Prutsch, Markus J. "'Germanic Caesarism' and the *Bismarckreich*." *Caesarism in the Post-Revolutionary Age*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. 119–148. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474267571.ch-005>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 10:14 UTC.

Copyright © Markus J. Prutsch 2020. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

“Germanic Caesarism” and the *Bismarckreich*

5.1 From *Ideal-* to *Realpolitik*: Debates on a German Caesar

The *topos* of France as the *Erbfeind* (“hereditary enemy”) of the German nation—which had gathered momentum after 1848 and found its reciprocal, though perhaps less distinct, equivalent on the other side of the Rhine—suggests an insurmountable antipathy between Germany and France in the 1850s and 1860s. The Franco-Prussian War of 1870/1871 can be seen as an acknowledgment and further aggravation of that antipathy, reinforcing the impression that Germans had been in unanimous opposition against France for a considerable time. Yet even if a pronounced antagonism between France and Germany during this period is acknowledged, the question remains whether this translates into an antagonism of the respective political systems and an incompatibility of French and German political thought.

In actual fact, the reception of the Second Napoleonic Empire in Germany exemplified in the previous chapter proves that a majority of contemporary German observers either had certain reservations against the regime or ruled out any “model role” of France for Germany. More than anything else, however, this needs to be seen in the context of political rivalry between two divergent versions of nationalism: on the one hand that of France, a time-honored nation undergoing an “imperial renaissance” and thus seen as a distinct threat by its Eastern neighbor; on the other hand that of Germany, a nation still divided but aware of its potential power and keen to make up for the lack of a nation state, and for the same reason—and the prospect of another continental rival—feared and opposed by France. At the intellectual level, this conflict translated into the highly ideologized dualism between Romanism and Germanism used by both partisans of a *Kleindeutsche Lösung* (“Lesser German Solution”) and a *Großdeutsche Lösung* (“Greater German Solution”); a dualism, however, in the context of which any French system of government would have suffered from prejudice.

Close inspection reveals that the impression of a united German front against concepts of Bonapartism and Caesarism *per se* is deceptive, since the unanimous rejection of French power-political and territorial claims did not translate into unanimous rejection of Caesarism as a “political life-form”. Even though French Bonapartism was often stigmatized as being “un-German”, many German political thinkers recognized the political viability and potential inherent in the idea of a “modern dictatorship”. Among such thinkers were contemporaries with neo-absolutist sentiments, for whom Caesarism was quite simply a new variation of and synonymous

with autocratic rule having the potential to crush progressive forces of whatever kind. Yet many liberals and democrats, too, developed varying degrees of sympathy for some sort of a “German(ic) Caesar”.

An interesting case is the earlier-quoted Gustav Diezel, in whose works the dilemma of rebuffing “Romanic” tyranny and a positive appreciation of authoritarian forms of rule becomes particularly apparent. The same man, who in his “universal dialectic” of regime types declares dictatorship and popular absolutism a perverted Romanic form of government, is full of praise for a figure like Oliver Cromwell, “that organizer of democracy, that triumphant commander, that tamer of monarchy”. Diezel harshly attacks those who would not find any fault with that “a few hundred sovereign representatives barter away the freedom, the honour, the present and future of their people”, but at the same time found it obnoxious that “a man, not born on the throne, should take it upon himself to raise his people to greatness and world-historical importance”. For Diezel, it is exactly this latter kind of leader he aspires for Germany: “If only Germany had found a Cromwell instead of dishonorable parliamentary prattlers, then it would not have descended to a 36-fold potentiated Ireland!”¹

While Diezel focused primarily on the role of the actual leader, other commentators had more the structural dimension—and potential *fortes*—of Caesaristic government in mind, which often coincided with less explicit reservations against the Bonapartist system in France. One such observer was the Prussian officer and historian Heinrich Blankenburg (1820–1897), who eighteen years after Diezel’s *Deutschland und die abendländische Civilisation* (1852) analyzed *Verfassung und innere Politik des zweiten Kaiserreichs* (1870). Blankenburg acknowledged that (parliamentary) constitutionalism offered certain advantages, above all that of being a barrier “against ambitious evolutions of the sovereign, against the artificial diversion of interests to the outside, against the masses’ excesses of chauvinism”.² However, in the long run it proved an unworkable system, mainly for France, but for other nations, too, including Germany. Since Bonapartism did offer a remedy for France, Blankenburg reasoned that “it is therefore by no means impossible that the idea of Napoleon III has a future”, and that throughout Europe the time might be ripe for a new constitutional alternative challenging “constitutionalism” as the dominant paradigm.³ Nonetheless, this did not imply transplanting existing French constitutional forms to other nations and the Second Empire—which he characterized as a “democratic-imperialistic system”⁴—becoming a new “universalist” regime type. On the contrary, the form of government Blankenburg had in mind was quite different: “In keeping with the spirit of our time, it would be such [a form of state] in which the national moment [...] claims a special status.”⁵

As these two examples demonstrate—the one from the very beginning, the other from the very end of the French Second Empire—, there was continuing if not intensifying openness towards a political regime guaranteeing strong leadership without sacrificing “progressive” elements altogether. At least on detours, many German liberals and democrats were developing a taste for Caesarism, and incorporated it into their political thinking. This might have been due to the strong presence and persuasiveness of Hegelian dialectics, which had become a prominent feature among the German intelligentsia at the time: for whoever had absorbed the paradigms of dialectics, the prevailing antitheses between monarchism and republicanism,

conservatism and liberalism, was asking to be "remedied" by a synthesis of a monarchical governing authority approved by and bound to the people.⁶

Even in May 1848, at the height of the Revolution, the German philosopher and Hegel disciple Johann Karl Friedrich Rosenkranz (1805–1879) had declared in an article for the *Hartung'sche Zeitung* that it was the task of the Prussian government to "move forward between the revolution, which is firmly intent on proceeding towards a republic, and the reaction, which only wants to shape constitutionalism aristocratically, towards a democratic monarchy as our true future."⁷ While Rosenkranz did not outline the design of such a democratic monarchy, others were slightly more decided. Concepts promoting some sort of "social monarchy" were prominently advocated by Lorenz von Stein, but also by the German-Swiss thinker Friedrich Rohmer (1814–1856), a somewhat "nonconformist" political theorist, who is hard to pin down ideologically and now largely forgotten.

In his pamphlet *Die Monarchie und der vierte Stand* (1848),⁸ Rohmer argued the case for an organic symbiosis and partnership of crown and fourth estate representing the mass of the population, which were mutually dependent on each other. For the populace, it was indispensable to have a guardian defending their interests, represented by the crown. In return, it was in the vital interest of the crown to accept this role.⁹ Rohmer dared to predict that in Germany only that power could assume hegemony and hope for the Imperial dignity whose monarch clearly grasped this need. The kind of monarchical authority Rohmer envisaged was a powerful and independent one:

The people long for real monarchs. It does not want portraits of princes, but real ones. It desires that the supreme power be strong and active, not weak [...] In this difficult time everyone really longs for a focal point, to which the wavering can cling and the ambitious can adhere.

In acting accordingly strongly and decidedly, yet still on the grounds of constitutionality and the rule of law, the monarchy in Germany was destined to achieve what Republicanism in France had failed to: "to finally secure the lot of the lower classes, to finally realize freedom for all."¹⁰

The simultaneousness and comparability of Rohmer's considerations and those of French political thinkers at the time, including Louis-Napoléon himself, proves that there might not necessarily have been intellectual dependence of the one on the other, but that in any case similar answers to pressing contemporary challenges were found in different national contexts. In the German context, Rohmer outlined the core structure of what in his eyes might become a "Germanic Caesarism": the replacement of the concept of *Bürgerkönig* ("Citizen King") by *Volkskönig* ("People's King"), the merger of liberal-democratic and conservative-authoritarian elements, and the cult of a leader both charismatic and determined.

While people like Rohmer might advocate a new and powerful regime type, they continued to base their argument on unconditional adherence to a notion of the *Rechtsstaat* ("state of law") that originated in an understanding of politics as essentially based on ethical and moral premises. This made them considerably different from the one "pragmatic" school of thought that gained more and more support in mid-nineteenth

century Germany: that of *Realpolitik*. Brought about primarily, though not exclusively, by disappointment regarding the non-achievement of national unity in the previous decades and continuing power-political limitation, *Realpolitik* was a potent reaction to and reflected a considerable break with the image of Germany as the land of the poets and thinkers cultivated since the eighteenth century.

In 1853, August Ludwig von Rochau (1810–1873), commonly accepted as the one having put the term in circulation, explained the principle of *Realpolitik* as follows:

The discussion of the question: who should rule, whether it be law, wisdom, virtue, whether an individual, a few or many, this question belongs to the realm of philosophical speculation; above all, practical politics has only to do with the simple fact that power alone can rule. To rule is to exercise power, and power can only be exercised by the one who possesses it. This direct correlation of power and domination constitutes the fundamental truth of all politics and the key to history.¹¹

In that they declared the exercise of power—no matter in which form—the essence of any form of rule and as such the core around which political debates had to revolve, adherents of *Realpolitik* had an ambivalent attitude towards the Bonapartist regime. While accepting Napoleon III as the greatest obstacle standing in the way of Germany's (re-)invigoration, the "spirit of power" embodied by the French Emperor did attract attention and respect. Rochau himself is a good example of this two-headed attitude of mind. Though a declared enemy of the Second Empire, he extrapolated clear historical lessons from Napoleon's coup of 1852:

These events contain one of the greatest political lessons that history has ever provided. What follows from this above all, and with a clarity never seen, is the irredeemable emptiness of constitutions, which attempt to decouple public law from public power, which confront unarmed law with armed force. The politics of facts overthrow powers and create powers; constitutional politics [*constituierende Verfassungspolitik*] essentially has to do nothing more than recognize the existing powers, and give them the benediction of the written law.¹²

For Rochau, the Napoleonic coup in France exemplified what was considered a universal key feature of *Realpolitik*, namely that power shapes and enforces (constitutional) law, not *vice versa*.

Immanent in the concept of *Realpolitik*, which became the subject heading for a reorientation of German liberal politics during the second half of the nineteenth century towards a decidedly national form (*Nationalliberalismus*, "National liberalism"), was a palpable peril. From declaring power to be the soul of politics it only took one further step to accept any political force that pushed for a desired outcome, no matter how arbitrary and objectionable the means used to this effect might be. In other words: it was permissible to become a defender of pure Machiavellianism.

