Prutsch, Markus J. "Mass Democracy and "Scientification": Caesarism at the Turn of the Century." *Caesarism in the Post-Revolutionary Age*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. 149–188. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474267571.ch-006>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 12:24 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.

Mass Democracy and “Scientification”: Caesarism at the Turn of the Century

6.1 Discourses on a “New Caesar” in the Late Nineteenth Century

As has been demonstrated in the previous two chapters, debate on the risks of, but also potential need for, a “new Caesar” had reached a new peak around the mid-nineteenth century. In the wake of the revolutionary events of 1848 it had mainly been the seizure of power by Louis-Napoléon and the founding of the Second Empire in France which served both as a focal point of discussion in Europe and as a central stockpile of arguments for and against an elusive phenomenon still widely referred to as Bonapartism; a phenomenon that due to continuing industrialization and the concomitant “social question”, which was above all a question of how to deal with the mounting working class, was gaining in momentum and direction considerably different from that of the early nineteenth century. The role of the Second Empire mirroring contemporary theoretical and political debate alike is also manifest in that French developments and the regime of Napoleon III served as *the*—mostly negative—reference point and benchmark for assessing the risks and chances of a “German Caesar” and later the actual policies of Bismarck. It is therefore not surprising that the downfall of Napoleon III and his “Caesarian democracy”—as which the German writer and historian Karl Hillebrand (1829–1884) characterized the Second French Empire *a posteriori* in 1873¹—had substantial repercussions on Caesarism discourses far beyond the borders of France.

For the period after 1870/1871, two interrelated trends are discernible:

1. The end of the Napoleonic regime and the ensuing calmer waters the country entered—at least in terms of foreign policy—not only limited dealings with French (political) affairs in journalism and writing abroad, but also resulted in the terms “Bonapartism” and “Napoleonism” losing their immediate relevance and historical presence. This allowed the term “Caesarism” to unfold, become more commonly used and assume the role of the key concept to describe regimes between democracy and dictatorship such as those of the two Napoleons.
2. Favored by its severance from day-to-day (French) politics, Caesarism—with its additional advantage of not smacking of a specific national location—gradually became a matter of the evolving (social) sciences, which helped to further depoliticize

the concept. Even previously there had been sporadic attempts to approach what was termed Bonapartism or Caesarism impartially and to develop more universal political theories around it, but for the most part the debates of the previous decades had been distinctly embedded in tangible political and ideological disputes. Growing efforts to turn Caesarism into a scientific and more universal concept, attributing it a place in what was to be called “political sociology”, did not lack ideological moments and also reflected specific historical circumstances. Yet increasingly, these moments and circumstances were present in a “filtered” rather than open manner.

Notwithstanding these processes of change, however, discourse on Caesarism remained entangled with broader concerns about organizing political rule and managing society: deficits of existing political systems and how to remedy them, appropriate forms of representation, and—as an overarching theme—political legitimacy. Since the American and especially French Revolutions, challenging traditional forms of political power and redefining sovereignty, the question of legitimacy had become central to political discussion. It developed into something even more fundamental with the “masses” assuming ever-more political power from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. The “will of the people”—one of the key drives of the Revolution—demanded acknowledgement. Yet in what concrete form that will should be acknowledged was left open, as was the issue of whether a “democracy” had to be understood as “rule of representatives”, or if it could also be interpreted as “rule of the masses”.² With the latter view gaining prominence as the nineteenth century progressed, Caesarism, too, became ever more “involved with the new importance given to the masses as a political force in the post-revolutionary age”.³

But what did “the masses” actually epitomize? Was it a mature and responsible demos, or rather a pliable crowd susceptible to demagogues? If the latter was the case, how were the masses to be kept under control—or unleashed? And what was the fate of not only representation and popular sovereignty, but also liberty and freedom in an environment supposedly receptive to demagogic leaders? Finally, what sort of legitimacy was fitting for an age in which traditional forms appeared to be becoming less and less conclusive and reliable?⁴

