is Napoleon III facing a weakened, spent humanity. Napoleon I and III may have seen the need for a momentary dictatorship within French conditions: in all other respects, there is no coincidence with Caesar or Augustus.¹⁷³

While these remarks are indicative of a positivist assessment of the general state of modern civilization being so very different from the ancient one, the author was noncommittal as to whether and how long the project of “Caesarism” might be continued in France, the only country in which it could possibly thrive. He left no doubts, however, as to what he considered characteristic of the system of Caesarism, a term considered better applicable to Napoleon III than Napoleon I, whose system of government was rather termed Bonapartism;¹⁷⁴ namely the covered “perpetuation” of dictatorial rule:

Caesarism [...] is autocracy with the semblance of liberal institutions. It is not despotism, which declares the people and all their material and intellectual possessions its unconditional property, to be disposed of as it likes; it is not absolutism, which permits the state to be governed according to law, but places the legislative and executive power solely and unreservedly in the person of the monarch. Caesarism recognises popular sovereignty and conveys this in the complete equality of all members of the state; it recognises institutions which are conceded a say in legislation and administration [*sic!*]. But it transfers the unconditional plenitude of power to Caesar, to whom people and institutions are completely subordinate, so that they must bow to the will of Caesar.

Caesarism was essentially grounded “partly on the fatigue of the people, on the lack of energy of the spirit, but also on the power of the sword, on the devotion of the army”.¹⁷⁵

In its lack of enthusiasm towards Caesarism and the straightened vision of the phenomenon as relevant only for France, but not Germany and Europe, the reviewer in the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums* complied with mainstream liberal as well as conservative political writing. An exception in both respects was the statesman, historian and jurist Philipp Anton von Segesser (1817–1888). Tellingly, Segesser was Swiss and Catholic, thus not caught up in German national categories and more open to the idea of political universalism. As such, he not only defended and argued for the Caesarism of Napoleon III in France, as Constantin Frantz had so eloquently done in his *Louis Napoleon* of 1852, but advocated both Napoleonic France and the system of Bonapartism as the cornerstones of a new European order.

Segesser’s political thought was based on the postulation that the substratum of politics had always been and would always remain religion. Europe as the Christian *Kulturkreis par excellence* was portrayed as being divided into three distinct zones: an orthodox, mainly Slavic; a Protestant, mainly Germanic; and a Catholic, mainly Romanic. Segesser envisaged a peaceful coexistence of these three political-confessional regions, but was at the same time convinced that the Romanic-Catholic group was predestined to gain predominance in the not too distant future. What made him confident more than anything else were the achievements of Napoleon III, for whom Segesser was full of praise in his various *Studien und Glossen zur Tagesgeschichte* throughout the Second Empire and even beyond its fall in 1870.¹⁷⁶

According to Segesser, the “new Caesar” in Paris had founded the one system of government which corresponded to the *Zeitgeist* more than any other. In its combination of democracy and authority it was “fundamentally the most perfect thing that the European spirit has managed to achieve in the realm of constitutional law in our century”.¹⁷⁷ Segesser was not unaware of the fact that the regime of Napoleon III had been erected by a *coup d’état* and that Caesarism could not be understood without the revolutionary energy surrounding it. Louis-Napoléon’s actual achievement, however, was that he had succeeded in restraining the Revolution and instrumentalizing it for his own purposes by means of social reform policies and a relentless pursuit of order. He had hence become the spearhead, organizer and master of a disciplined Revolution. In two respects, Segesser described Bonapartism as innovative and epoch-making

for European civilization: firstly, as a counter-movement to nineteenth-century individualism; secondly, as the renovator of monarchy and the monarchical principle in a new form. Dismissing legitimism and the doctrine of divine right as unviable, Segesser contrasted the “old monarchy” with the much-praised Napoleonic “democratic monarchy”,¹⁷⁸ matching the *Zeitgeist* and the needs of peoples better than any other alternative, and offering a means to push back Republicanism in Europe. Raised by the popular voice, relying on the legacy of the First Empire and justified by the restoration of the religious principle, Napoleon III appeared as the true and best “modern European”. Segesser acknowledged that the actual practice of the Second Empire was not without its faults and was even partly immoral. However, there was no doubt in his mind that it was French Caesarism which “alone embodies the politics of the future [...]” and “alone promises a political future for Catholicism”.¹⁷⁹

It was out of religious considerations that Segesser cultivated a universalistic approach to and grasp of modern Caesarism. Another group which developed a “universal” understanding by their very scholarly interest were authors dealing with the “soci(et)al dimension” of modern body politics and Caesarism/Bonapartism in particular. This dimension had never been entirely separated from the “political” in the narrow sense of the word and had been present in the debate about Caesarism from the late eighteenth century onwards. It gained in importance, however, with the rise of socialism and communism, but was not at all confined to socialist authors only. Tocqueville had been an early analyst of Caesarism from a clear “social” and “sociological” perspective, and German liberals in the mid-century followed his lead. One of them was Theodor Mundt (1808–1861).

Even in his *Pariser Kaiser-Skizzen* (1857), containing personal reflections on a recent stay in the French capital, Mundt—a moderate member of the “Young Germany”—displayed a clear and acute view on the cultural, social and political conditions in France at the time. Among other things, the work contained a detailed and astute analysis of the “Napoleonic Ideas”, and Mundt came to conclude that the historical appearance of “Napoleon III was “certainly not to be assessed according to an old and traditional type of despotism in history”.¹⁸⁰ The one characteristic feature of the Second Empire, “the common thread running through all those situations”, was termed “imperialism” (*Imperialismus*) by Mundt.¹⁸¹ Yet he had some doubt whether imperialism in its “exclusive focus on violence” would be as apt as a constitutional monarchy to perform the tricky task of “turning the ideas of the Revolution into legitimate facts”.¹⁸²

Mundt’s evident interest in the societal transformations taking place in the Empire continued and intensified in his book *Paris und Louis Napoleon*, published in 1858. There, not without some admiration for the Emperor as a person, Mundt considered “Napoleonism” (*Napoleonismus*) as an adequate expression of a new social reality. It was a synthesis of democracy and absolutism, obtaining its historical justification and power from two sources, namely the destruction of the feudal system on the one hand and the promotion of industry as the corner stone of the modern state on the other. Napoleonism was “at the start of an epoch that, with respect to its historical development, is only industrial and military”, with industrialism as its very *signum* and soul.¹⁸³

In referring to the “reduction” of state to army, and society to industry in the system of Napoleonism, Mundt’s analysis corresponded with two characteristic features of the Second Empire: 1) the militarization of the political system both as a means for domestic politics and prerequisite for an ambitious foreign policy conceived in global dimensions; and 2) the industrialization of France, which was expedited and gained momentum since Louis-Napoléon’s seizure of power. Closely linked to the industrialization policy were efforts to address the social question, which Louis-Napoléon had designated as fundamental as early as in his writings of the 1830s and 1840s. While it is true that Napoleon III never made any serious effort to put his most radical social ideas—as expressed, e.g., in *Extinction of Pauperism*¹⁸⁴—into political practice, his social policies adhered to the general principles developed in his programmatic writings, namely that it was the task of the state to actively promote economic development in a way which would also benefit the working classes. This was also in acknowledging that he himself had described the legitimacy of his regime resting to a good part on the economic and social development of the country.