In 1858, the Westphalian writer and politician Karl Bollmann (1833–1891) published his *Vertheidigung des Macchiavellismus*, in which he turned against liberal

doctrines and analyzed the first and second regimes of *napoleonischen Cäsarismus*,¹³ their social foundations and the role of the masses. All of this was from the viewpoint of the lessons which might be learned and the opportunities which might reasonably ensue in any project for a united and strong German nation.

For Bollmann, a characteristic feature of good political leadership was to take the fullest possible advantage of a given situation and to mobilize all available national resources to achieve the political goals. In this regard, he had some admiration for the French Emperor: "Napoleon III understood how to search out the right moment for his plans in the most elegant manner, placing them in direct connection with the entire European political situation [*europäische Weltlage*]. In this, he is considered markedly superior to his model, Napoleon I." He also applauded Napoleon's "remarkable virtuosity [...], in cultivating the most perfect Caesarism in the interior".¹⁴

According to Bollmann, some of the most effective instruments to win the approval of the masses was to safeguard material prosperity, but also to instrumentalize the press, which had become a "real power". In revealing his contempt for the populace, Bollmann had no doubt that whatever the masses heard over and over again they were ultimately willing to accept, considering their incapability of forming an opinion on their own.¹⁵ However, at the end of the day domestic policies were subject to the success of foreign politics, above all the preservation of independence. A foreign political "awakening" of Germany seemed hence vital in Bollmann's view.

The conditions for such an awakening were actually quite favorable. On the one hand, the Crimean War had changed the geopolitical situation considerably and proved the Congress System was dead. On the other, a new *geistige* ("spiritual") era was about to dawn, moving on from the previous one. This was, Bollmann reasoned, *the* historical moment for a true national leader to seize the mantle. This leader had to abstain from erroneous political modesty, be readily prepared for anything and to make use of all available means in (foreign) politics, including—where necessary—forgery and dishonesty: "Germany needs [...] an armed reformer who, even if he had to march through the red sea of a general war, will lead us to the promised land of national unity and independence."¹⁶ In Bollmann's work, it was not only German unification which assumed a clear *ersatz*-religious dimension, but also the leader he envisaged for the nation, whom he portrayed as some kind of modern, secular Messiah. The last lines of the text in particular bespoke hopes of mundane salvation, covered in metaphoric language:

When will You appear, King of the future? When will You cut through the thorny hedge of internal patriotic splinter and kiss the sweet mouth and the closed eyes of the sleeping beauty of national happiness to her joyous awakening? [...] O come, come soon! and all the gates will open to You and all the Germans will cheer for You and follow You to battle and victory! Come, King and Master!¹⁷

Yet Bollmann's open canvassing for "pure Machiavellianism" and charging his political ideas with a messianic spirit remained an outsider position even among the staunchest representatives of the national-*realpolitisch* camp. This, however, did not preclude that a considerable number of his German contemporaries of all political

backgrounds were open to the idea of some—at least temporary—political dictatorship. Such thoughts had been harbored for a long time by people in opposition or even open enmity to the existing monarchical regime, like Heinrich Heine and other representatives of the Young Germany (*Junges Deutschland*) during the *Vormärz*, or later Gustav Diezel; people who dreamed of a “Germanic hero” or “Caesar” overthrowing the established order that was perceived as hampering both German unity and reform. In the late 1850s and 1860s, especially under the impact of the acute constitutional conflict between crown and parliament (*Preußischer Verfassungskonflikt*), also voices more benevolent of and closer to the government reasoned whether a dictatorial or “extraordinary” style of government might not be a suitable answer to the political needs of the country. Among such voices was the historian Maximilian Duncker (1811–1886), a political advisor of the liberally-minded Prussian Crown Prince and later short-time Emperor Friedrich III (1831–1888), who thus had access to the innermost circle of the monarchy. In a memorandum sent to the Crown Prince in November 1861, he advocated a “liberal dictatorship” as a way both to concentrate national resources and win over the support of German liberals.¹⁸ Later, in a letter to the then Minister of the Interior Graf Maximilian von Schwerin-Putzar (1804–1872) of February 1862, Duncker maintained that “the German question is a question of power; indeed, the question of Germany’s power”, and that he—for the sake of German national policy—was willing to accept a “military dictatorship” since to merely dissolve the renitent parliament “will only restore democracy to a greater extent”.¹⁹

Even firm defenders of liberal values like the Karlsruhe historian Hermann Baumgarten (1825–1893) suggested that German and particularly Prussian politics needed to strike new paths, oriented more towards action than discussion. “Why is everything here so excessive?”, Baumgarten asked in a letter to Heinrich von Sybel (1817–1895), dated March 21, 1861 and written during his time in Berlin, providing the answer in the same breath: “Because countless people are talking and writing about everything, and everyone is tired when it comes to actually doing something. Here, in handling business, nothing is monarchical, everything disintegrates into republicanism. [...] The mass [*Masse*] of equal [*gleichmäßiger*] intelligence makes any rapid, radical action here impossible.” He thus yearned for “a great genius or a mighty tyrant” who was capable of quick and decisive action, without actually seeing who this might be.²⁰ Five years later, he seemed to have a slightly clearer opinion, when he argued against liberal doctrinarism and for ideological “openness” in his essay *Der deutsche Liberalismus. Eine Selbstkritik* (1866), supporting the Prussian government’s policies and a stronger governmental orientation of German liberalism.²¹ Yet it was not so much Bismarck, whom Baumgarten saw as a potential point of reference, but the Italian statesman and architect of the *Risorgimento*, Camillo Cavour (1810–1861). Spotlighting Cavour rather than Napoleon III or Bismarck was in line with a broader trend in the 1860s to invoke *Cavourismus* as a potential model for Germany:²² on the one hand, it avoided mentioning the widely disliked “French system” of Bonapartism; on the other, it circumvented any appearance of being a mere footman of Bismarck’s regime. At the same time, the parallels between the Italian and German nation building projects were obvious enough to be perceived as such by the public.

With this in mind, Baumgarten wrote that "the only great, brilliant victory of liberalism known to our century was won in Italy". This, however, had only been possible because it had been "the many" who obediently followed and supported "the one". It was a fact that the truly decisive impulses did not emanate from the Italian people, nor from any Italian Party, but from Cavour. Baumgarten reasoned that for nations to accomplish great deeds, great men were indispensable. In modern democratic societies this was particularly the case: "[...] democracy needs a head. Only aristocracies can allow the masses of the chosen to practice a collective activity."²³

On the whole, it can hence be demonstrated that the readiness in Germany—especially, though not exclusively, in Prussia—to perceive some form of Caesaristic government as "necessary" was considerable in the 1850s and 1860s even among many liberals. More than anything else, this was due to the as yet unresolved "national question" (*nationale Frage*). Yet which concrete approach did the ruling dynasty and leading (Northern) German politicians adopt towards a "Caesaristic" or (semi-) dictatorial form of government?

5.2 Bonapartism and the Ruling Class

Trying to assess the attitude of the Prussian ruling class towards Caesarism and Bonapartism in the mid-nineteenth century essentially means dealing with a distinctively "conservative" group of people in the traditional sense of the word, devoted to monarchical legitimacy.²⁴ Therefore the answer to how the regimes of the two Napoleons were perceived seems obvious: blunt rejection. And indeed, many examples can be quoted in which the Napoleonic regimes and their leaders were dismissed and openly attacked by high representatives of the Prussian state. The most significant person testifying the repudiation of "Napoleon(ism)" is certainly King Friedrich Wilhelm IV (1795–1861) himself, a key figure of both nineteenth-century German Romanticism and conservatism. His invectives especially against Napoleon I are legion, whom he defamed at many instances in a highly polemical way.

Friedrich Wilhelm IV felt strong personal antipathy towards Napoleon Bonaparte, whom he had met as a boy at Tilsit in 1807 after Prussia's devastating military defeat by the French; this antipathy transformed into hostility against the whole dynasty and everything smacking of "Bonapartism". His aversion, however, was also clearly ideological, reflecting the inviolable principles of that strand of conservative thinking as whose main protagonist Friedrich Wilhelm was considered throughout the *Vormärz* period: the *Altkonservativen* ("Old Conservatives"), or *Hochkonservativen* ("High Conservatives"), respectively.

Strongly influenced by the Swiss jurist Karl Ludwig von Haller's *Restauration der Staats-Wissenschaft* (1816–1825),²⁵ but also—though to a lesser degree—by Friedrich Karl von Savigny's (1779–1861) "Historical School of Law," the "Old" or "High Conservatives" were fervent defenders of a patrimonial and *ständisch*-corporatist monarchy divinely ordained. They advocated an "organic" and "historically grown", thus effectively decentralized, body politic based on divine kingship and limited political rights of the traditional *Landstände*, while repudiating contract and natural

law theories and especially the universalistic principles of the Enlightenment and the Revolution, including rationalism and popular sovereignty. Rather, this kind of “universalism”, considered a form of historical relativism, was contrasted with the concept of Christian universalism. The High Conservatives, whose main representatives included the brothers Ludwig Friedrich Leopold (1790–1861) and Ernst Ludwig von Gerlach (1795–1877), Karl Ernst Jarcke (1801–1852), Friedrich Julius Stahl (1802–1861), Marcus von Niebuhr (1817–1860) and Hermann Wagener (1815–1889), passionately pursued what might best be characterized as an ideologically infused *Prinzipienpolitik*. Political and moral “principles” occupied a central role in their thinking, as epitomized in the title of Stahl’s famous work *Das Monarchische Princip* (1845),²⁶ in which he made a plea for monarchical legitimacy and authority, contrasting the ruinous “parliamentarian principle” with the “monarchical principle”, which he called “the foundation of German state law and German statecraft.”²⁷ Yet Stahl’s theoretically grounded and conclusive work, termed a “quantum leap” in conservative thought,²⁸ also demonstrates that the High Conservatives were not simply old-fashioned reactionaries or anti-intellectual “deniers of modernity”. They clearly had a sound grasp of contemporary developments and made use of modern forms of publicity to argue their agenda, which included founding the (in-)famous *Neue Preußische Zeitung*—known as *Kreuzzeitung* due to its emblem, an Iron Cross—in 1848. These characteristic features set them apart from both the backward-looking, aristocratic “Junker conservatism” (*Junkerkonservatismus*), and the more pragmatically oriented conservatism prevalent in the Prussian bureaucratic apparatus (*Beamtenkonservatismus*).