These were all questions of a pertinent and essentially universal nature. Accordingly, the problem—or promise, depending on the point of view—of mass democracy was a key priority in the mind of many political thinkers and practitioners throughout Europe at the time. This chapter sets out to highlight the European, if not global, dimension of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century debate on mass democracy, in which the concept of Caesarism played a pivotal role. At the same time, it is to be demonstrated that with the “currency” of the Caesarism term growing in the second half of the nineteenth century, the complexity of its usage and trajectory increased as well. If “everybody is now talking of Caesarism”, as Ludwig Bamberger remarked as early as in 1866,⁵ they were doing so in a broader sense than ever before. This makes it even more difficult than for the first half of the nineteenth century to provide anything like a comprehensive overview of the surrounding debates, and little more than a sketchy “panorama” of general trends will have to suffice; notably by focusing on five cases: Great Britain, the USA, Italy, France and Germany.

6.1.1 Great Britain, the USA and Italy

The spread of the debate on Caesarism saw its most practical manifestation through the canonization of the term in an increasing number of lexica and dictionaries of the time. The "how" and "when", however, allows one to draw inferences about the actual importance and character of the discourse in different national contexts. It is worth noting, for example, that while in other countries the term had long since been established in reference works, one cannot find any explicit entries for "Caesarism"—or "Bonapartism" and "Napoleonism"—in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* throughout the entire nineteenth and early twentieth century. This may have to do with the fact that the British continued to deem Caesarism to be a mainly continental—and perhaps even more specifically, French—phenomenon, triggered by conditions peculiar to the continent. While a feeling of British political distinctiveness had grown during the French Revolution, such a feeling became even more distinct after the mid-nineteenth century, with Britain experiencing no equivalent to the 1848 revolutions in Europe. Nonetheless, it would be misleading to assume that Caesarism did not play any role for or in political discourse, especially since in view of the challenges posed by a mass society, the future of the political system was being discussed as avidly as in other parts of Europe. The main difference was rather the way Caesarism was taken up, which in Britain almost exclusively served the purpose of a "negative foil".

In line with this critical stance, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, for example, records the ire of a contributor to the Westminster Review complaining in 1858 of the "clumsy eulogies of Caesarism as incarnate in the dynasty of Bonaparte".⁶ Caesarism was becoming an issue in the context of debate on reforming the English Constitution and franchise in particular, which had already seen a first extension through the Great Reform Act of 1832. More importantly in quantitative terms, however, were the Acts of Parliament in 1867, 1884 and 1885, accompanied by fierce debate on how the "masses" should best be dealt with and contained under the specificities of the British political system. An 1866 reviewer of the new edition of John Earl Russell's *Essay on the History of the English Government and Constitution* (1865),⁷ for instance, captured the shortcomings of parliamentary rule when he wrote of the dangers of a weak government being elected by some "ignorant multitude", referring to the United States:

America during the last five years has only repeated to the world the lesson that had already been taught in France, that, if you will have democracy, you must have something like Caesarism to control it. The feeble and pliable Executive of England is wholly unsuited to such an electoral body. A Government that yields and must yield to the slightest wish of the House of Commons, is only possible so long as that House of Commons is the organ of an educated minority. Such an instrument of Government has never yet in the history of the world been worked by a Legislature chosen by the lower class.⁸

Across party lines, it was taken for granted that the masses were not just uneducated, but irrational and thus potentially dangerous. Caesarism, in this context, was seen to fatally rest on and even actively promote the ignorance of the illiterate masses, or