Considering the social policies and the obvious advances Napoleon III made to the working class, Mundt—as others—was inclined to describe “Napoleonism” as “governmental socialism.”¹⁸⁵ If it continued along the same path, the government of Napoleon III could only finally arrive at socialism as its destination.¹⁸⁶ For the aforementioned Gustav Diezel it was clear as early as 1852 that “with Louis Napoleon, the single, undivided, equal people has ascended the throne. Its program in the interior will be essentially socialism, i.e., the use of state power to attract and pacify the hitherto depressed classes,” even though “far more the rural population than the educated and more free-thinking urban workers.” Accordingly, no one had less reason for complaint about the Napoleonic regime than socialists and communists. Bonaparte was *their* man and had proved to be “a skilful worker in perfecting Communism,” not least in that he “has made the power of the state even more absolute and more ingeniously and comprehensively centralized.”¹⁸⁷

And indeed, notwithstanding the fact that social-revolutionary intellectuals belonged to the most ardent opponents of the Napoleonic regime and would hardly agree in general on what Diezel had put forward, even authors of the radical left acknowledged that Bonapartism might be a significant stage on the way to socialism. After all, this was not only the opinion of Proudhon in *La Révolution sociale démontrée par le coup d'état du 2 décembre*, but also of Karl Marx, who with his *Der 18te Brumaire des Louis Napoleon* (1852) provided perhaps the most famous politico-theoretical answer to the *coup d'état* of 1851 and the Napoleonic system.¹⁸⁸

Written between December 1851 and March 1852 during his exile in London, Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire*, in which he demonstrated wide knowledge of contemporary history and the socio-economic situation in France as well as his sense of sarcasm, combined sociological analysis and revolutionary prophecy. At first sight, Marx does not seem to take Bonapartism all too seriously when famously citing the coup of Napoleon III as an example how history repeats itself as a “miserable farce” after it had initially—namely under Napoleon I—occurred as a tragedy: “The eighteenth Brumaire of the idiot for the eighteenth Brumaire of the genius!”¹⁸⁹ This, however, did not make the phenomenon less remarkable and instructive for Marx, whose aim—as

he later declared in the preface to the second edition of 1869—was to “demonstrate how the class struggle in France created circumstances and relationships that made it possible for a grotesque mediocrity to play a hero’s part”.¹⁹⁰ It was also in the 1869 preface that Marx rejected the Napoleonic regime being characterized by “the school-taught phrase of so-called Caesarism”, which suggested a deceptive parallel to the ancient world:

In this superficial historical analogy the main point is forgotten, namely, that in ancient Rome the class struggle took place only within a privileged minority, between the free rich and the free poor, while the great productive mass of the population, the slaves, formed the purely passive pedestal for these combatants. People forget Sismondi’s significant saying: The Roman proletariat lived at the expense of society, while modern society lives at the expense of the proletariat. With so complete a difference between the material, economic conditions of the ancient and the modern class struggles, the political figures produced by them can likewise have no more in common with one another than the Archbishop of Canterbury has with the High Priest Samuel.¹⁹¹

In his political philosophy, Marx made out two groups that constituted the political power base for Louis-Napoléon: the *Lumpenproletariat* and, to an even greater extent, the most numerous class of French society, i.e. the small-holding peasants (*Parzellenbauern*). Their support was due both to material and ideological moments. The *Lumpenproletariat* had been co-opted with the promise of social and political reforms. The peasantry, on the other hand, was not only a traditional stronghold of the Napoleonic cult, but owing to their mode of production also unable to develop an independent class consciousness and hence dependent on a strong authority, in the mid-century embodied by Louis-Napoléon:

Just as the Bourbons were the dynasty of big landed property and just as the Orleans were the dynasty of money, so the Bonapartes are the dynasty of the peasants, that is, the mass of the French people. Not the Bonaparte who submitted to the bourgeois parliament, but the Bonaparte who dispersed the bourgeois parliament is the chosen man of the peasantry.¹⁹²

With their support—though essentially advancing the interests of the finance aristocracy—Louis-Napoléon had managed to place himself above the two main classes of society, proletariat and bourgeoisie. In this position, he had managed to take the French (political) nation by surprise:

The Constitution, the National Assembly, the dynastic parties, the blue and the red republicans [. . .], the thunder from the platform, the sheet lightning of the daily press, the entire literature, the political names and the intellectual reputations, the civil law and the penal code, *liberté, égalité, fraternité* [. . .]—all has vanished like a phantasmagoria before the spell of a man whom even his enemies do not make out to be a magician.¹⁹³

Outward characteristics of Bonapartism were military penetration of society and quasi unrestricted executive power for the government. However, while the immediate and palpable result of Louis-Napoléon's coup was "the victory of Bonaparte over parliament, of the executive power over the legislative power, of force without words over the force of words", Marx was in no doubt that "the overthrow of the parliamentary republic contains within itself the germ of the triumph of the proletarian revolution".¹⁹⁴ At the end of the day, Bonapartism paved the way for the rule of the proletariat: the erratic policies of Louis-Napoléon, who was driven by the contradictory demands of his situation, made "some tolerant of revolution, others desirous of revolution, and produces actual anarchy in the name of order, while at the same time stripping its halo from the entire state machine, profanes it and makes it at once loathsome and ridiculous".¹⁹⁵ Together with the leveling and centralizing effect of Bonapartism, this would eventually guarantee the victory of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie as a prerequisite for a classless society.

However, it was especially, though not exclusively, with respect to his 1852 assessment of Bonapartism as merely the immediate and inevitable prelude to a proletarian revolution—a view shared by other socialist thinkers—that Marx was rebutted. He, as many other contemporary critics, overestimated the regime's reliance on deceit, corruption, coercion and force of arms, while underestimating its ability to create and preserve popular allegiance over a period of ultimately almost twenty years.

4.4 Legitimization Strategies of the Second Empire

To gain popular support and assume power in the wake of the 1848 Revolution had been a remarkable triumph for Louis-Napoléon, as had been the erection of the Second Empire. It had become possible due to a wide spectrum of fears, hopes and expectations in the French population: partly paranoid panic of the red menace and the wish for a protection of vested rights and the preservation of the existing social, legal and property order among members of the middle classes; hopes for a melioration of their standard of living and working conditions in the lower and working classes; increasing annoyance with the parliamentary-representative system being stuck in ideological fragmentation; corresponding desire for identifiable leadership, effective government and political calculability.