In the eyes of the High Conservatives, Napoleon(ism) was the incarnations of the damnable principles of the Revolution, “that monster”, as the then Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm described it in 1832, “which first saw the light of the world forty years ago, and which, were I apocalyptically inclined, I would immediately compare to the Beast *par excellence*.”²⁹ The Revolution was *the* nightmare of the High Conservatives, against which their project of a conservative-legitimist monarchical order was directed. Therefore not surprisingly, the outbreak of the Revolution in 1848 not only in France and neighboring European states, but also Prussia, came as a shock to them. The meteoric rise of yet another Bonaparte from a derided “want-to-be Napoleon”, via President to Emperor within a few years seemed to confirm the worst fears and prejudices of the High Conservatives *vis-à-vis* “Bonapartism”, against which they polemicized all the more actively. At the forefront of rejection were the two Gerlach brothers, whose *ständisch*-patrimonial and Christian-Germanic background made them view Bonapartism as the synthesis of two equally false principles against which they had been fighting throughout their lives: popular sovereignty and absolutism.

Shortly after Louis-Napoléon’s successful coup in Paris 1851, Ludwig Friedrich Leopold von Gerlach—general adjutant to the King and one of his closest political advisors and friends—expressed his concern about the events in France in a letter to Otto von Bismarck, with whom he regularly corresponded: “I do not ignore the good side of the coup d’état, but I am armed with the history of the old Bonaparte so as not to be misled by it.” Gerlach was certain that Bonapartism merely replaced the “absurdity of constitutionalism” with a “deceitful and nonsensical sovereignty of the people, an

even more nonsensical and impossible division of power and a dreadful centralization (*viribus unitis*), in other words, absolute despotism".³⁰

A few days later (December 26, 1851), in a private note, Gerlach remarked about the "resurrected Bonapartism" in a similar fashion:

People believe that the victory of the President over the Reds and Constitutionalists will liberate them from the fear of 1852, that disastrous, notorious year. One forgets that he, just as his uncle, is himself the concentrated revolution and *heros necessarius* of it, partly because of their relationship, partly because of his revolutionary origins founded upon perjury and breach of faith, but especially because, without any right and without any higher calling, he has the revolutionized and atomized France at his feet.³¹

From late 1851 onwards, Gerlach did not tire of warning about the "despicable figure of Bonapartism", which had recently risen up,³² the "dangerous and great power of Bonapartism, this child of the vile marriage of absolutism and liberalism",³³ and of Napoleon III, who represented as much the "incarnated Revolution" as his uncle had done before him—regardless of whether they had intended to or not.³⁴ In equal terms, Leopold's younger brother Ernst Ludwig von Gerlach, co-founder of the *Kreuzzeitung* and whip of the conservative party in the upper house of parliament, wrote in February 1853 that it "is good that we have eluded the Charybdis of revolution [...], but now we are falling into the Scylla of Bonapartism".³⁵

However, while the developments in the wake of the 1848 Revolution sharpened High Conservatives' awareness of Bonapartism as a problem and fortified their opposition to the phenomenon, the revolutionary trauma in turn increased the preparedness of certain conservative Prussian politicians to rule in a way perceived as "Napoleonic". What may look like a paradox at first sight turns out not to be so on closer examination.

After March 1848, Friedrich Wilhelm IV, who had always cherished the hope of a renewal—or rather "reinvention"—of corporatist-*ständische* institutions, now presided over nothing less than Prussia's transition to modern constitutionalism. Although in December 1848 he and his government managed to seize control of the revolutionary movement and to unilaterally impose their constitutional draft—which followed the model of "constitutional monarchy", preserving the dominant status of the crown, and became even more conservative due to revisions undertaken in 1850—, this was hardly of great comfort: from now on, the King had to live with a Constitution which he could not realistically revoke in its entirety. Whether they wanted it or not, king, government and the conservative party had to find a *modus vivendi* with the Constitution. Forced to adapt to the new constitutional age, however, they in fact soon recognized that the Constitution might be to their advantage and used for counter-revolutionary purposes.

For Friedrich Wilhelm IV, this meant doing everything in his power to relativize the Constitution from within, that is by using the monarchical prerogatives with which he had been entrusted. Even though the King never succeeded in neutralizing the hated Constitution towards which he was unable to develop an impartial relationship, his

efforts to strengthen monarchical authority opened the door for “Bonapartist appetites”³⁶ in the government. This development did not go unnoticed by Leopold von Gerlach, who identified Bonapartism as a problem not only in France, but throughout Europe and even in Prussia. “What I find truly disheartening,” Gerlach confessed in a letter to Bismarck in 1855, “is the widespread Bonapartism and the indifference and foolishness, with which one sees this greatest of all dangers approaching.”³⁷ Two years later he expressed his conviction that “most statesmen, not just here, but in other countries as well, are in truth [Bonapartists],” citing the British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston (1784–1865) and the Austrian politicians Alexander von Bach (1813–1893) and Karl Ferdinand von Buol-Schauenstein (1797–1865) as examples.³⁸ In the Prussian context, Gerlach and his fellow High Conservatives pinpointed Otto Theodor von Manteuffel (1805–1882), minister of the interior from 1848 to 1850 and prime minister from 1850 to 1858, to be a notorious Bonapartist.³⁹ Manteuffel—nicknamed *Fra Diavolo* (“Brother Devil”) by his conservative opponents, bearing the same name as the Neapolitan guerrilla leader Michele Pezza (1771–1806)—appeared as the personification of bumbledom, absolutism and Bonapartism alike:⁴⁰ “What are we left with if we get rid of the constitution?”, Gerlach asked in November 1852: “the Manteuffels.”⁴¹ In view of such a prospect, he was in no doubt that constitutionalism was the lesser of two evils: “[...] I do not want to defend constitutionalism, [...] but I prefer it to absolutism.”⁴²

What made Manteuffel and his political style look so “Bonapartist” to the High Conservatives? He was among those who were impressed by the Napoleonic coup of December 2, 1851: not so much by the “Napoleonic idea,” which might be behind the seizure of power, but by the immediate political effects of the coup. The re-establishment of order and the—seeming—unrestricted nature of Napoleonic leadership in France were appealing to a Prussian conservative politician sympathetic to the idea of an authoritarian-bureaucratic system of government. His actual policies in the 1850s could indeed give some cause for concern among High Conservatives, with Manteuffel manipulating public opinion by means of a newly created Central Press Office, and establishing a network of informers and spies to control and monitor real and alleged opposition forces, including the *Kreuzzeitung* party.

Yet taken as a whole, it seems that Manteuffel’s style of government, though reflecting certain Bonapartist elements, was not so “Bonapartist” as to place it anywhere near that of the two Napoleons. Differences to the French model are tangible, for example, in Manteuffel’s rejection of a “Caesaristic” plebiscitary system and in his lifelong reluctance to make political concessions to the masses and to the working class in particular. Manteuffel was not unaware of the social question in modern-day society, and was most likely influenced in his views by the writer Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl (1823–1897). In his work *Die bürgerliche Gesellschaft* (1851), Riehl asserted that it was no longer three, but four groups that constituted contemporary (German) society: aristocracy and peasantry as the “powers of social persistence”, the *Bürgertum* and the proletariat as the “powers of social movement”.⁴³ Manteuffel shared Riehl’s conviction that it was time monarchical government acknowledged these divisions and that it was fatal to build its legitimacy and power on solely one group. The government should instead stand above class conflicts and assume the role of a “mediator”. These ideas,

however, did not translate into any serious attempt to integrate the lower classes into the political process and boost social policies, as Napoleon III was doing. On the contrary: Riehl's and Manteuffel's idea of how a stable monarchy could best be achieved was to isolate the revolutionary underclass by forming a counter-coalition of the other three groups in society.

The fact that notwithstanding such obvious differences to Napoleon III Manteuffel was branded a "Bonapartist" by the Gerlach circle, albeit the Minister-President compared himself rather to a person like Frederick II, shows how varied—even confused—the perception of Bonapartism could actually be at the time. The term could serve as a descriptor of a concrete regime type resembling those of the two Napoleons, but also as a denominator for one specific component of these regimes, e.g. the authoritarian one, or simply as a political combat and defamation term. As the utterances of Leopold von Gerlach prove, one and the same person could use the concept of Bonapartism both selectively and inconsistently: one time with an emphasis on its revolutionary character, another time stressing its autocratic components, but sometimes also underlining that Bonapartism was not the same as absolutism, nor the same as Caesarism. In June 1857, Gerlach declared in this vein that:

Bonapartism is not absolutism, not even Caesarism [...] Caesarism is the presumption of an *imperium* in a rightful republic and justifies itself by a state of emergency; for a Bonaparte, however, whether he likes it or not, it is the Revolution, which is to say the sovereignty of the people, that is the internal and also, with each conflict or need, the external legal title.⁴⁴

Contrary to the general trend in politico-theoretical discourse, Gerlach was inclined to make a clear distinction between Bonapartism and Caesarism, understanding the latter to be a justified and legitimate form of (crisis) government, in line with the classical Roman understanding of (temporary) dictatorship. Bonapartism, in turn, was characterized by its illegitimacy and viciousness, resulting from its revolutionary origins.⁴⁵

Against these very criteria, the verdict that Manteuffel was a Bonapartist made only limited sense, since it could hardly be claimed that the Prussian Minister-President was a product of the Revolution or pursued a revolutionary agenda. Someone who seemed to represent Bonapartist principles better and whose political initiatives could more easily be compared with those of the two Napoleons was another advisor of Friedrich Wilhelm IV after 1848, namely Karl Ludwig Friedrich von Hinckeldey (1805–1856). A career bureaucrat as Manteuffel, Hinckeldey became police president in Berlin in 1848, and the King's principal confidant in security matters. In his position, he not only created a modern police force and perfected surveillance of political opponents as well as censorship of the media, but also pushed for a modernization of Berlin, including ambitious construction projects and administrative as well as social service reforms. Hinckeldey envisaged "positive state action" becoming a key instrument in mobilizing popular support for the monarchical cause. David E. Barclay goes as far as to claim that "with his mixture of rough authoritarianism, populism, and welfare paternalism, with his emphasis on the extension of state power and his simultaneous support for modern

forms of economic activity”, Hinckeldey represented “an early form of Prussian crypto-Bonapartism”.⁴⁶ Yet Hinckeldey’s scope of action and influence remained limited both in spatial and temporal respect, given that his main field of activity continued to be Berlin, where he died in 1856. Always in the shadow of his King and of other politicians, he never managed to unfold his political ideas at a supra-regional level and did not even come close to gaining the status of a “national leader”.