“collective mediocrity”, to use a notion by John Stuart Mill.⁹ It was with this push that in the mid-1860s Walter Bagehot (1826–1877) made one of the most significant—and at the same time most sarcastic—contributions to British debates on Caesarism in the nineteenth century. In his succinct article *Caesarism as it now exists*, first published in March 1865,¹⁰ Bagehot pondered on the French Second Empire in order to draw lessons for his British readership. He saw clear parallels between Julius Caesar, who for Bagehot was “the first instance of a democratic despot”, and the regimes of the two Bonapartes in France. Caesar had overthrown an aristocracy “by the help of the people, of the unorganized people. He said to the numerical majority of Roman citizens, ‘I am your advocate and your leader: make me supreme, and I will govern for your good and in your name.’”—which was exactly the underlying principle of the French Empire, too. For Bagehot, it was Louis-Napoléon—a “Benthamite despot”—who had perfected Caesar’s style of rule: “He is for the ‘greatest happiness of the greatest number’. He says, ‘I am where I am, because I know better than anyone else what is good for the French people, and they know that I know better.’ He is not the Lord’s anointed; he is the people’s agent.”¹¹ Bagehot acknowledged the achievements of the Second Empire, characterizing it as the “best finished democracy which the world has ever seen. What the many at the moment desire is embodied with a readiness, an efficiency, and a completeness which has no parallel.”¹² Nevertheless, all potential advantages of democratic despotism were overshadowed by a fundamental constructional flaw: it stopped “the effectual inculcation of important thought upon the mass of mankind.”¹³ This was a systemic must, since “a democratic despotism is like a theocracy: it assumes its own correctness”; but as a result, leaves the masses totally unschooled, not least in political matters, hence corrupting the future: “France, as it is, may be happier because of the Empire, but France in the future will be more ignorant because of the Empire.”¹⁴ A second fundamental flaw identified by Bagehot was that “an enormous concentration of power in an industrial system ensures an accumulation of pecuniary temptation”, making the Empire endure “the daily presence of an efficient immortality”. Yet another problem was the institutionalization of the regime, since its existence depended “on the permanent occupation of the Tuileries by an extraordinary man. The democratic despot—the representative despot—must have the sagacity to divine the people’s will, and the sagacity to execute it. What is the likelihood that this will be hereditary?”¹⁵ Together, these were traits which did not make Caesarism a model worth striving for.

Five years later, with the Second Empire in its final throes, Bagehot returned to the topic, offering not only a concise definition of “Caesarism”, but also an explanation for its utter failure in France. In *The Collapse of Caesarism*, he defined “that peculiar system of which Louis Napoleon [...] is the great exponent” as follows:

[Caesarism] tries to win directly from a plebiscite, i.e., the vote of the people, a power for the throne to override the popular will as expressed in regular representative assemblies, and to place in the monarch an indefinite “responsibility” to the nation, by virtue of which he may hold in severe check the intellectual criticism of the more educated classes and even the votes of the people’s own delegates. That is what we really mean by Caesarism,—the abuse of the confidence reposed by the most ignorant in a great name to hold at bay the reasoned arguments

of men who both know the popular wish and also are sufficiently educated to discuss the best means of gratifying those wishes. A virtually irresponsible power obtained by one man from the vague preference of the masses for a particular name—that is Caesarism [...]”¹⁶

It was in the very nature of such a system that “all intermediate links of moral responsibility and cooperation” between throne and people were absent, given that the plebiscitary moment so characteristic of Caesarism entrusted the Emperor with an authority reducing all intermediate powers to comparative insignificance whenever they collided with his own. Consequently, virtually everything depended on the plebiscitary leader and his abilities.¹⁷ Disposing of “indefinite power but not indefinite capacity”, the “Caesarist system”—whose physical basis Bagehot considered to be the army—was left with no reliable “check on recklessness or incapacity at the head”. The only controlling mechanisms were “the wishes of the masses of people, and that is often the source of the greatest weakness”: a Caesar who was supported against the aristocracy and the educated classes by the ignorant masses was “compelled to limit his measures by their ignorant likes and dislikes”. Bagehot concluded, therefore, that Napoleon had failed “not only through that loneliness of power which has given him not natural allies among the educated people”, but also “in consequence of his abject dependence on that ignorant conservatism of the peasantry to which he has looked for the popularity of his regime”.¹⁸