Gaining power was a crucial first step, consolidating it a no less important second one. Repression was one potential alternative for the regime, however a very dangerous one. What was decisive for the endurance of the Napoleonic regime was its ability to fulfill the high expectations of different groups of society and to generate necessary legitimacy through its policies. In this regard, Louis-Napoléon was in a more difficult situation than his uncle had been half a century before him. The latter was considered a "national hero" and "decision maker" long before the 18 Brumaire, whereas the former still had to prove his qualities as a leader; and while there was certainly frustration over the republican system in 1851, popular support had been even lower for the corrupt Directorate in 1799. There was hence urgency for Louis-Napoléon to prove himself and his regime as the best alternative for the future

France, and Napoleonic propaganda did its best to demonstrate that this was indeed the case.

Exemplary for the regime's self-conception and self-staging as "unifier" and "benefactor" of the whole nation is a public speech of Jean Gilbert Victor Fialin duc de Persigny, one of the key theorists of Bonapartism and holding high government positions in the Second Empire, which he gave in Saint-Étienne on August 26, 1863 *Sur les principes politiques de l'Empire*.¹⁹⁶ As to the character of the Empire, Persigny described it as the only reasonable substitute for the other three political alternatives which had torn France apart in the previous decades: Reaction and Restoration; rule of the bourgeoisie and the *juste milieu*, as under the July Monarchy; and Republicanism. Unlike these three, which had eventually led to a series of revolutionary regime changes, the Second Empire did not represent the interest of one particular group, but of society in its entirety and was thus in the position to overcome the rifts traversing the nation:

For the men of the upper class party, more inclined to worship royal traditions, the Empire, lacking its old legitimacy, at least offered a sort of monarchical unity; to those of the middle-class party, it guaranteed a sort of liberty moderated by the order necessary for the prosperity of commerce and industry; and those of the working class party saw in it the brilliant triumph of democracy. The new party of the Government, although composed of seemingly heterogeneous elements, therefore had the great advantage of representing the three opinions, three parties, three classes.¹⁹⁷

Persigny portrayed the "three Frances" not only as being merged in the Empire, but the latter also as a fortunate realization of the classical principle of the separation of powers outlined by Montesquieu and Machiavelli (!) as well as Locke.¹⁹⁸ The most important achievement of the Second Empire to Persigny, however, was the re-establishment of "order" both in the political and social field:

[...] by restoring the fundamental principles of authority and freedom to our institutions, the Emperor has restored order to the State, just as he, in creating the Government party independently of class antagonism, restored order to society. To ensure the destiny of the Empire, nothing more is needed.¹⁹⁹

His outlook for the future was correspondingly optimistic:

A day will come when, under the reign of a prince called Napoleon IV or Napoleon V, our grandchildren will say with pride about each of us: He belonged to the party that was faithful and devoted to the country, that, by founding the Empire, put an end to our revolutions and guaranteed the greatness, the prosperity and the freedom of France!²⁰⁰

Yet any propagandistic utterance could only be as convincing as the actual political achievements of the regime against which it could be measured.

Given that expectations with regard to Louis-Napoléon were so different right from the beginning and that most diverse interests needed to be satisfied, delivering policies that would gratify the nation as a whole was a most challenging task. To increase the chances of success, several policies and legitimization strategies had to be pursued at the same time. A particularly important element was the combination of forced economic development with social reformism so prominently stated in Louis-Napoléon's political writings. In the event of the envisaged "industrialization with social conscience" succeeding, a crucial contribution to domestic pacification could be made.

4.4.1 Economic and Social Reformism

Napoleon's economic policy was ambitious and altogether successful. It was targeted at improving infrastructure, especially transport infrastructure, which—compared to Britain—left a lot to be desired at the beginning of the 1850s. In less than twenty years the rail network expanded from 4,000 kilometres at the beginning to 20,000 kilometres at the end of Napoleon's rule. Railway construction served as a leading sector for the expansion of the steel and heavy industry as well, and helped to increase the trade volume by an estimated 101 percent over the period 1851–1863 and no less than 248 percent between 1851 and 1882. Parallel to the development of the rail network and the improvement of the road system and the waterways, the extension of modern means of communications—in particular the electric telegraph—and the postal service was driven forward, too.²⁰¹

A prerequisite for the dynamic development of the infrastructure was the modernization of the French banking system. Particularly important in this respect was the creation of the *Société Générale du Crédit Mobilier* and the *Crédit Foncier de France* in 1852, both of which were also intended to expand French investments outside Europe. The *Crédit Mobilier*, becoming one of the leading financial institutions of the world during the nineteenth century, was founded to give loans to the owners of movable property. By mobilizing savings of middle class French investors, the declared object of the investment bank was to promote industrial enterprises of all kinds, especially the construction of railways in France and abroad. In contrast, the *Banque Foncière de Paris*, which soon became amalgamated with similar institutions at Nevers and Marseilles under the title *Crédit Foncier de France*, was a mortgage bank lending money on the security of real or immovable property.²⁰²

Clearly, the promotion of economic development by Napoleon III was not solely intended to strengthen France's power-political standing in Europe, but to no lesser degree as a means to create public confidence in the regime at home. And indeed, due to the political stability and its pro-business policies, the Second Empire soon earned a significant degree of respect and creditworthiness. This, in turn, was most favorable for accelerated economic growth.²⁰³ The credit status which the regime had gained after only a couple of years was demonstrated when during the Crimean War the government decided to issue a state bond publicly rather than via the banking system. The undertaking, which can be seen as an "economic plebiscite" over the regime,²⁰⁴ was a full success for the Emperor: with 468 rather than the expected 250 million francs the government loan was easily oversubscribed.²⁰⁵

In his efforts to boost the French economy, Napoleon III never lost sight of the social question, aware of the fact that universal suffrage made the regime dependent on the support of the rising working classes. Thanks to the *de facto* expropriation of the House of Orléans in early 1852, Louis-Napoléon had gained financial leeway for socio-political projects. Among other things, these assets were used to support mutual societies (*sociétés de secours mutuels*), by which workers made provisions for health-care and old-age collectively. In addition, these societies—precursors of modern social security systems—also sponsored the construction of working class housing in the industrial centers.²⁰⁶ In general, Napoleon's social and welfare policies aimed at expanding—with state support—the activities of (workers' and other) associations, which had been created by private initiatives. This also allowed for a close control of their activities by the authorities, under whose influence the number of associations rose from 2,400 to 3,400, their membership figures from 271,000 to 426,000 between 1852 and 1856 alone. By the end of the Second Empire (1869), around 800,000 full and around 100,000 honorary members were organized in 6,000 associations.²⁰⁷

With a look to the working class, Napoleon also pushed for a liberalization of foreign trade, perhaps the most eminent outcome of which was the signing of a commercial treaty with the United Kingdom in January 1860. Napoleon III not only expected sustainable economic growth from such liberalization efforts, but also a considerably raised standard of living for the working classes.²⁰⁸ In doing so, however, a serious conflict of interests and objectives became obvious in the regime's home policy. Substantial parts of the business classes and the bourgeoisie felt uncared for and their vital economic interests being sacrificed, resulting in a growing estrangement of Napoleon III and the upper middle classes, whose confidence in the regime had been shattered.²⁰⁹ The reform of foreign trade became a major factor in the rise of opposition to the Napoleonic order, and the gradual liberalization of the political system in the 1860s has not least to be seen as an attempt of the Emperor to compensate decreasing support for his economic policy among the elites by making concessions to political participation.