Even though High Conservatives spared no effort in stigmatizing their political adversaries in the ruling class as Bonapartists, this was for the most part a concern within the segmented conservative party: Hinckeldey was—and indeed could—not be seen and remembered in such terms by a broader public for his inferior political position alone; Manteuffel for his actual style of government, which resembled neo-absolutism rather than Bonapartism. Yet the situation looks different regarding that man who—endowed with a clear sense of power—became Prussia’s Minister-President in 1862; a statesman who more than any other has monopolized the role of key figure of German nineteenth-century history and defied any clear categorizations of being reactionary or revolutionary, authoritarian or democratic: Otto von Bismarck.

5.3 Otto von Bismarck: a German Bonaparte?

The life and political achievements of Bismarck, who has entered history books as the architect of German unification as much as one of the most skilled (or at least most vulpine) diplomats in world history and an ambitious political reformer at home, have been retold so often that there is no need to go into details here. We can confine ourselves to the one question which is central in the context of this inquiry and which in itself is complex enough: in how far was Bismarck seen as a “German Bonaparte” and “German Caesar” by contemporaries, or considered himself as such, and in how far can Bismarck’s leadership style and policies be legitimately described as “Bonapartist” or “Caesaristic”? The most obvious way to address this issue is by investigating the extent to which Bismarck can be compared to the two Napoleons, and to Napoleon III in particular.⁴⁷

One can justifiably object that a search for parallels or differences between these statesmen and their regimes can only be a superficial endeavor, simply because they are hardly comparable characters and found themselves in fundamentally different social and political roles: unlike either Bonaparte, Bismarck was a member of the traditional aristocratic elite; and unlike them, Bismarck never acquired or even aspired to the position of formal head of state or monarch, but ultimately remained dependent on his sovereign, which was not the people, but the Prussian King.⁴⁸ Still, the fact that Bismarck could never assume the role of a “leader” or “ruler” in the same way as Napoleon I or Napoleon III should not be overemphasized. Collating Bismarck with the French Emperor(s) can be justified for two reasons: firstly, it can be argued pragmatically that despite his formal constitutional subordination to the King, Bismarck actually occupied a pseudo-monarchical and quasi-independent role that provided him with substantial room for maneuver, at least under the rule of Wilhelm I (1861–1888); secondly, comparing Bismarck Germany and Napoleonic France in terms of Bonapartism and

Caesarism is not the contradiction it might first seem to be if these concepts are considered first and foremost as a style of government and technique of rule, potentially functional in varying systemic contexts, rather than a clearly defined "ideal type". While a case can thus be made for the comparability of Bismarck Germany and Napoleonic France *per se*, this does not, however, establish whether they were indeed comparable. In order to come closer to an answer, getting a better grasp of Bismarck's (early) political concepts in general and his attitude towards French Bonapartism in particular might be useful.

5.3.1 Conservative Dissonances: *Recht* vs. *Macht*

In his early political life, Bismarck gained the reputation of a politician with a gift for stinging rhetoric, defending the interests of the landed nobility within the conservative camp and standing loyal to the Gerlach circle and its political beliefs. But while Leopold von Gerlach and his brother Ludwig helped to launch Bismarck's political career in 1847, when he became a representative to the newly created Prussian legislature (*Vereinigter Landtag*), existing differences to the *Kreuzzeitung* party and the political theory of a Friedrich Julius Stahl were discernible even at this early stage. These differences were manifest in Bismarck giving priority to considerations of power and interest over principle, which ultimately also included the position of his political friends and his own.⁴⁹ The pragmatism and opportunism with which Bismarck approached and practised politics became even more pronounced after he was appointed Prussia's envoy to the Diet of the German Confederation in Frankfurt in 1851, a post he held for the next eight years until January 1859.

These attitudes became especially apparent in Bismarck's unbiased, not to say friendly, stance towards France under the rule of Napoleon III; a stance, which put him in opposition not only to general public opinion in Germany, but also—and more importantly—to the High Conservatives in the government. Bismarck's openness towards a Franco-Prussian rapprochement was dictated by power-political reasoning: he was convinced that in order to counteract Austria's influence in Germany, it was necessary for Prussia not only to gain the support of other German states, but also to keep the possibilities for alternative alliances alive, including those with Russia and France. Friendship—or at least a working relationship—with both Russia and France seemed necessary for Bismarck to threaten Austria, but also to prevent France and its Emperor from allying themselves with Russia. Even though the Crimean War saw Russia and France as opponents, this was of no relief for Bismarck. The fact that Prussia remained isolated throughout the Crimean War and was almost not invited to the peace talks in Paris further increased Bismarck's fear of Prussia losing her role as a European power, and confirmed his opinion that an undogmatic and flexible foreign policy was essential to counteract this development. He outlined his foreign political concept in the so-called *Prachtschrift* (or *Prachtbericht*) of April 26, 1856, addressed to Manteuffel, in which improving relations with Napoleonic France was of crucial importance.⁵⁰ This, together with the two journeys Bismarck made to Paris in 1855 and 1857 respectively, put him in open conflict with the High Conservatives, for whom France and Napoleon III had always been and remained the natural enemies of Prussia

and Germany as a whole. What displeased the High Conservatives in particular was the fact that Bismarck did not seem to find any real fault with the Napoleonic political system, which posed the danger of his being discredited not only as a mere (foreign-political) opportunist, but also (ideological) Bonapartist.

As their correspondence demonstrates, Leopold von Gerlach felt more and more compelled to make his former protégé aware of the dangers of Bonapartism, the harmfulness of which Bismarck did not seem to be able to clearly recognize. In 1857, when the exchange of letters on the issue reached a peak, Gerlach failed to understand how “a man with your mind can sacrifice the principle to a single man, such as this L [ouis] N [apoleon]”.⁵¹ Bismarck’s reply a couple of days later denied any particular personal sympathy for the French Emperor, but also made a strong case against legitimism playing a central role in foreign policy and for his argument that Prussia would have to deal with France, no matter under which government it might currently be.⁵²

In response, Gerlach felt obliged to remind Bismarck that the “revolutionary spirit”, the fight against which he considered to be both his own and still also Bismarck’s life task, should not and could not be decoupled from the present regime in France under Napoleon III: “My political principle is and remains the fight against the Revolution. You will not be able to convince Bonaparte that he is not on the side of the Revolution. He does not want to be anywhere else, since this side has its clear advantages for him.”⁵³ Two weeks later, Gerlach assured Bismarck that—knowing his views in domestic policy—he did not consider him a Bonapartist, an allegation against which Bismarck had felt compelled to defend himself.⁵⁴ However, Gerlach considered it all the more inexplicable “how you look at our foreign politics”, Bismarck’s concept of which lacked “head and tail, principle and goal of politics”. He also found it strange that Bismarck could overlook the fact that Napoleon III “was subject to the consequences of his position of absolutism founded on popular sovereignty (l’*élu de 7 millions*), which he feels as much as the old [Napoleon I; MJP]”. Making overtures to France and cooperating with Napoleon would ultimately mean strengthening the revolutionary spirit in Europe with Prussian support.⁵⁵

In reaction to this, Bismarck not only re-emphasized his position that modern foreign policy had to be guided by need rather than principle, but also pointed out that he was unable to share Gerlach’s and the High Conservatives’ assessment of Napoleon III and their unfettered appraisal of the anti-revolutionary axiom. Pre-empting—in part verbatim—what he was to outline only three days later in the aforementioned memorandum to Manteuffel regarding the suggested “normalization” of Franco-Prussian foreign relations,⁵⁶ Bismarck posed the provocative question: “How many existences are there in today’s political world that are not rooted in revolutionary soil?” One did not even have to cite Spain, Portugal, Brazil, the various republics in the Americas, Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, Greece, Sweden or England as examples. Even the German princes would not be able to claim any fully legitimate title to rule in their respective territories in a traditional sense of the word. Since the omnipresence of the revolutionary legacy in the modern world was a fact, the present Napoleon-phobia appeared unreasonable to Bismarck.⁵⁷ What was crucial was not whether a regime might be of revolutionary origin, but in how far a regime attempted to leave the

Revolution and its missionary zeal behind. And in this respect, the Bonapartes appeared in a much better light than the three last Bourbon kings in the eighteenth century: "The House of Bourbon has done more for the Revolution than any Bonaparte [...] Bonapartism is not the father of the Revolution; just like every absolutism, it is a fertile field for sowing it." Both Napoleons had been heirs of the Revolution, not their propagators, and both had been inclined "to gain for themselves firmer foundations than those of the Revolution". This was particularly true of Napoleon III, who was more than aware of the flaws of the Bonapartist system of government, which he realized and complained about. However, Bismarck reasoned that "for France, the present form of government is nothing arbitrary, something that L. Napoleon could establish or change", and most likely "the only method by which France can be ruled for a long time to come". He thus insinuated that neither Napoleon III nor Bonapartism *per se* were a hazard; on the contrary, they were the best available guarantee for the containment of revolutionary energies.⁵⁸

Which conclusions can be drawn from the correspondence between Gerlach and Bismarck with regard to the latter's political mindscape? On the one hand, the differences between the two are symptomatic of a growing gap within the ranks of Prussian conservatives, with the older generation of High Conservatives becoming increasingly isolated both intellectually and politically. Bismarck in particular embodied a shift from High Conservative *Prinzipienpolitik* to a *Realpolitik* based on pragmatic—*Altkonservative* might call it "amoral"—calculations of state interest on the governmental level, which reflected a more general trend in German political debates. The legitimist camp with a romanticized idea of *Rechtsautoritarismus* ("legal authoritarianism") as its guiding principle was more and more on the defensive against those making a case for an interest-guided *Machtautoritarismus* ("power authoritarianism"), like Bismarck, who with growing self-confidence criticized the Gerlach circle for ignoring existing realities and for being anachronistic. Bismarck's key message was that it would be not only unwise, but actually irresponsible to bind one's own policies to one single "subjective" principle and thus limit the available options right from the beginning; or, as Bismarck famously put it in his last known letter to Gerlach of May 2, 1860: "You cannot play chess if you are prohibited from using 16 out of 64 squares from the outset."⁵⁹ Against an argument as simple and convincing as this, the High Conservatives could only fight rearguard battles. This was particularly true after 1861, when King Friedrich Wilhelm IV as their political and Leopold von Gerlach as their intellectual figurehead died.