In the British context, publications taking up Caesarism with a comparable sharpness of mind and as explicitly as Bagehot’s remained the exception. The concept, however, continued to be ever-present, weaving its way into the predominant discourse on the potential risks of mass democracy, and how best to immunize the British political system against them. Among those who explicitly warned of mass democracy was the jurist and historian Henry James Sumner Maine (1822–1888), seen as one of the forefathers of modern legal anthropology and sociology of law. In a volume of essays published in 1885 entitled *Popular Government*, generating much comment at the time, Maine portrayed democracy—to him an “extreme form of popular government”¹⁹—as by no means more stable or necessarily more progressive than any other form of government. Quite the contrary: “as a matter of fact, Popular Government, since its reintroduction into the world, has proved itself to be extremely fragile.”²⁰ Of all forms of government, democracy was by far the most difficult. The greatest and most permanent of all the difficulties of democracy lay in the constitution of human nature: to Maine, it was a given fact that all government and rule was about exertion of will, “but in what sense can a multitude exercise volition?” Maine blamed modern enthusiasts of democracy for making one fundamental blunder, namely “mix[ing] up the theory, that the Demos is capable of volition, with the fact, that it is capable of adopting the opinions of one man or of a limited number of men, and of founding directions to its instruments upon them.”²¹ He was thus referring to the malleability of the masses and their being merely an instrument of the political leader: “There is no doubt that, in popular governments resting on a wide suffrage, [...] the leader, whether or not he be cunning, or eloquent, or well provided with commonplaces, will be the Wire-puller.”²²

Much of the debate on the consequences of the masses becoming a political force of increasing importance and the concomitant chances for populist leaders to seize their opportunities revolved around the question in how far British politics itself—and its premier system in particular—had become a version of Caesarism. Among other publications, this was a key concern of the 1909 *The Crisis of Liberalism: New Issues of Democracy* by John Atkinson Hobson (1858–1940), an English economist and popular critic of imperialism.²³ In the recent history of his country, Hobson saw clear and alarming tendencies in this direction, with “a Cabinet autocracy qualified in certain electoral conditions by the power of some enclave or ‘cave’ in a party” looming. The current state of affairs might “easily lead to Caesarism, where a magnetic party leader either succeeded in capturing the imagination of the populace or in engineering a supremacy among competing politicians”. In order to avert this danger, reforms of the existing electoral institutions aimed at “reversing the tendency towards increased Cabinet control” were therefore deemed indispensable. According to Hobson, this was to be achieved by establishing “a real and firm check upon abuse of power”, including “the House of Commons [...] be made more accurately representative, and representative government [...] be supplemented by a measure of direct democratic control”.²⁴

While thus sharing Maine’s awareness of the susceptibility of democratic systems to one-man rule, Hobson disagreed with Maine’s overall dismissal of democracy and argued rather for an appropriate democratic mechanism as the most promising firewall against Caesaristic ambitions. To that aim, Hobson advocated a parliamentary system guaranteeing true representation, yet complemented by an element of direct-democratic control in order to thwart—or at least contain—any potential excesses of parliamentary party politics.

Not surprisingly, British debates on the consequences of mass democracy had an equivalent outside of Britain and echoed themselves ongoing political developments as well as discussions in that country which had acquired a full-fledged—by nineteenth-century standards—democracy since the late eighteenth century, and with which Britain shared a common language: the United States of America. There, too, the concept of “Caesarism” was not a separate issue of political debate and concern, but featured as part of a wider discourse on the present and future of democratic government, embodying a potential degeneration of—or simply contrasting model to—a sober (democratic) polity. It is in this vein that the term Caesarism is used in 1857 in Orestes Brownson’s (1803–1876) equation of “modern Caesarism” with “monarchical absolutism”.²⁵