4.4.2 Charisma and Plebiscitary Mass Democracy

Like his uncle before him, Louis-Napoléon capitalized not only on a distinctive political and social crisis for his seizing power, but also on widespread hopes of salvation by a "national saviour". This charismatic element remained characteristic of the regime throughout its existence. From the beginning, it was linked with the prospect of economic and social development on the one hand, and the promise of (re-)establishing (plebiscitary) democracy and universal suffrage on the other. While the plebiscitary element had been promoted and successfully practiced even under Napoleon Bonaparte, a new element of Louis-Napoléon's rule was that the second parliamentary chamber (*Corps législatif*) was periodically re-elected by universal male suffrage in direct ballot. Unlike Napoleon I, his nephew had to make sure he won not only the plebiscites as expressions of "democratic legitimacy", but also the parliamentary elections. Since he did not wish to merely "reign" like a constitutional monarch, but actually "rule", Louis-Napoléon became an active political player, whose policies

together with the whole regime were up for approbation in every single election. This put the Second Empire in a more delicate position than its predecessor and implied permanent activism on the part of the government.

Given the vital need for electoral success, “electoral steering” became a fixed element of constitutional practice in the Second Empire. The most effective instrument to produce the desired outcomes was the system of “official candidacy” (*candidature officielle*). Before every election, essentially in each constituency one suitable person loyal to the regime was picked as the official government candidate and supported by the public administration. Those candidates profited from simplified administrative procedures and active support for their canvassing, and they were also empowered to hold out the prospect of various kinds of material “gratuities” for their voters. The system, however, did not confine itself to promoting government representatives, but also included massive discrimination of unsolicited candidates, no matter which political leaning. The hindrance repertoire included prohibiting electoral rallies as well as threatening printers publishing advertising material for “unofficials” with an employment ban. As a result, Napoleon III was able to secure a largely obedient parliamentary majority for most of his rule.²¹⁰

The practice of the official candidates both complemented and perfected the plebiscitary system: the exertion of direct influence on the electorate degraded parliament to a mere executive body of the government and rendered every independent role in the political process void. If successfully applied, the Emperor never had cause to resort to his constitutional right of an *appel au peuple*²¹¹ to overrule parliament and affirm his political pre-eminence, since a rupture between government and parliament could not possibly develop. The apparent conformity between the executive and legislative branch was intended to underline national unity and the effectiveness of the system. And indeed: after the two successful plebiscites of 1851 and 1852, Napoleon III had no need to fall back on this political instrument during the next eighteen years of the Empire.

Considering the manipulation of the political system by the regime, one might be inclined to denounce the Caesarism of Napoleon III as mere pseudo-constitutionalism, and its elements of civic political participation as pure *ersatz*-democracy. Indeed, the anti-democratic elements of the regime have long been underlined from various ideological perspectives. Contemporary critics so different in their political views as Victor Hugo and Karl Marx were in unison when vehemently attacking Louis-Napoléon's government as despotic and arbitrary. Others were perhaps less harsh in their choice of words, but nevertheless stressed that the Second Empire was an aberrance of “true democracy”. One of them was the French republican philosopher Jules Barni (1818–1878). In his work *La morale dans la démocratie* (1868) he argued that “democracy” was often used to palliate absolute power:

A specific political constitution that declares people sovereign and even invokes universal suffrage is often labelled as democracy, but it promptly transfers absolute power to a ruler—elected or hereditary (little matter)—who, concentrating all power in his hands, is in fact the absolute master of citizens' liberty, property, and even life.

This had been the case with Roman Caesarism under the reign of Tiberius, Caligula and Nero, all of whom had claimed democracy for them; but not only then. A similar phenomenon could be detected now: “the new Caesarism, established in France on 18 Brumaire, did not fail to present itself as the crowning achievement of democracy, and this particular claim found too many advocates.” However, no matter how often it was claimed, “this is hardly democracy; this is only a lie. Democracy, I have said and will repeat, is not *equality in servitude*, but *freedom in equality*.”²¹²

Indeed, the fact that Napoleon III tried to give his Caesaristic regime the appearance of being more of a democracy than it was can hardly be denied. Therefore it comes as no surprise that a majority of later political historians stressed the anti-democratic nature of “Bonapartism” or emphasized its deviation from the republican norm.²¹³ According to this view, Bonapartism appears to be merely concerned with power politics, with any reference to democracy as simply instrumental. This undemocratic image seems even more justified when post-Second Empire Bonapartism is taken into account, which was to demonstrate distinct political authoritarianism and social conservatism.

To disqualify the Bonapartist regime between 1851 and 1870 in these terms, however, does not do it historical justice. To assume that “democracy” was just a chimera understates Louis-Napoléon’s commitment to mass democracy. To start with, there are two facts which cannot be denied: Firstly, that it was under the Second Republic that significant restrictions to universal male suffrage had been introduced in 1850, and that it was Napoleon who restored it immediately after his coup in 1851. Secondly, that Napoleon III remained firmly dedicated to universal suffrage during the Second Empire, never making any attempts to infringe upon this fundamental principle, and that despite the existing system of the “official candidates”, electoral fraud in the proper sense of the word was never an issue.

It was only under these framework conditions that the electoral system could develop its own “democratizing” dynamics in the second half of the Second Empire’s existence, which in turn helped to propel the liberalization of the regime as a whole. Favored by growing resentment towards bureaucratic formalism and by increased self-confidence of local dignitaries, prefectural control over local politics and the electoral system were increasingly challenged during the 1860s. It was not by coincidence that political emancipation efforts on the local level, but also allowing for an incremental democratization,²¹⁴ went hand in hand with growing opposition tendencies among the middle-class elites on a national level. Since the aforementioned free trade agreement with Great Britain in 1860, which had been signed against the declared will of the financial capital, frustration with the regime’s policies had continuously grown bigger. Middle-class opposition represented a considerable challenge to the regime’s authority and complicated domestic politics, since it soon became clear to the government that in the long run it was impossible to turn a blind eye to the bourgeois elites’ interests. Their influence was too considerable not only in the economic, but also in the political sphere. Growing opposition and the interlinked erosion of the regime’s system of “electoral steering” during the 1860s demonstrated that there was a real danger of the electorate emancipating itself from official control, and of a permanent hotspot developing.