In the first instance, Bismarck's *Realpolitik* emerged from geopolitical reasoning and was seen as an instrument applicable in foreign relations. However, the foreign political pragmatism shown towards France and her ruler was also to be extended to other areas, such as ideology and domestic politics. With the same "openness", with which France was seen as a political state actor, one could actually perceive French Bonapartism: it might be a regime of revolutionary origin and far from perfect, but why should that matter if it was the best available alternative for the moment? Tentative steps in the direction of an "ideological relativism" were even discernible in May 1860, when Bismarck openly declared—certainly not raising his aging mentor's spirits—that the differences between "right [*Recht*] and Revolution, Christianity and unbelief, God

and Devil” were not quite obvious to him. By then, at the latest, there could be no further doubt that Bismarck was right in claiming that “I am a child of other times than you are, [...] one just as truthful to his as you are to yours”.⁶⁰

Throughout his first fifteen years as an active politician, Bismarck repeatedly stressed that he deemed not only the former Bourbon kings, but also the constitutional monarchy of Louis-Philippe far more abhorrent than the Napoleonic regimes. From this one could infer some sympathy at least within the French context, but one would search in vain for any clear personal positioning towards Bonapartism as a potential (domestic) form of rule, or even an open appreciation of the same. If there had been any sympathies, it was not to be expected that Bismarck would have made them public and risked widening the gulf between him and his conservative fellow party members and the King, on whom his career ultimately depended. But there was actually also no immediate need to declare himself on this issue as long as he acted as a foreign politician with limited, albeit considerable, power of decision, and not a national political leader; a position, into which he grew after his appointment to Minister-President in September 1862. From that moment on, Bismarck’s policies and actions became the best indicator of the degree to which his style of government is comparable to that of the two Bonapartes in France, and whether it can justifiably be called “Bonapartist”.

5.3.2 Bismarck and Napoleon III: Their Two Regimes Compared

In trying to get a better understanding of Otto von Bismarck’s leadership techniques after 1862—first as Prussian Minister-President (1862–1890, with a short interruption in 1873), later as Federal Chancellor of the North German Confederation (1867–1871) and then Chancellor of the German Empire (1871–1890)—several explanatory approaches have been taken. Among those most frequently used are “negative integration”, “amalgamation policy” and “social imperialism”, each with their own distinct strengths and weaknesses.⁶¹

The idea of “negative integration” essentially implies that Bismarck Prussia and Germany shared a uniting fear of a minority within their own body politic (most notably socialists and Catholics) and a foreign enemy (Austria and even more so France), artificially created and skillfully exploited by the government. “Amalgamation policy” (often referred to as *Sammlungspolitik*), in turn, suggests that Bismarck’s power basis was the coalition he had managed to form between the two most powerful interest groups in German society, namely the traditional elite of the land-owning nobility and the upcoming industrial and financial (bourgeois) elite, against other social classes and the proletariat in particular. Both approaches thus share the similarity of essentially being conflict-oriented, establishing an “in group” on the one hand, an “out group” on the other, with the differences mainly to be found in the driving motivations of the “in group”: fear in the case of negative integration, the preservation of the socio-economic *status quo* in the case of amalgamation policy. Unlike these two explanatory approaches, “social imperialism”—intrinsically linked with the German social historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler—suggests itself as a more generally applicable one. It makes the claim that in order to stabilize an existing political and social order,

domestic tensions are diverted outwards to the "imperial space", thus offering a potential explanation and basis of comparison for different forms of nineteenth-century European imperialisms.⁶² However, the one approach that has been consistently applied over time more than any other to characterize Bismarck's policies is that of Bonapartism and—slightly less frequently—Caesarism.

Unlike the above-named characterizations of Bismarckian politics, which gained importance only after the Second World War, Bonapartism and Caesarism had even been used by many of Bismarck's contemporaries, be it politicians or political thinkers. In one way or another, they saw—or at least sensed—an intrinsic affinity in style between the policies and political principles of Napoleon (I and III) and Bismarck, like Friedrich Engels, who in a letter to Karl Marx portrayed the Bismarck regime as a "Bonapartist semi-dictatorship" in 1866.⁶³ Four years earlier—when Bismarck had just been appointed Minister-President of Prussia—the Italian member of parliament Giuseppe Lazzaro (1825–1910) had denounced Bismarck as a Bonapartist in a pamphlet that was also to become the first explicit politico-theoretical encounter with Caesarism (*Cesarismo*) in Italy: Lazzaro contended that like Napoleon III, Bismarck, too, was an autocrat masquerading as the people's benefactor and paying sham homage to "progressive ideas" (*idee progressiste*).⁶⁴

Analogies between the Bonapartes and Bismarck have been emphasized ever since. Yet quantity does not say anything about the qualitative value of the Bonaparte analogy. And indeed, while Bonapartism and Caesarism is employed as one of the most common "systemic descriptions" of Bismarck, it is perhaps also the most vague and tentative explanatory approach to characterize his leadership style from the 1860s to 1890. It has been argued that "Bonapartism" and "Caesarism" lack any precision and are used rather abstractly,⁶⁵ and some scholars have placed doubt whether these concepts can be used to describe Bismarckian politics in any useful way at all,⁶⁶ the latter view having become predominant in contemporary research.⁶⁷ These scholarly assessments correspond with the view of those nineteenth-century observers denouncing the idea of Bismarck being a "second Napoleon", among them the German liberal Ludwig Bamberger (1823–1899).⁶⁸

While there has been some fierce arguing for and against "Bismarckianism" being "Bonapartism" or "Caesarism", it is astonishing that the one thing which would seem quite natural to start with plays a relatively limited role: a critical-analytical comparison of Bismarck and Napoleon III and their respective regimes; that is, a comparison which would go beyond formal (dis-)similarities and help to produce more sophisticated answers that are neither stuck in *a priori* efforts to making abstract generalizations, nor emphasizing (national and biographical) idiosyncrasies. To do this in any exhaustive manner would certainly require a monograph of its own. Still, this does not preclude making an effort to highlight at least some of the (structural) differences and parallels between the two regimes.

A systematic comparison of different regimes has to take into account at least three levels, which are unquestionably interconnected with each other, but not to be confused: 1) the "structural" level, describing the socio-economic, broader political and cultural framework within which regimes come into being and function; 2) the level of the "formal constitution", prescribing the institutional roles and rules of the regimes; finally 3) the level of the "real" or "material constitution", which—broadly understood—

reflects the practical functioning of regimes as well as the strategies and policies applied for their legitimization. Let us first turn to the “structural embeddedness” of Bismarck’s regime and that of Napoleon III, respectively.

In this regard, obvious similarities can be discerned. Napoleon III and Bismarck alike faced the task of exercising political power in a rapidly industrializing state, characterized by an ever-decreasing share of the population working in the primary sector of the economy and in agriculture in particular. In the long-run, this was to become a considerable challenge for two regimes receiving much of their support from the rural population. Moreover, both France under Napoleon III and Prussia under Bismarck can be characterized as post-revolutionary societies: not only in the sense that they necessarily had to deal with the underlying political and intellectual legacy of the eighteenth century’s “Great Revolutions”, but also in that the Revolution of 1848 had been a formative element of immediate relevance for the genesis and, indeed, legitimacy of both regimes. The success of the 1848 Revolution in France certainly set a somewhat dissimilar stage for Napoleon III than the failure—to a large part—of the 1848/1849 Revolutions in Germany for Bismarck, but the policies of both men essentially represented a continuation of the Revolution by other means, intrinsically mingling revolutionary with anti-revolutionary and modern with conservative elements. Characteristically, both in France and Germany the experience of Revolution together with the tangible impact of industrialization brought about a latent “red scare” and fear of a democratic-Jacobin republic. This gave rise, among other things, to the middle classes and traditional elites (at least in part) closing ranks, and eventually favoring reform over radical change.

Yet despite such parallels, a number of contentions have been voiced against the structural comparability of the (Second) French Empire and the *Bismarckreich*. These include, for example, the fact that while nineteenth-century France had been a nation state for many centuries, the nation-building process in Germany came to a conclusion only after the War of 1870/1871. In addition, substantial dissimilarities can be discerned between French and German society in the second half of the nineteenth century, and an accordingly different “social basis” of the Prussian-German monarchy compared to the French. It can indeed be maintained that post-1848 Prussian-German society was different from the French, which had undergone no less than three revolutionary *caesura* (1789, 1830 and 1848) that had tapered social differences and strengthened the role of the bourgeoisie and the “fourth estate” alike. Unlike France, the industrialization process in Prussia took off within a still largely feudal-conservative *Obrigkeitsstaat* (“state of authority”), in which the agrarian aristocracy had managed to preserve much—though not all—of its former political power. Bismarck’s social challenge was thus not so much the “domestication” of the “revolutionary masses”, as it was for Napoleon III in France, but harmonizing the conflicting political, social and economic interests of the *Bürgertum* with the existing *Junker* system. Bismarck’s solution to this challenge was eventually to foster the re-feudalization of politics and society, especially after 1878/1879; something which was in distinct contrast to Napoleon’s program of establishing a post-revolutionary order inclining towards egalitarianism. The clash of bourgeois-liberal and conservative interests became obvious even during the first “practical test” of Bismarck’s leadership, the Prussian

Verfassungskonflikt ("constitutional conflict") between 1859 and 1866, which will be looked at more closely in the later comparison of French and German constitutional practices. Initially, however, the "formal constitution" of Napoleonic France and Bismarckian Germany is to be examined.

One obvious difference between the constitutional frameworks within which Napoleon III and Bismarck operated was the absence of a formal "constitutional breach" in the case of the latter. While Napoleon tailored the legal-institutional order to suit his needs in the wake of the *coup d'état* of December 2, 1851, Bismarck continued to rule within a given constitutional system after becoming Minister-President of Prussia in 1862. Yet this difference is qualified in view of the year 1871, which provided Bismarck with a unique opportunity to put his personal mark on the constitution of the newly-created German Empire. Moreover, one could assume that even the Prussian constitution guaranteed Bismarck a powerful-enough position and sufficient room to maneuver politically for whatever Caesaristic ambitions he might have had. With the "revolutionary" character of the legal-institutional order *per se* hence being of only limited analytical value, let us focus on the positions occupied by Bismarck and Napoleon III in their respective constitutional systems and their role in the law-making process in particular.

Essentially, the constitutional orders of the French Second Empire as well as that of the Kingdom of Prussia and later the German Empire can be categorized as "monarchical-constitutional": a monarchy (understood in its Greek original meaning as "rule of the one", without necessarily implying any hereditary character) with a ruler disposing of encompassing powers, which at the same time are limited—at least formally—by a written constitution and a parliamentary body. Yet this common typology is not particularly helpful, considering that "monarchical constitutionalism" thus broadly interpreted was the almost universal model of nineteenth-century constitutionalism in Europe.