Discussions on the risks of dictatorship within democratic frameworks gained momentum as the president’s power in the constitutional system of the United States grew, reaching its first zenith under Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865). Throughout his presidential term, and favored by his active and assertive leadership style during the American Civil War as well as his re-election in 1864, Lincoln was faced with allegations of “monarchical pretension” and even dictatorial behavior. Among the starkest pamphlets against Lincoln in this regard was *Abraham Africanus I* (1864), in which the president’s style of government was denounced as hubristic, autocratic and an eminent danger to American democracy.²⁶ At the time, parallels between Lincoln and Julius

Caesar were also being drawn, gaining particular momentum after Lincoln's assassination in April 1865.²⁷

Similarly, Lincoln's later successor as US President, Ulysses S. Grant (1822–1885), was faced with accusations of Caesarist intentions, especially when speculation grew in advance of the 1876 elections that he might run for a third term. Caesarism became the favored term for describing Grant's proposed third tenure of office. On July 7, 1873, James Gordon Bennett Jr., editor-in-chief of the by then most popular US newspaper *New York Herald* and a staunch supporter of the Democratic Party, even launched a campaign to alert the nation to its alleged peril. In his editorial of the same date,²⁸ Bennett asked Americans to put aside such "sentimental and fantastic" issues of politics such as free trade or voting rights and to focus on the only question that truly mattered: "shall we have a republican form of government", or should the country succumb to "Caesarism"? The latter being very probable because the "political situation" was in the hands of Grant:

He is as completely master as was ever Jefferson, Jackson or Lincoln. Never was a President so submissively obeyed. Never was a party so dominant. Every department of the government, nearly every large State, the army, the navy, the bench [...] all, all are in the hands of his followers.

Moreover, Bennett—stressing that "great events are not the works of mere men, but of social and political conditions which daring men oftentimes seize"—saw "many of the elements favorable to Caesarism" present at that time. This included luxury, a spirit of speculation, a loose moral tone, a military spirit and widespread craving for "show and noise". Bennett warned that should Grant be renominated and win the elections, the path to Caesarism would inevitably be paved, and Grant would be "remembered with those daring, ambitious men, like Caesar and Napoleon, who preferred their own gain to the national liberties".²⁹

Bennett and others libelling Grant as a perpetrator of Caesarism, however, did not go unchallenged. While supporters of the President rebuked such accusations as inappropriate if not ridiculous,³⁰ even commentators opposing Grant considered Caesarism to be an inappropriate concept, not least since any true parallels between Caesar and Grant were deemed missing.³¹

With Grant eventually abstaining from running for a third presidential term—not least in view of the accumulated scandals of his presidency, which made even a considerable faction of his Republican Party desire an end to "Grantism"—, the heyday of political discussions on Caesarism in the USA came to an end, although the term and concept remained part of the repertoire of political debate.

The receding of Caesarism discourses after Grant was also due to the fact that the Civil War as the most eminent crisis in the country's history could be considered as having been largely overcome by the late 1870s, despite continuing political and social divisions. After the Reconstruction Era, US domestic politics entered somewhat calmer waters, and with it controversy on the risks of or perhaps need for a "new Caesar" became less pertinent.

The situation was quite different in many continental European states, for which the second half of the nineteenth century marked a time of unrest, politically and

otherwise. Accordingly, debate on Caesarism was likely to have a different drive. Yet turbulent times alone did not necessarily make Caesarism a key concern of national political discourses. Italy, faced with the double challenge of dealing with the repercussions of the Revolution of 1848 on the one hand and trying to tackle in parallel its state and nation building on the other, is a case in point.