To counter such dangers, the regime allowed for several reforms and extended liberties to be incrementally introduced from the early 1860s onwards, which marked the evolution of the empire towards a more liberal form. Following the general amnesty of August 16, 1859, which was meant to demonstrate the Emperor's will to exercise leniency even with his enemies, important political concessions were made in late 1860, when the Chambers were granted the right to vote an address in answer to the Emperor's annual speech from the throne as a means to air their opinions and grievances on the acts of the government. Further decrees and *sénatus-consulte* increased the power of the assemblies and the *Corps législatif* in particular, progressively retrieving them from the marginalized role they had been given in the Constitution of 1852. Among other things, granting the chambers the right to make parliamentary debates public through the media and the right of voting on the budget by sections (1861) as well as the legislative's power to direct questions to the government, gained in 1867, were important steps in this respect. Despite a trend towards parliamentarization, however, an encompassing revision of the constitution and the political system remained a desideratum. The opposition—strengthened by the successful attempt in the elections of 1863 to bring together (moderate) legitimist, liberal and republican opponents of the regime in a *Union libérale*, the head of which was Adolphe Thiers—thus continued to voice ever more urgently its demand for “necessary liberties”.

The result of the elections of May 1869, which took place in an environment of strikes and manifestations of public unrest in the urban centers, eventually tipped the scales in favor of more sweeping constitutional reform. In spite of the established system of official candidates and a renewed warning against the *spectre rouge*, the elections inflicted a serious defeat upon the Empire. Nationwide, the regime won only 57 percent of the popular vote (4.44 million votes), while in Paris the opposition parties managed to gain around 75 percent of the votes. With 3.96 million Frenchmen declaring themselves anti-government in 1869, the opposition had increased its share of the votes by more than two thirds as compared to 1863 (1.95 million) and actually more than quintupled it as against 1857 (with only 0.67 million).²¹⁵

For the Emperor, these results confirmed the need to make more concessions to liberal opinion in order to secure a broader political basis and isolate the irreconcilable republican left. This was most likely to be achieved by restoring the political influence of the social elites. At the same time, however, Napoleon III did not want to risk a radical regime change going beyond a reform of existing institutions and was intent on safeguarding as much of his political leadership as possible. The liberal Bonapartist Pierre-Charles Chesnelong (1820–1894) pointedly referred to the tightrope the regime had to walk between “conservative” and “liberal” interests, paradigms of “order” and “change”, when declaring that “in spite of its faults, the Empire is still the pivot of order in France and in Europe. We need to know how to maintain it in resisting it, in developing within it [...] the spirit of purified conservatism represented by a sincere and prudent liberalism.”²¹⁶

The constitutional changes resulting from the *sénatus-consulte* of September 8, 1869 reflected the oscillation between concessions and defense of the *status quo*.²¹⁷ The powers of the *Corps législatif* were increased, e.g. with respect to the right of interpellation (Art. 7), control of the budget (Art. 9) and customs treaties (Art. 10). The

ministers remained exclusively “dependent” on the Emperor, but the new clause that *Ils sont responsables* could be read as a rapprochement to the principle of a more extensive parliamentary accountability (Art. 2). Even more importantly, the Second Chamber gained the right to initiate legislation (Art. 1), which had previously been a prerogative of the Emperor.

In return, however, Napoleon III retained considerable executive powers, including quasi unrestricted control over the entire state administration, foreign policy and the armed forces. No concessions were made with regard to the Emperor’s right to declare war and to appoint the members of the Senate—and hence influence the majorities in the First Chamber—at his discretion. Most notably, Napoleon III was eager to keep his prerogative of appealing directly to the people without consulting parliament.

Rather than renouncing the instrument of plebiscite, which had cemented his power in 1851 and 1852, the Emperor was determined to use it again: formally to let the French people approve the constitutional changes, but essentially to reaffirm his personal legitimacy and that of his regime. To ask for a national “vote of confidence” was not without risk. The preparations of the plebiscite, which was scheduled for May 8, 1870, were accordingly diligent. In a public proclamation to the French people on April 23, 1870, Napoleon III emphasized that it was indispensable that any new “constitutional pact” be approved by the nation. He explained that he deemed it necessary to develop the imperial order further into a more liberal form in order to equip France with continued stability and progress. The Emperor promised that a positive vote would not only sanction the reforms introduced since 1860, but consolidate the whole political system durably, and facilitate a later transition of power to his successor. He therefore empathically asked the voters for another act of personal faith.²¹⁸

To insinuate that a “nay” would nurture the threat of revolution was a central element of the official campaign, which appealed to social fears reinforced by a carefully engendered “red menace”. A diffuse fear of social revolution not only haunted the liberal elites, who worked for more political participation and the limitation of the Emperor’s personal power, but were above all worried about the preservation of the social order; in the provinces, too, resentment of “Paris” and horror of political radicalism as well as anticlericalism were rekindled. Seen from this angle, the plebiscite became much more than a simple “yes” or “no” on constitutional issues.

This ultimately made for the overwhelming approval the plebiscite found, with the number of “yes” votes (7.35 million) outnumbering the “no” (1.39 million) by almost five.²¹⁹ Louis-Napoléon’s personal authority had—once more—been confirmed, and so that of his political regime. On May 21, 1870, Napoleon III commented on the result of the plebiscite correspondingly: “The enemies of our institutions have made the question into one between Revolution and Empire. The country has chosen for the system that guarantees order and freedom. Today, the foundations of the Empire have been strengthened.”²²⁰ Indeed, the plebiscite of 1870 could only be seen as a success for the Emperor: the approval of the plebiscite by the French people made the liberal concessions made during the 1860s—underlined by the appointment of the former republican Émile Ollivier (1825–1913) as head of a new cabinet on January 2, 1870—practically irreversible. At the same time, however, Napoleon III got his categorical

“no” for far-reaching structural change and the introduction of parliamentary government sanctioned, too. Somewhat paradoxically, political polarization in the run-up to the plebiscite had also thinned out the opposition to the regime, leaving radical republicans as virtually the only serious adversaries of the regime.

In the summer of 1870 there thus appeared to be no real threat to the Second Empire, and Roger Price notes: “The establishment of a Liberal Empire, with a strong executive power held in check by rejuvenated parliamentary institutions, seemed to herald a long period of political stability [...]”²²¹ It looked as if the regime had successfully mastered the crisis which it had drifted into during the 1860s, and had actually accomplished the daring and difficult transition from its usurpatory origins to institutional stability. Yet this stability was deceptive. What would destroy the regime was not political opposition from within, but military defeat, the shipwreck of another feature of its existence: imperialism.

4.4.3 Imperialism and Bellicism

Even before his ascent to actual power, Louis-Napoléon had not grown tired of emphasizing that the “Napoleonic idea” was in essence an idea of peace, not war, and still as President of the Republic he continued to stress that the most important political objective of French policies and his government was the creation and preservation of (domestic) peace. Yet Louis-Napoléon’s definition of “Napoleonism” as a “peace project” did not imply that the Second Empire was to become a peaceful period in French history. This was neither the case with regard to the regime’s establishment by a domestic coup that was essentially military, nor even less so in terms of foreign policy. Quite the contrary: from its very beginning in 1851/1852, military interventionism and expansionism were characteristic features of Napoleon’s rule. In its eighteen years of existence, the Second Empire not only participated in the Crimean War (1853–1856) and took sides for the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia in the Second War of Italian Independence against the Austrian Empire (1859), but also intervened militarily in Mexico in the 1860s (1861–1867) and ultimately declared war on Prussia-Germany in 1870, which was to bring about the downfall of Napoleon III.