If a slightly more specific definition of "monarchical constitutionalism" is applied, however, which assigns this classification only to regimes with monarchical legitimacy being the primary source of legitimacy and monarchical sovereignty the underlying concept of sovereignty, an obvious difference is discernible. Such characteristics of what might be called more accurately "constitutional monarchism"⁶⁹ apply to both the Kingdom of Prussia and also—through to a lesser degree—the later German Empire: revolutionary constitutionalism with its language of popular sovereignty was repudiated, as was the idea of a separation of powers *sensu stricto*, in which each of the constitutional actors dispose of a legitimacy of their own. Rather, the monarch was claimed to be the bearer of all sovereignty and state authority (*plenitudo potestatis*), and only the execution of the same was left in part to certain constitutional institutions.⁷⁰ In other words, while the only holder of *ius* is the monarch, the other powers in the political system are subordinate and only have delegated power (*exercitium*), making such a system appear as a "constitutionalized" form of enlightened absolutism. This concept, which found its politico-theoretical expression in the later formula of the "monarchical principle", had made it into the *Wiener Schlussakte* of 1820 as the basic political norm of the German Confederation,⁷¹ and was to become the core of German constitutional law and practice until the First World War.

In France, the situation was quite different: the *Charte constitutionnelle* of 1814 had provided Europe with the most influential model of constitutional monarchy, but in France itself the restored Bourbon monarchy's anti-revolutionary experiment of a constitutional order based on monarchical legitimacy and sovereignty failed even with the July Revolution of 1830, and definitively with the February Revolution of 1848. The Constitution of 1852—as the earlier constitutions of 1799, 1802 and 1804—was solidly grounded in revolutionary rhetoric and acknowledged the principle of popular sovereignty (cf. Art. 1). Following this logic, Napoleon III, like his uncle before him, was the product of and thus dependent on the will of the people. In constitutional terms, he was merely a *pouvoir constitué*, not the *pouvoir constituant*.

Irrespective of whether one characterizes the constitutional systems within which Napoleon III and Bismarck operated in equal measure as “monarchical-constitutional” or not, it can be stated that at least in legal terms neither system was a dictatorship or autocracy—attributes that have been used for Napoleonic France in particular.⁷² Both in France and Germany, the executive body was restrained by constitutional provisions, and legislative power to be exercised only in collaboration with parliament. Thus, a dualistic element was apparent, although monarchical power was undoubtedly the predominant factor in law-making. In the French Imperial Constitution of 1852,⁷³ only the Emperor—supported by the State Council (*Conseil d'Etat*)—had the right of initiative (cf. Art. 8 and 50); he was endowed with an absolute veto (cf. Art. 10). Moreover, foreign and military policy was effectively his exclusive competence, and he had the authority to issue regulations and decrees in his own right (cf. Art. 6). Ministers were dependent on and answerable to the Emperor alone (cf. Art. 13). Similar prerogatives of the crown can be found in the Prussian Constitution of 1850⁷⁴ absolute veto (cf. Art. 62), discretionary power to issue decrees and determining the members of government (cf. Art. 45), the absence of ministerial responsibility towards parliament (cf. Art. 44 and 45), as well as almost full control of foreign policy (cf. Art. 48). Despite these similarities, however, the competences of the Prussian bicameral parliament were all in all more encompassing than that of its counterpart in France. This was particularly due to its disposing of a full right of legislative initiative (cf. Art. 64), which was also perpetuated in the Imperial Constitution of 1871⁷⁵ (cf. Art. 23 of the *Verfassung-Urkunde für das Deutsche Reich*)—a privilege granted to the French chambers only at the very end of Napoleon III's turn to the *empire libéral* (cf. Art. 12 of the French Constitution of 1870).⁷⁶

Yet more importantly for the overall weaker systemic position of Bismarck *vis-à-vis* Napoleon III than the more comprehensive rights of the Prussian-German parliament was another, more obvious factor mentioned in the introduction to this chapter: their respective constitutional status. While in France Napoleon III assumed the undisputed role of monarchical head of state, Bismarck's rule in Prussia and later the German Empire continued to be dependent on king and emperor, respectively. It is true that the Imperial Constitution of 1871 in particular, bearing his personal hallmarks, put Bismarck as *Reichskanzler* (“Chancellor of the Empire”) in a predominant position. Parliament had no means to legally force his abdication at any moment, he was at the same time chancellor and foreign minister with essentially free rein in foreign and military policy, and he did not have to worry about the federal element of the

constitution either, given that he was Minister-President of Prussia—the most powerful of the federal states—in personal union. Nevertheless, the structural constellation of Napoleon's and Bismarck's rule was fundamentally different. Bismarck was not a self-made ruler, he had been appointed by the King of Prussia—and was eventually to be dismissed by the German Emperor. Despite his impressive plenitude of power, "disposability" was a characteristic feature of Bismarck's position throughout his career.

These observations lead to the question of how the legal-normative restrictions of Napoleon III and Bismarck respectively played out in constitutional practice of the regimes, and whether Bismarck was perhaps able to compensate for his inferior systemic role in everyday politics. This refers to the third and last element of our comparison. For a more focused comparative assessment of constitutional practices and the way power was exercised by Napoleon III and Bismarck, respectively, let us focus on four particular features of their regimes: I. anti-parliamentarism and authoritarianism; II. democratic-plebiscitary legitimacy; III. imperialism; and IV. social policies.

The rule of both Napoleon III and Bismarck was characterized by their anti-parliamentary impetus already immanent in the respective constitutional systems outlined above. The dominance of the executive was to be guaranteed by a far-reaching marginalization of and control over representative bodies in everyday politics, yet without going so far as to eliminate these bodies altogether and thus moving towards a dictatorship proper. Overall, it seems that Napoleon III was more successful in containing parliament than Bismarck, at least until 1869. Not only did the French Constitution of 1852 provide Napoleon with more legal instruments—especially the exclusive right of initiative—to steer parliament than the Prussian and later German Imperial Constitution did for Bismarck; also the system of "influencing", not to say rigging, elections in order to resolve any potential conflict with parliament *a priori* was more perfected in France, manifest in a system of "official candidates" that guaranteed stable majorities in the chambers. Accordingly, Bismarck had to face the political realities of an unruly parliament opposing (parts of) government policies for much of his time in political leadership. Unlike Napoleon III in France, Bismarck remained in "indirect dependency"⁷⁷ from parliament throughout his career, characterizing the inner dualism between *Reichstag* and government in the German Empire, and he had the difficult task of creating and managing changing parliamentary majorities. Relying on a system of dependencies and complaisances, Napoleon III maneuvered between the political fractions and aimed at positioning himself above them. In contrast, Bismarck's striving for parliamentary support continued to be dependent on tactical and temporary alliances with one political party or another. Against this background, the executive branch never managed to gain as much autonomy as in Napoleonic France, which has also to do with the latter's form of a unitary state: while the rule of Napoleon III largely relied on a centralized and hierarchically organized state administration, Bismarck's power mainly depended on his skillful yet at the same time restless playing off various parties and institutions against each other, and holding the balance between different federalist and unitary tendencies especially after the foundation of the German Empire.⁷⁸

Bearing these challenges in mind, Bismarck's successful thwarting—essentially until 1890—of parliamentary aspirations to have an effective say in shaping policies is

all the more remarkable and underlines his reputation as a virtuoso, or rather technician, of power. The Prussian *Verfassungskonflikt* ("constitutional conflict"), which was also the first political litmus test after his appointment as Prussian Minister-President, is symptomatic in this regard. At the center of the conflict between King Wilhelm I (1797–1888) on the one hand and the Prussian *Abgeordnetenhaus* ("House of Representatives") dominated by liberals on the other was the fight over the reform and reorganization of the Prussian armed forces; particularly the financial means required for the envisaged extension of the standing regular army, which the chamber was reluctant to approve. At the peak of the conflict in March 1862, Wilhelm I appointed a new conservative government and dissolved the *Abgeordnetenhaus* that had only been elected in January, but saw himself confronted with yet a new liberal majority after the elections in May. With further attempts to end the deadlock between crown and parliament failing in September, the King—already considering abdication in favor of Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm (1831–1888), the later short-term Emperor Friedrich III—finally appointed Bismarck, at that time ambassador in Paris, as Prussian Minister-President (September 22) and shortly thereafter also foreign minister. Even at the first audience with Wilhelm I, the new Minister-President left no doubt about his stance in the constitutional conflict, which to him put the idea of monarchical government fundamentally at stake and hence required resolute action:

I succeeded in convincing him [the King; MJP] that it was not about conservative or liberal in this or that hue, but about royal government [*Regiment*] or parliamentary rule, and that the latter was necessarily, and also by means of a period of dictatorship, to be averted.⁷⁹

Bismarck made it known in no uncertain terms that in order to frustrate abhorrent parliamentarism, all necessary action was justified, including a *coup d'état* and temporary dictatorship. Even though he abstained from the *ultima ratio* of unilaterally overthrowing the existing constitutional order in 1862, as Louis-Napoléon had done in December 1851, Bismarckian politics never excluded the option of a "Brumaire". From the beginning, threatening to commit a coup was effectively used as a means of crisis management and tool of power politics on the home front,⁸⁰ and in more than one respect Bismarck's methods of government were unconstitutional in strictly legal terms, and close to an undeclared state of exception. In the context of the Prussian constitutional conflict, Bismarck's *Machtautoritarismus* ("power authoritarianism") was played out in the form of his four-years (1862–1866) of governing against the will and intentions of the majority in parliament, without a lawfully adopted budget and under restriction of civil liberties and freedom of the press in particular, yet backed by the Prussian bureaucracy and with the army as a subtle "last resort". Bismarck's "solution" to the constitutional conflict was the so-called *Lückentheorie* ("Gap Theory"), which essentially claimed that the crown in its role as sovereign power had the legal authority to take decisions whenever the constitution did not provide any explicit provision. Its intellectual originator was Friedrich Julius Stahl, whose works made him one of the most influential legal and constitutional scholars of the nineteenth century. In *Das Monarchische Princip* (1845) and later *Die Revolution und die*

constitutionelle Monarchie (1848), he had developed a coherent theory of what both Stahl and later observers⁸¹ considered the distinguishing feature of German constitutional law: the "monarchical principle." Above all, the principle claimed "the prince has the right and power to reign by himself."⁸² In the event of diverging interpretations of the constitution or a constitutional conflict, "preserving the prestige of the monarch must, according to the monarchical principle, be the overriding principle."⁸³ For Stahl, the monarch had the ultimate say in interpreting the law, as he was the father of the constitution both in the figurative and literal sense. Consequently, a legitimate right of initiative could be derived for the monarchical power in all politically contentious issues, which Bismarck applied to the concrete case of the state budget: given that the (Prussian) Constitution did not stipulate explicitly how to proceed in the event of king and both chambers failing to agree on a budget (cf. Art. 62 of the 1850 Constitution), Bismarck as representative of the crown saw himself entitled—if not obliged—to take unilateral action in order to guarantee the proper functioning of the state.