It was only in the 1860s that Caesarism was taken up by political commentators in Italy. Among the very first—and actually few—to put “Caesarism” front stage of political writing was the previously-mentioned journalist and parliamentarian Giuseppe Lazzaro (1825–1910). His pamphlet *Il cesarismo e l'Italia*, published in 1862, provided a critical assessment of Caesarism, which Lazzaro considered to be a genuinely modern phenomenon.³² *Cesarismo* rested on the language of “popular will” and could be characterized as “the hypocrisy of the monarchy erected as a system of government”. A hybrid of absolutism and universal suffrage, Caesarism for Lazzaro was above all to be admonished for its corrupting and debilitating features: “With Caesarism, the political absurdity of the *Etat c’est moi* is clothed in legality, with Caesarism, the people commits suicide [*è suicidato*], while with absolutism it is killed.”³³ What was particularly alarming for Lazzaro was the fact that Caesarism, while originating in France, was spreading throughout Europe, especially in Germany.³⁴ Italy, on the other hand, did not seem to be particularly susceptible to Caesarism and could even be considered as a counter-model. In Lazzaro’s view it was not figures like Napoleon III or Bismarck, but the Italian statesmen Cavour and Garibaldi who should be seen as real exemplars of modern liberty.³⁵

The debate on Caesarism gained some momentum in Italy after the publication of Napoleon III’s biography of Caesar in 1865, with the reception of both the book and the concept overwhelmingly negative.³⁶ Giuseppe Mazzini (1805–1872), for example, objected to the cult of the individual leader, which was the core of Caesarism, since it failed to understand what real leadership was all about, namely: serving God and people under the ideals of truth and morality. Figures such as Alexander the Great, Caesar or Napoleon, however, had misspent their genius by becoming autocratic egoists, and rather than initiating a new era, they had each closed an epoch.³⁷

In the following decades, a distinctively critical stance towards Caesarism continued to prevail in the Italian context, yet with only a small number of authors dealing with the concept explicitly and in an analytical manner. Among them was the historian and writer Guglielmo Ferrero (1871–1942), who in his 1898 *Il Militarismo*—appearing in English one year later in a considerably revised and expanded version—examined Caesarism as a phenomenon integrally linked with the (French) Revolution and Jacobinism, and as an enduring legacy in the French Third Republic.³⁸

To Ferrero, the fact that contemporary France was nominally a parliamentary and democratic republic could not obscure the fact that “the republican constitution today is what the monarchy and empire were in the past, a mere bark whose nature has changed, but which still covers its original trunk and pith; that is Caesarism”.³⁹ Caesarism was not to be confused with, but actually went beyond, a Napoleonic style of government. In essence, it was the militarism—understood in an encompassing way—of the “Jacobin lay State created by the Revolution in opposition to the Church”.⁴⁰ The Jacobin State, Ferrero argued, represented a political solution to the problem of the

relation between religion and modern society, and had been created by a cultured minority to be the bulwark of liberty. However, "an indissoluble contradiction presided like an unlucky star at its birth". That "original sin of the modern Latin nations, and more especially of France and Italy" was that in order to maintain their authority, the liberal minority—for whom popular sovereignty was a key theoretical concept founded in opposition to monarchical absolutism—imposed their regime tyrannically and by means of force, thus entering into competition with the Church and imitating it in many of its authoritarian ways.⁴¹ Contradictory enough, the Jacobin state—completed by Napoleon—was not just the tyrannical government of a minority, but was by necessity also aristocratic and oligarchic state paternalism, clientilism, bureaucratization, centralization and a mighty executive body seeking legitimacy through the incitement of patriotic fervour and hence inclining towards war were, in Ferrero's eyes, all characteristic features of the (French) Jacobin state. Caesarism as the intrinsic militarist impulse of the Jacobin state had permeated all French regimes of the nineteenth century, including the Third Republic. The only discernible difference was that with Europe's borders changed and France's military capabilities in decline, this impulse had become mainly externalized in the form of French colonialism.

All in all, nineteenth century Italian encounters with Caesarism can be described as subdued and only a niche component of domestic political discourse. Largely perceived as something "foreign", Caesarism served as a warning of possible degenerations of political rule, yet with no immediate implications for Italy. Towards the end of the century, however, a change in perception was looming, as was manifest in Ferrero's approach to the subject. There was an increasing consciousness that Caesarism might be a general concomitant of political modernity, intertwined especially with the challenge of putting the promise of popular sovereignty into practice, and that it was hence not exclusively an issue of French—or German—politics.