Indeed, the fact that the Second Empire waged a series of wars made it distinct from both the short-lived republic and the two monarchies preceding it, while parallels with the imperial past of the First Empire are evident. One might therefore suppose that the regime of Louis-Napoléon was after all—as that of his uncle earlier—only concerned with glorifying force and exercising military power, which in turn might prove the centerpiece of Constant’s theory of usurpatory rule: usurpers had to conduct war in order to justify their rule and create legitimacy, while traditional monarchs could trust on dynastic legitimacy even without military success and glory.²²² Conversely, this implied that military defeat was fatal for usurpatory regimes, while it was not necessarily the case for monarchies. But how convincing is the argument that usurpatory rule is ultimately dependent on perpetuated military success when applied to Napoleon III?

There seems to be some empirical evidence which endorses a greater systemic resistance of “traditional monarchies” towards military failure. The experiences of the first half of the nineteenth century proved that losing a war did not jeopardize the

reign of a historical monarch: the continued military failure of the Habsburg Emperor Franz II (later Emperor Franz I of Austria) in the first four coalition wars against revolutionary and later Napoleonic France and even his total defeat in the Franco-Austrian war of 1809 cost him territory and forced him to renounce the dignity of the Holy Roman Emperor, though, but never endangered his monarchical power *per se*. Similarly, Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia managed to keep his throne even after the disastrous defeat of Jena and Auerstedt in 1806, and neither did the Russian Tsardom under Nicholas I and Alexander II forfeit its autocratic powers due to the loss of the Crimean War. Not so Napoleon I, who lost his Empire in the context of military defeat both in 1814 and 1815.

However, even in the case of Napoleon Bonaparte the role of military failure is less clear than it might appear at first sight. Constant's theory of the dependency of usurpers on victory in war does not quite explain the double downfall of Napoleon I. Even the French Senate, which had initiated his dethronement in April 1814, did not charge him with having illegitimately assumed power and being a usurper, but justified the Emperor's deposition along the lines of historical models blaming monarchs to have abused their power and become tyrants.²²³ Undoubtedly, Napoleon's falling military star from the failed Russian Campaign onwards did not help to boost popular belief in his leadership capacities. Yet it is daring to say that it was primarily military setbacks which cost him the support of the French nation. Rather, military setbacks—and more so Napoleon's refusal to accept the peace conditions offered by the coalition—prepared the ground for domestic opposition to argue for the end of his regime, and made the public, so heavily burdened by conscriptions and confiscations as well as the economic side effects of a dragged out large scale war, accept it without resistance.

For his nephew Napoleon III, the verdict on the role of failed imperialism and military success is not unambiguous either. As for the motives of the Second Empire's "active" foreign policy, which—depending on the point of view—one might be inclined to call ambitious and grand, or aggressive and belligerent, various readings have been put forward. Certainly the most flattering is the one which considers Napoleon III to be the visionary of a united "Europe of the nations", and French foreign policy during his rule essentially as the attempt to put the Emperor's idealism into political practice. Seen from this perspective, Napoleon III appears to have taken up his uncle's exile writings—containing the vision of a common Europe united in peace—as a foreign political program; a program, for which war and expansionism was just a necessary and temporary means to a noble end.

Others have interpreted the "imperialism" of the Second Empire not so much as the expression of idealism than of conventional power politics, which was characteristic for other states and political systems at the time, too. Prominently, Napoleon's later opponent Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898) also characterized the regime in this vein. In a memorandum written for minister Otto Theodor von Manteuffel (1805–1882), dated June 2, 1857, Bismarck negated that the Emperor of the French and his legitimation differed considerably from other contemporary European rulers.²²⁴

However, there have also been voices stressing that the Empire's military imperialism needs to be explained systemically, that is as the result of the Napoleonic regime's specific character. Even early observers suggested that Louis-Napoléon would not only

seize power with the support of the army, but that military elements and expansionism would also be a determining element of the new regime's policies. Among them was Auguste Romieu, in whose writings "Caesarism" and "imperialism"/"militarism" appear closely interlinked. He characterized Caesarism as "rule of the sabre," but also associated "fame" and "glory" with the new political order he sketched. After the 1851 coup, Tocqueville and Jules Barni, among others, identified (Louis-Napoléon's) "Caesarism" with militarism, too, though in a clearly derogatory tone. In his *La morale dans la démocratie* (1868), Barni repeatedly stressed his conviction that "despotism naturally leads to war," and that "Caesarism and militarism are two inseparable scourges."²²⁵ To Barni, the French Empire under the two Napoleons was *the* modern paragon of despotism and Caesarism; a "regime of military monarchy," as he formulated it in a speech at the *Congrès international de la paix* in Geneva 1867, "which sacrifices the liberties of all for the power of a military leader, measures the power of the state by the number of its soldiers and seeks continually to expand the mass of men it can bend to its laws."²²⁶

Undeniably, the army continued to play a central role throughout the Second Empire's existence, and the regime displayed a considerably greater readiness to wage war than its predecessors had. This was certainly in part due to personal ambitions for military fame on the part of Napoleon III, who did not want to be second to his uncle, even though he lacked the latter's military genius. More than that, the prospect of being perceived as a "war hero" by the nation must have been appealing to Napoleon III. This was especially true in a period in which bellicism—going hand in hand with increasing nationalistic tendencies—played an ever greater role in domestic politics. Aiming for foreign political and military success to increase legitimacy was a hazardous endeavor, nevertheless an enticing one which seemed to have been tailor-made for Napoleon III, whom many contemporaries had started to characterize as an adventurer as early as after his failed attempts to seize power through military coups in 1836 and 1840, respectively. But can the increased willingness of the Second Empire to wage war be explained by Napoleon III's need to prove his and his regime's legitimacy?

The answer might rather be "no" than "yes". The series of wars France waged after 1851/1852 may primarily be accounted for by the greater room for maneuver French diplomacy gained in the ongoing disintegration of the European Concert that had been (re-)established at the Congress of Vienna.²²⁷ That room—one might concede—was actively and decisively exhausted by Napoleon III; it was an opportunity, however, which would most likely have been seized also by a regime less "Caesaristic" than the Napoleonic one.

A determining element and objective of French foreign policy common to all political regimes from the First Empire onwards had been the revision of the Peace Treaties of Paris (1814/1815) and the retrieval of an "appropriate" political role for France within the European great powers; that was a role at least on a par with the continental powers Austria and Russia. Even the Restoration and the July Monarchy had clearly pursued these objectives. Regarding the former, France's readmission into the European Concert and the extension of the Quadruple to a Quintuple Alliance in 1818 was as important a milestone of revisionist policies as the French intervention in Spain 1823, which was essentially an attempt by the French government to regain

influence on the Iberian Peninsula and strengthen its position among the other European powers. During the July Monarchy, revisionist aspirations came to the forefront during the Rhine Crisis in 1840, when the French Government under Adolphe Thiers openly—though unsuccessfully—made demands for the territories on the left bank of the Rhine, repeating old claims for the Rhine to be the natural frontier of France. But while farther-reaching ambitions of the French governments under Louis XVIII, Charles X and Louis-Philippe continued to be dashed by the united front of the former allied powers, growing antagonisms and animosities between Britain, Russia, Austria and Prussia finally opened new perspectives for France in the 1850s. These were then promptly exploited by Napoleon III.