Eventually, the constitutional conflict was formally settled after the Second Schleswig War of 1864 and Prussia's victory in the German War of 1866—foreign-political successes securing Prussian hegemony in Germany and boosting Bismarck's public repute at the same time. "Corrupted" by these successes,⁸⁴ which opened up the prospect of a German nation state, the Prussian *Abgeordnetenhaus* approved Bismarck's *Indemnitätsvorlage* ("Indemnity Bill") on September 3, 1866 with a large majority of 230 to 75 votes: the *Indemnitätsvorlage* retroactively confirmed the constitutionality of all budgets between 1862 and 1865 and hence also legalized the government's actions in the previous years.⁸⁵ To a certain degree—even though differences are clearly evident—, this was the Prussian version of the Napoleonic plebiscite, in that accomplished political facts were legitimized *a posteriori*. Parliament yielded to the policies and authoritarian style of Bismarck, who was granted an additional triumph insofar as the decision on the Indemnity Bill led to a durable split within the liberal camp, with the new National Liberal Party (*Nationalliberale Partei*) breaking away from the German Progress Party (*Deutsche Fortschrittspartei*) and henceforth largely supporting Bismarck's political program. As during the Prussian constitutional conflict, Bismarck also managed later in the German Empire to effectively thwart parliamentary control of the army as a central power factor, to which a large part of the government budget was devoted. In the continuing struggle about military expenses, Bismarck prevailed over parliamentary claims for annual budgetary procedures and got a multiannual financial framework (*Septennat*) approved in 1874, which was successfully renewed in 1880 and 1887, in the latter case after the dissolution of the intractable *Reichstag* and new elections bringing about the desired parliamentary majority for the government. Accepting the *Septennat*—as previously the *Indemnitätsvorlage*—did not formally infringe on the budgetary rights of the *Reichstag*, yet symbolized its self-disempowerment and reinforced the *de facto* primacy of the executive over the legislative. Any genuine parliamentarization of the political system was and continued to be a chimera in Bismarckian Germany.

It can thus be stated that like in Napoleonic France, anti-parliamentarism and authoritarianism—though certainly different in their concrete expression—were

idiosyncratic for Bismarck's system of government, too. Under Napoleon III, anti-parliamentarism was complemented by a distinctive democratic and populist element, the most important component of which was universal suffrage. This raises the question of the significance of this element in Bismarck's policies.

Even during the *Verfassungskonflikt*, Bismarck—in clear contradiction to traditional conservative positions—was playing with the idea of universal (male) suffrage, and had entered into talks about this issue with Ferdinand Lasalle (1825–1864), president of the General German Workers' Association (*Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbeiter-Verein*), the first mass party of the organized labor movement in Germany.⁸⁶ Considering this option was certainly not due to any ideological proximity Bismarck had to the principle of equality or to altruistic motivations, but sprang from well-reasoned *Realpolitik*: Bismarck calculated that given its still limited size and importance at the time, it would not be so much the working class that would benefit most from opening up the existing franchise system, but rather the rural population in its structural-conservative and pro-monarchical stance. Thus, a powerful counterweight to the politically aspiring (liberal) bourgeoisie was potentially at hand.

The same reasoning with regard to universal suffrage prevailed in the French Second Empire. In 1863 it was Napoleon III himself who communicated to Bismarck his personal experiences with the expansion of suffrage, outlining that it was considerably easier to steer the masses through *suffrage universel* than controlling the bourgeoisie who were profiting greatly from census suffrage. Napoleon III thus considered it a great mistake of the Prussian Government to have called new elections for the *Abgeordnetenhaus* in 1862 without revising the electoral law.⁸⁷ Despite his pursuing a different agenda essentially aimed at stabilizing the Prussian state with its pre-industrial oligarchy, Bismarck shared Napoleon's views on the potential of a democratic franchise, which promised a congenial way of linking power and masses. In 1866 he elaborated in a similar vein that “direct elections” and “universal suffrage” were apt to re-establish “the contact of the supreme power with the healthy elements that make up the core and mass of the people”⁸⁸—not the “anarchical revolutionized masses of the modern cities.”⁸⁹ Thus, Bismarck purposefully enforced general, equal, direct and secret (male) suffrage, initially for the North German Confederation, later also for the Imperial Constitution; a suffrage which demonstrated not only a striking resemblance to the demands of the Revolution of 1848 and was one of the most progressive in Europe at the time, but also stood in stark contrast to the existing electoral law in the individual German states, including Prussia, where the three-class franchise system (*Dreiklassenwahlrecht*) was to remain in force until the end of the monarchy.

The latent proximity of universal suffrage to authoritarian and more particularly Caesaristic government did not go unnoticed by contemporary observers, among them the liberal politician Karl Twesten (1820–1870), who during a meeting of the *Reichstag* of the North German Confederation declared on March 30, 1867: “On the one hand, the military force, stronger and more extensive than ever, subsumed in warmongering hands, and beside it, the general equal, direct suffrage; these are the means [...] through which the Caesarian dictatorship is built in France.”⁹⁰ Napoleon III, in turn, understandably expressed his delight about France's neighbor east of the Rhine

adopting what he considered *the* fundament of France's contemporary constitution and the basis for his imperial power.⁹¹

One may feel inclined to challenge the accuracy of this assessment, and the comparability of the "democratic moment" in the policies of Napoleon III and Bismarck, respectively: for the latter, that moment had an even more instrumental character than for Napoleon III, and was characterized almost exclusively by a conservative-preserving impetus. The corresponding hopes placed by Bismarck in universal suffrage were soon defeated by reality. Ever increasing voter turnouts at the elections to the *Reichstag*, rising from 51 percent at the first elections to 77.5 percent in 1887 and reaching as much as 85 percent in 1912,⁹² marked the growing politicization of the masses though, but not necessarily in the sense of Bismarck, who was increasingly concerned about the way the right to vote was being used by the electorate.⁹³ In hindsight, Bismarck was forced to acknowledge that his conservative party was not in a position to become a national majority party—something which had already become apparent in the need to forge alliances and make compromises with other parties while in power, the most explicit example being the *Kartellparteien* ("cartel parties") in the last years of his chancellorship.

Against this background alone, it would be misleading to talk about a "plebiscitary regime" *strictu sensu* with regard to Bismarck. Unlike the two Bonapartes, Bismarck never sought—and indeed never had to seek—direct confirmation of his position and his leadership skills by popular vote, even if the elections to the *Reichstag* especially in 1878 and 1887 might have had the character of a plebiscite for and against the "iron chancellor". Nevertheless, Bismarckian politics was of a distinctive "popular", not to say "populist", nature, relying from beginning to end on a number of methods to rally public support and to play off carefully influenced public opinion against political and particularly parliamentary opponents.

It is not only with regard to universal suffrage that Bismarck made instrumental use of what can be termed "Caesaristic methods" for his project of a Prussian-conservative order, but also in connection with the one historical accomplishment with which his name continues to be associated more than any other: the creation of the German Empire. Caesaristic-plebiscitary motives played a crucial role in the making of the *Kaiserreich* 1870/1871,⁹⁴ and even if he eventually repudiated the existing idea of an emperor being proclaimed by his soldiers,⁹⁵ Bismarck was well aware of the potential immanent in the *Reich* becoming the symbol of Germany's unification during the Franco-Prussian War and eventually the *signum* of a common, amalgamating and after all obliging victory. Accordingly, Bismarck acknowledged the "title of Kaiser" as a "publicity element for unity and centralization" in his memoirs,⁹⁶ possibly realizing that the *Kaisergedanke* ("imperial idea") could assume a similar integrative capacity for the German *Reich* as the Napoleon cult had done for France and the French Second Empire in particular. Yet at the same time, establishing an empire was never an end in itself for Bismarck, rather another tool for stabilizing the existing political order with a clear anti-revolutionary function. Bismarck welcomed the empire exclusively on the premise that it was founded by and derived its political legitimacy from the German princes; the *Reich*, in his words, was to be "a mere history-based symbol of the independence of the German princes", in no way an expression of popular sovereignty "in the manner of

the Empire formed by universal suffrage”.⁹⁷ In line with these principles—and in acknowledging the political obstacles that would have complicated ambitions for a more unitary nation state anyway—the German Imperial Constitution of 1871 abstained from fashioning the Empire along the lines of the Napoleonic *empire français*, with the emperor representing a unitary-national institution relying on plebiscitary legitimacy. Instead, the *Bismarcksche Reichsverfassung* established a monarchical confederation headed by the King of Prussia, who had the title of German Emperor (*Deutscher Kaiser*), but was a mere *primus inter pares* among the German sovereigns. The title of “German Emperor” in itself was emblematic for Bismarck’s conceptualizing the *Reich* and the envisaged power-political status of the emperor in particular: “Emperor of Germany”, an alternative that was much closer to the heart of Wilhelm I, would have insinuated a hegemonic claim to power over Germany in its entirety, which contradicted not only political realities, but would have also been an insult to the other German princes and was hence successfully repudiated by Bismarck. Conversely “Emperor of the Germans”—in analogy to *empereur des français* carried by both Napoleon I and Napoleon III—would have paid tribute to the principle of popular sovereignty, which was totally unacceptable to Bismarck and hence not even taken into consideration.

Even in the wider sense of an expansive and aggressive foreign policy, “imperialism” was an instrument that was used by Bismarck only with particular caution. It is certainly true that he did not shy away from using force to achieve his goal of a unified Germany led by a powerful Prussia, as he so famously proclaimed in his “Blood and Iron” speech of September 30, 1862.⁹⁸ Being prepared to resort to war if required for the project of German unification and the expansion of its continental power corresponded with Bismarck’s frequently being portrayed in uniform and spiked helmet—a martial depiction that does not exactly evoke imaginations of a “peace chancellor”, but rather “soldier politician”, as which Napoleon I and to some extent also Napoleon III wished to be perceived. However, from the beginning Bismarck vehemently denied accusations by contemporaries that “Iron and Blood” was to be taken as a public announcement of a dictatorship in the making, searching legitimacy through foreign-political activism. And indeed: especially after the *Reichsgründung*, Bismarck can neither be blamed for having pursued an overly aggressive or interventionist stance in foreign policy, nor having been particularly keen to stabilize the domestic regime through victories abroad.