In the Crimean War (1853–1856)—the first instance since the Congress of Vienna in which members of the former anti-French Quadruple Alliance, which had dominated European foreign policy ever since, were in open conflict with each other—France strengthened its role as a continental power at the expense of Russia and ended its (relative) diplomatic isolation. Three years later, Napoleon's intervention in Italy weakened France's second "historical" rival on the continent, Austria. Throughout the 1850s and 1860s, the Second Empire steered a foreign political course that was anything but "exceptional" in that it continued traditional French interests. This also holds true for the policy towards Germany.

While Napoleon III had initially considered Prussia to be a "natural" ally against Austria, this attitude changed after 1866. Prussia's swift and full victory in the Austro-Prussian War thwarted not only French ambitions to assume the role of a mediator between the two conflicting parties and thus increase its influence in Germany, but also demonstrated that Prussia had irrevocably turned from a regional to a European power keen to repulse any foreign attempt to intervene in inner-German affairs. This could only be perceived as a defeat by Napoleon III, for whom future chances to pursue French national interests in Germany by diplomatic means receded into the distance, not even to mention the old dream of the Rhine border. French policies of the following years were therefore eager to compensate for what was seen as a humiliation. In that, however, the government did not position itself against public opinion. On the contrary: public opinion and the media perhaps even more than the state authorities were intent on getting their revenge. It was not least the anti-German *vox populi* calling for action to be taken against the nation's eastern neighbor that induced Napoleon III to take a firm position in the "July Crisis" of 1870 and eventually made him declare war on Prussia on July 19, 1870 after the Ems Dispatch.²²⁸ Napoleon III had thus been coerced—or at least strongly encouraged—by public opinion in his decision making.

Which conclusions can thus be drawn regarding the role of imperialism and militarism for the Second Empire and its "Caesar"? It seems clear that the increased "activism" of France during the 1850s and 1860s cannot necessarily be ascribed to the specific regime type. Rather, as Roger Price puts it, "Napoleon's vision of the unrealised greatness of France was a widely shared feature of the general political culture", even though perhaps one "reinforced in his case [...] by his Bonapartist inheritance".²²⁹ The Emperor's European endeavors do not reveal a break with traditional French foreign policy, and his extra-European "adventures"—most noteworthy the Mexican expedition—were in line with the colonial ambitions of other European powers.

For the regime itself, the accumulation of additional political legitimacy through foreign political and military success was definitely appealing and useful. However, it was not a *conditio sine qua non* for its existence, particularly because the Napoleonic system could rely on important domestic achievements—politically, socially and economically—through which it had proved its value for the nation. To state that imperialism and bellicism were not “regime-immanent”, however, does not say anything about the susceptibility of the Second Empire to military defeat. In this regard, in fact, it appears that the highly personalized and centralized Napoleonic system was quite vulnerable. This was confirmed in the Franco-Prussian War.

For the understanding of the concurrence of military defeat and regime change in 1870, different explanatory approaches can be cited. First, “rational choice reasoning” on the part of the French nation. As far back as 1859, during the French military intervention in Italy, a governmental report on general public opinion noted that war would remain popular “for as long as taxes are not increased and the cost of exoneration from military service remains the same, and for as long as trade and agriculture are not affected profoundly”; in other words, as long as the population was not expected to make “heavy sacrifices”,²³⁰ which did become the case in 1870. In contrast to the earlier wars since Napoleon’s coup in 1851, the sacrifices in 1870 were not only disproportionately heavier, but for the first time the war was also waged on French soil. The way the French were personally affected was more immediate than before, potentially lowering the masses’ preparedness to back the regime’s war efforts. While this dimension was not specific to the Napoleonic system—even though Napoleon I had faced a similar situation in 1814—the other two essentially were.

On the one hand, a “structural” dimension can be mentioned. The army was the primary representative of Napoleonism and the symbol of the nation’s glorious past. It was *the* central institution of both the coup of 1851 and the regime. Hence, the repercussions of military failure would be dramatic, since the Second Empire would lose its most important instrument of power. This was true on a symbolic as well as a practical level, since the army was the guarantor for the preservation of public peace and a bulwark against any revolutionary upheaval in the country; an eventuality wherefore detailed operational plans had been prepared. Perhaps even more important than the “structural” was the “power-sociological” dimension: while the Napoleonic system rested on and gained its stability from the Emperor, it also fell with him. This was what happened in 1870, favored by the fact that the heir apparent was too young to have acquired any personal popularity of his own, and that the regime had existed for too short a period of time for any sustainable traditional legitimacy to develop.

Napoleon’s elevated political role made him the responsible for the military catastrophe in 1870; all the more so, because throughout his rule Napoleon had been determined to reserve the spheres of military and foreign policy for himself. In July 1870, albeit under pressure for tough action from the public and from parliament, the ultimate decision to go to war rested with the Emperor. Napoleon III not only made the choice between war and peace, but even decided to assume personal command of the French armies. While he hoped that military glory would be his in the event of victory, as in the Italian campaign of 1859, it was discredit the Emperor eventually earned after the lost Battle of Sedan. The defeat was a personal one and shattered his

claim to lead the nation. In the eyes of the French, Napoleon III was responsible for the disaster not only on a political, but also on a military level. The whole Napoleonic regime appeared delegitimized more than that of Napoleon Bonaparte ever had been, who—at least till Waterloo—bore the nimbus of the military genius, whose failure could appear as being due to unfavorable circumstances and the sheer superiority of the allied powers.

The speed with which the Second Empire evaporated only a few months after the successful May plebiscite was illustrative of the shaky ground on which it was ultimately built. *Ex post facto*, the plebiscite had even accelerated the downfall of the Empire: the overwhelming approval had suggested unfettered support for Napoleon III and his policies, and had made the Emperor and his advisors believe that a successful military campaign might further strengthen the Bonapartist regime *vis-à-vis* its opponents. While there might have been a slight chance for the Emperor to remedy the situation and save his throne by his personal presence in Paris, the fact that Napoleon III was taken prisoner by the Prussians at Sedan on September 2, 1870 rendered this last hope void. Acephalous and apathetic, the regime was unable to exert any influence on events in the capital, the outstanding importance of which for French politics was once more illustrated: while in many parts of France support for the regime was still discernible, Parisian deputies usurped the power in the capital without much resistance. Just two days after the Emperor's capture, the Third Republic was proclaimed on 4 September 1870. While the new republic was not acclaimed with great enthusiasm, it did mark a new form of government less discredited than the previous one, which in the eyes of many Frenchmen had demonstrated its inability and thus forfeited its legitimacy.

4.5 Conclusions

Which concluding assessment can be given of the regime of Louis-Napoléon and the state of the more general debate on Caesarism in the mid-nineteenth century?

It can be shown that after 1848 the term “Caesarism” gained more and more acceptance in European political discourse as a denominator for a new form of government somewhere between “democracy” and “dictatorship”, though other concepts, most notably Napoleonism and Bonapartism, continued to be used parallel to it. Around 1850, the debate on “modern Caesarism” and Bonapartism proved even more complex and heterogeneous than at the beginning of the century. The wide range of people from different political camps acquiring a taste for the regime of Louis-Napoléon attests to the “flexibility” of the Caesarism concept: not only did conservatives like Donoso Cortés, Romieu, Frantz or Segesser welcome Napoleonic Caesarism, mainly for confronting the red menace, containing revolutionary fervor, reaffirming private property and generally restoring “order”; liberal and socialist thinkers, too, were not immune to at least some admiration, however different and sometimes equivocal the motivations might have been, as the stances of Mundt or even Proudhon have revealed.

Also in terms of the segments of the population which Napoleon managed to appeal to, heterogeneity—and partly contradictoriness—is characteristic: while fear of

socialism and radical political rhetoric drove the middle classes away from the republicans to Louis-Napoléon, the rural population showed strong loyalty to “their Emperor” as the one protecting them from a return to the *Ancien Régime* on the one hand, the exploiting bourgeoisie and radical socialism attempting to topple the existing property order on the other. Considerable parts of the working class, in turn, considered Napoleon to be the politician who took their claims for social reform seriously and was willing to make it part of the political agenda. Quite naturally, this “broadness” also implied that strongly divergent expectations needed to be fulfilled in the regime’s policies.

Given its evident “historical complexity”, the concrete institutional form of Bonapartism was far from static, making it difficult if not impossible to isolate any clear “essence” even within the French context: not only was the First Empire considerably different from the Second, but there were also notable political variations within the latter, of which the authoritarian early years contrasting with the later liberal years was only one. Acknowledging “differences” in an environment of dynamic social, economic and political change also put the “great parallel” with antiquity into perspective. Comparing antiquity with the present still played a role in the mid-century, but lost in importance, with most of the works dealing with the Bonapartist regime—or more generally Caesarism—declaring it to be a qualitatively new form of rule. This was yet another sign of the mutations that language (and practice) of Caesarism had already undergone and would continue to undergo in its curious evolution.

Despite increasing differentiation of the concept, by the mid-century also a couple of themes had crystallized which remained fairly constant in later discussions on Caesarism: firstly, the matter of Caesarism’s legitimacy; secondly, its relationship to the “masses”. In light of the ever more burning social question, the second point was gaining in importance and dynamism at the time, as the Second Empire had demonstrated *in situ*, heralding a fundamental change of political paradigm. Louis-Napoléon’s interventionist economic and employment policy, his Keynesianism *avant la lettre*, the forceful promotion of infrastructure and heavy industry projects, but above all the attempt to include the proletariat in the “political nation” marked the transition from legal to social statism, from *Rechtsstaat* (“state of law”) to *Sozialstaat* (“welfare state”), and a change of emphasis from constitution to administration.

Yet in other respects the Second Empire brought more lucidity, namely with regard to the immanent strengths, but also shortcomings, of a regime type characterized as “democratic dictatorship” or “plebiscitary monarchy”. Perhaps plainer than its predecessor half a century earlier, the Second Empire highlighted both. One obvious advantage was the clear identifiability of rule and responsibility with one person, which was a crucial advantage for seizing power, particularly in moments of crisis when a *bellum omnium contra omnes* was looming ahead due to the fragmentation and ideologization of the political sphere. Rather than a civil war, Caesarism offered the prospect of coherent and rapid decision making, guaranteed by the elimination—or at least marginalization—of intermediary bodies. In addition, ideological “flexibility” enabled Louis-Napoléon to mix conservative, liberal and social(ist) elements at his discretion and provided for a potentially broad basis in society, whilst the regime’s form being *sui generis* allowed to appeal to multiple sources of legitimacy: besides the

characteristic charismatic element, the regime did its best to strengthen a traditional element by establishing a dynastic hereditary monarchy and was also able to rely on a rational element ("good politics"). Each of the three plebiscites held under Louis-Napoléon can be seen as representing one of the three legitimacy pillars on which the system rested: charisma (1851), tradition (1852) and rationality (1870).

The regime's ability to appeal to different sources of legitimacy, however, could not hide the fact that the regime's authority was of a particular character and permanently endangered, since it depended on fickle public opinion that had to be fought for on a daily basis. Coercion, propaganda, demagoguery, sensationalism, electoral steering and corruption were as much part of the means used to meet this vital need as were the regime's practical policies, especially in the economic and social field. Louis-Napoléon was well aware that his ability to gain and defend his power ultimately depended on seditious flattery towards the populace. Nevertheless, Louis-Napoléon needs to be given credit that unlike most other important politicians of the nineteenth century, including his uncle Napoleon Bonaparte, he never talked contemptuously about the populace, but always in the mood of the starry-eyed and philanthropic idealist he seemed to have remained throughout his life. Even so, gratitude on the part of the masses was limited, as the abrupt end of Napoleon's rule in 1870 demonstrated.

The deposition of the Emperor on September 4, 1870 turned out to be a *de facto* plebiscite unveiling the flipside of any plebiscitary political system. The fact that less than four months after the formal May plebiscite—which had ended with a superb success for the regime—the nation came to a totally different "resolution" proved the Emperor's cousin Jérôme Napoléon Bonaparte (1805–1870) right, who in September 1869 had remarked on plebiscitary government: "If the people says yes, it is an illusion; if it says no, it is a revolution."²³¹ Doomed to fulfill the political and material expectations of the electorate on a permanent basis, the nation's solidarity was at risk to dwindle overnight as soon as any serious setback arose. In the end, Louis-Napoléon himself was one of the first victims to suffer the "political mobilization" which he had so effectively—and quasi irreversibly—pushed by opening up politics to the masses.

Nonetheless, Caesarism kept its appeal to contemporaries: not only for ambitious individuals the perspective of becoming a "new Caesar" was all too appealing to lose attraction only because of deficits which might have become visible; from a "systemic" perspective, too, there were still a number of good arguments which could be put forward in favor of this regime type. Germany in particular turned out to be—or rather remained—fertile ground for the concept of Caesarism, albeit during the time of Louis-Napoléon German thinkers and politicians did not tire of branding the "Romanic" system of plebiscitary dictatorship and Bonapartism. Criticism of Bonapartism, however, did not imply that Caesarism was similarly condemned: the trick was to distinguish between them. In the following chapter, "Germanic" concepts of Caesarism in the second half of the nineteenth century are turned to, which are intrinsically linked with the one statesman commonly referred to as the key "architect" of the German nation state: Otto von Bismarck.