Often it was Bismarck who within the government assumed the role of admonisher for a restrained foreign policy, for example after the victory in 1866, when he successfully insisted *vis-à-vis* the King on abstaining from unnecessary humiliation of the enemy and the incorporation of Saxony into the Prussian state, and managed to push through a moderate and quick peace allowing Austria as well as its German allies to save face. After 1871, Bismarck’s foreign policy was directed towards a prosperous development of Germany by ensuring peace and political stability in Europe. Until the very end of his chancellorship, he remained a fierce proponent of a European balance of power and the Congress System, which saw a significant—and final—achievement in the form of the Congress of Berlin in 1878. Moreover, it was only very late and not out of conviction, but driven by growing public pressure animated by the *Zeitgeist* that Bismarck had

Germany join the colonial expansion of the other European powers; and it is revealing that it was the dispute between Bismarck and the young emperor Wilhelm II about the future foreign policy of the *Reich*, with the latter urging for a more ambitious and confrontational *Weltpolitik*, that heralded Bismarck's resignation in 1890.⁹⁹

Overall, "imperialism"—understood as the advocacy of an empire and a policy of extending a country's power and influence through use of military force and colonization—has only limited analytical value for explaining the Bismarckian system of government, and in any case less than it has for explaining the rule of Napoleon III. This is despite the fact that in the latter's case "imperialism" has been demonstrated as not necessarily being regime-immanent.¹⁰⁰ A larger similarity between the two regimes seems to have existed regarding the last element of their respective constitutional practice that is taken into comparative analysis: social policies.

Like Napoleon III in France, Bismarck monitored and promoted the advancing industrialization of the country with an active economic policy, not least with a view to help raise the power-political status of Germany in Europe. Yet the march into the modern industrial world brought not only massive economic but also social changes, requiring adequate political answers. At the latest after the foundation of the Empire, the working class became a (political) factor in Germany, too, which the government could not ignore. In trying to find answers to the pending social question, which was mainly a "worker question", Bismarck applied a seemingly ambivalent double strategy of repression and embracement. While repression was not particularly surprising given Bismarck's background and political socialization, his far-reaching concessions to the "fourth estate" were not necessarily to be expected. Bismarck's readiness to abandon ideology had already been demonstrated in the 1860s by his contacts with Ferdinand Lassalle (1825–1864)—a leading figure of German socialism—and his promoting universal suffrage, provoking harsh criticism from conservatives and liberals alike that Bismarck was a "revolutionary". This was later followed by comprehensive social (security) legislation: Bismarck not only initiated statutory accident insurance, but also sickness and disability insurances as well as a pension scheme to reduce the risks of poverty in old-age. He was thus the trailblazer for a modern welfare system in Germany and a pioneer of social state interventionism in Europe.

However, as in other areas, Bismarck's social policies—which went beyond the socio-political initiatives of Napoleon III in France, including the support of "mutual societies" (*sociétés de secours mutuels*)—can be chiefly explained by his target-oriented understanding of politics requiring flexibility and, at times, randomness in choosing the most appropriate means to reach an objective. With regard to Napoleon III, one can assume the presence of some altruistic desire to help improve the situation of the working class apart from all political motivations. In the case of Bismarck, considerations of *Realpolitik* seem to have prevailed almost exclusively. The ultimate ambition was nevertheless the same for both: monopolizing the working class by the state and assuring its long-term loyalty in order to remove it from the influence of the organized labor movement, which in the German context was formed in the 1860s after its first beginnings during the Revolution of 1848. Accordingly, the socialist *Arbeiterbewegung* ("workers' movement"), discredited as *innerer Reichsfeind* ("interior enemy of the

Reich”), was unrelentingly antagonized by Bismarck through various instruments, with the *Sozialistengesetz* (“Socialist Law”) of 1878 being one of the legislative cornerstones. Adopted by the *Reichstag* after two failed attempts to assassinate Emperor Wilhelm I, which had been instrumentalized by Bismarck, and fierce parliamentary debates, the *Gesetz gegen die gemeingefährlichen Bestrebungen der Sozialdemokratie* of October 21, 1878¹⁰¹ aimed to lastingly cripple the Socialist Workers Party—the later Social Democratic Party—that was blamed for revolutionary agitation and subversive activities. The law banned socialist and social democratic (sub-)organizations, including trade unions, throughout the Reich and outlawed their activities such as public meetings and publications, thus amounting to a full-scale party ban. Extended four times (1880, 1884, 1886 and 1888) and slightly modified over time, it was to remain in force until Bismarck’s leaving the political stage in 1890.

Bismarck bluntly expressed his hopes that isolating and cutting off the roots of the organized labor movement, while at the same time implementing a version of top-down “state socialism”, was apt “to generate a conservative attitude in the great mass of the propertyless”.¹⁰² Or, as he put it elsewhere: “My thought was to win over, or should I say bribe, the working classes into regarding the state as a social institution that exists on their behalf and cares for their well-being.”¹⁰³ In the end, Bismarck thus worked as well towards a *soziales Volkskönigtum* (“social popular monarchy”) that Lassalle had been reasoning about¹⁰⁴—though with fundamentally different motivations and intentions.

The actual success of Bismarck’s social policy was certainly modest: parliament watered down his state-socialist plans and refused to take harsher repressive measures against the organized labor movement, and Bismarck failed in durably alienating the working class from the social democratic party by accustoming them to the *Obrigkeitsstaat* (“state of authority”) he envisaged. Nevertheless, his attempts at “collective bribery” through (social) benefits, though perhaps morally reprehensible, demonstrated Bismarck’s astute understanding of the fundamental role played by the “masses”—which in the industrial age was increasingly represented by the working class—in modern politics even for a traditional hereditary monarchy. In this regard, if in no other, parallels to Napoleon III cannot be denied.

This leads us to a concluding assessment of Bismarck and the foundations as well as style of his government, bringing us back to the initial question of whether he can be considered a “German Caesar” or “German Bonaparte”.

5.4 Conclusions

In mid-nineteenth-century Germany, lively debate revolved around the need for a “modern Caesar” favored by the unresolved national, but also the increasingly pressing social question. In view of existing challenges and the need to provide fresh authority for the existing monarchical system in the wake of the revolutionary crisis of 1848, willingness to pursue “new” and “unorthodox” forms of governance was growing among politicians of the time, too. This was promptly perceived and denounced as a turn towards “Bonapartism” by traditional conservative circles. Therefore it comes as

no surprise that the one politician who is seen as the father of German unification, and who more than anyone else determined politics in Germany throughout the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s with policies and a style of government considerably diverging from classical conservatism, was described as a German version and proponent of Bonapartism or Caesarism even by contemporaries.

Analogies between Bismarck and Napoleon III in particular suggested themselves at the time, and the famous painting of 1878 by Wilhelm Camphausen (1818–1885) depicting the two together—dressed in uniform and sharing a bench after the Battle of Sedan—was thus also to be taken as a reference to assumed ideological-political proximity. Famously, Marx and Engels were among those observers who deemed both statesmen typical representatives of a new “real type” of modern political rule that could be observed in the nineteenth century: “The period of revolutions from below was concluded for now; there followed a period of revolutions from above”—a period that turned the “gravediggers of the Revolution of 1848” to “executors of its will”.¹⁰⁵ Generations of authors have continued to consider intrinsic analogies between the two Bonapartes—especially Napoleon III—and Bismarck as a given fact. In their minds, Bismarck had essentially copied Napoleon III, “whose government was sustained by the masses and opposed by a portion of the educated middle class; Napoleon had introduced universal suffrage to get rid of the Second Republic and had been successful in that. Bismarck was confident that he would be able to achieve the same success”.¹⁰⁶

Yet no less is the number of those especially in more recent scholarship that have cautioned against any fundamental comparability of the two or emphasize that Bismarck’s form of rule was similar to that of Napoleon III only insofar as it was tailored for a “Caesaristic statesman”.¹⁰⁷ And indeed, both ways of thinking can be reasonably argued. Depending on the point of focus, similarities or dissimilarities prevail. In particular the fundamentally different constitutional role of Napoleon III and Bismarck, but also other factors such as the dissimilar socio-economic situation in post-1848 France and Germany with the distribution of powers between social groups and the resulting room for political maneuver being unlike, cautions against depicting Bismarck as a “German Bonaparte”. At the same time, however, there are striking resemblances, from their being both products of and managers of crisis, to their innovatively combining repressive and progressive policies as well as multiple sources of legitimacy. And assuming that each and every historical phenomenon is somehow *sui generis* and distinct from other phenomena, the common features shared between Napoleon III and Bismarck seem all the more noteworthy.

So what conclusion can be drawn? Was Bismarck a Bonapartist or a (new) Caesar? No, he was neither of the two, for the social and political framework in itself stood in the way of any such aspirations that might have existed. But did Bismarck utilize a “Bonapartist” or “Caesaristic” toolset? Yes, he did, and quite actively so. This underlines the need to distinguish between “system” and “method of government”, and approach Caesarism chiefly under the latter. At the end of the day, Bismarck was and continued to be an “absolutist public servant in the age of mass politics”.¹⁰⁸ He fulfilled this role congenially. While his policies were “conservative” and aimed at strengthening the Prussian-German monarchical state, he far-sightedly realized that in order to do so, disentanglement from some traditional conservative positions and the application of

revolutionary and Bonapartist means was inevitable. Affinity with and conscious imitation of Bonapartist techniques of rule cannot be denied: a militant domestic policy, alternating between conservative and revolutionary paradigms, disdain for traditional forms of political legitimacy, active social and welfare policies, populism and instrumentalization of the masses, to mention but a few. A static defense of the *status quo* seemed unwise, indeed dangerous, in view of the dynamic changes of the framework conditions for political and social processes to take place. “Revolution” and “counter-Revolution” were no longer to be seen as dichotomies: “There are times when you have to govern liberally, and times when you have to govern dictatorially, everything changes, there is no eternity here.”¹⁰⁹ Modern politics was about paying tribute to the *Zeitgeist*, which meant above all that if in the second half of the nineteenth century—with the advent of mass societies and the mediatization of politics—trends towards parliamentarism had to be halted and monocratic rule to be perpetuated, “personalized power” and the “masses” had to converge and enter into a relationship of mutual benefit.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, this challenge of linking populace and “Caesar”—in the specific case of Wilhelmine Germany, *Demokratie und Kaisertum*¹¹⁰—proved increasingly appealing, but also difficult, throughout Europe.