Since the concept of Caesarism touched upon the issue of how to organize political leadership in an age of mass politics, there was potential room for a more favorable assessment of "Caesarist" figures and styles of government. Rather than as part of an intensified debate on Caesarism, however, the question of how to mobilize the masses while at the same time taming them, and how to guarantee an organic relationship between the political elite and the "people", were taken up in the proto-fascist discourse emerging in Italy at the turn of the century, with figures such as Gaetano Mosca (1858–1941) at its forefront.

As a matter of fact, Caesarism never enjoyed the same degree of immediacy in Italy as it did in France and especially Germany, where it continued to be an important reference point beyond the fall of Napoleon III and Bismarck, respectively.

6.1.2 France

It comes as no surprise that the end of the Second Empire brought with it less intensive and particularly less effusive dealings with Caesarist-style rule in France than in the previous two decades. Given that it was mainly Napoleon III and his personalized style of government that were blamed for France's devastating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, euphoric obeisance to one-man leadership could hardly be expected

in the immediate aftermath of 1870. At the same time, however, the Bonapartist movement—represented by followers of the overthrown Emperor and proponents of Napoleonic ideas more generally—continued to be a political force to be reckoned with. A more critical view of Caesarism, but with a hint of admiration for many of its (assumed) features, became characteristic of politico-theoretical discourse in the Third Republic.

Exemplary of this ambivalence prevailing at the time is the entry *Césarisme* in the second edition (1873–1877) of Émile Littré's *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, in which Caesarism is rendered as “domination of the Caesars, that is, the domination of princes brought to government by democracy, but invested with absolute power”, and at the same time presented as a “theory of those who think that this form of government is the best.”⁴² This interpretation did not constitute a fundamental break away from the understanding during the Second Empire, and actually expressed a more positive attitude than, for example, Pierre Larousse's *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle* of 1867. Here, *Césarisme* had been defined almost identically as “domination of the sovereigns brought to government by democracy, but invested with absolute power”, yet with a distinctively negative undertone. The author acknowledged that “Caesarism necessarily implies the idea of a government that is either good or bad according to the person exercising it, who is always supposed to act providentially in the interest of all and by the will of all”, but considered it merely as “one of the progressive forms of despotism, which suits people who cannot or do not know how to govern themselves”. Caesarism essentially meant political dictatorship and was an impossible form of government in the long run. This was particularly true for the nineteenth century: “in a society that lives off spirit and work, Caesarism is an impossibility.”⁴³ It was however, telling that any mention of Napoleon III was avoided, thus leaving it up to the readers to decide whether or not to classify his regime as Caesaristic.⁴⁴

The first work in French to explicitly take up Caesarism as an object of interest after the deposition of Louis-Napoléon, *Du césarisme en France*—written by a “M. Jourdeuil”, whose biographical details are unknown, and published in June 1871—answered the question as to whether the Second Empire should be qualified as Caesaristic unmistakably in the affirmative, thus setting the tone for later publications in France.

The pamphlet,⁴⁵ appearing amidst the Third Republic's process of self-discovery and plans to establish a parliamentary monarchy under Henri d'Artois, Comte de Chambord (1820–1883), grandson of former king Charles X, started its examination of how to deal with the legacy of Caesarism in France with a definition of the term that was as succinct as it was negative: “Caesarism is dictatorship converted into a permanent system of government; It is a discretionary and exceptional sovereignty that establishes itself as a regular power in the interest of the rulers and not the ruled.”⁴⁶ As far as the author was concerned, the roots of French Caesarism could be traced back to the absolutist regime erected under Louis XIV, even though it only reached its height after the French Revolution. As devastating as the experiences of Caesarism—with the *Ancien Régime*, the First Empire, the Restoration, the July Monarchy and the Second Empire representing only different versions of it—might have been for the country, the lost war now offered a unique chance to reverse them and make France “the most liberal and the best balanced nation in Europe.”⁴⁷ This was to be achieved by reforms

extinguishing Caesarism and eradicating the party system. To that aim, Jourdeuil suggested, among other things, strengthening structures of local government in order to counter the disastrous centralization of political power so typical of Caesarism. Quite astonishingly, however, the two instruments hailed as key remedies had themselves been distinctive for the last stage of French Caesarism in the Second Empire, described by Jourdeuil as *césarisme prolétaire et populacrier*⁴⁸—namely direct plebiscitary democracy and universal suffrage:

1. The plebiscite to confer supreme power and decide the great questions of constitutional law;
2. Universal suffrage to delegate a share of executive or legislative power to citizens.⁴⁹

Corresponding to these two instruments perceived as the cornerstones of the country's future political system was the antithetic vision of "a republic with a hereditary president"⁵⁰ believed to be the most suitable solution for France, with representative elements left marginalized.

Du césarisme en France is momentous, and one may even say paradigmatic, for French political debate at the time: above all, in that even declared critics of Caesarism—be it defined more broadly as a symptom of French politics going back to even before the Revolution, as Jourdeuil had suggested, or more specifically as a *signum* of the two Napoleonic regimes—could hardly envisage overcoming it without harking back to some of its key features. This went hand in hand with classical republicanism facing a loss of significance and growing confusion with regard to its conceptual and ideological basis. Despite the fact that "republicanism" continued to attract supporters and was almost an inevitable point of reference during the Third Republic, in terms of actual meaning it had only superficial resemblances to earlier predecessors. While classical republicanism had never equated representation to democracy, with the latter typically seen as both unworkable and dangerous, universal suffrage and even plebiscitary government were now regarded as core elements of republicanism. Moreover, the republicanism of the Third Republic had acquired a distinctively social component, with a commitment to educational and social reform, and the establishment of a "just" society. In both cases, analogies with the policies of the Second Empire were evident.

The conceptual transformation process—and indeed conceptual confusion—also found expression in the association of Caesarism with Jacobinism, and Jacobinism with the Third Republic. This connection resulted in political reformers of the Third Republic being accused of Caesarism by—often Catholic—critics such as Eugène Villedieu, who in his *Le Césarisme jacobin, les droits de l'Eglise et le droit national* (1880) blamed the "new Jacobins" for launching a full-scale attack on the Church and thus bereaving citizens of their most fundamental institutional attachment.⁵¹ From the perspective of such critics, Caesarism was "not the negation of republicanism, but—in the metamorphosis of 'Jacobin Caesarism'—its apotheosis."⁵² This view of Caesarism as the self-expression and the inevitable result of the Revolution's (Jacobin) doctrines, still alive in the structures of the Third Republic, was not only present in France, but also taken up by foreign commentators such as Guglielmo Ferrero.⁵³

A different way of linking the legacy of the Revolution with Caesarism was not necessarily to see the latter as a direct outcome or perpetuation of the Revolution, but rather to declare a miscarried combination of revolutionary idea(l)s—above all that of popular sovereignty—and Caesarist government the root of evil. An example of such a take on the subject is Joseph Ferrand's (1827-1903) book *Césarisme et démocratie* (posthumously published in 1904), with its subtitle *l'incompatibilité entre notre régime administratif et notre régime politique* already referring to the central thrust of the argument. In the wake of the Revolution, Caesarist state centralization had produced a situation of political and administrative debility in France, a fundamental divergence "between our principles and our practices".⁵⁴ While on the one hand the national authorities had smothered the potential of local government through an all-encompassing concentration of power at the central level, on the other two pernicious ideas had dominated French political life since the days of the First Consul: firstly, that deliberating is the duty of the many, but that action is the responsibility of the one; secondly, that given that government is claimed to represent the sovereign nation, it was impossible for the people to oppose government, since to do so would be a contradiction in itself. France, in Ferrand's view, had thus institutionalized the *coup d'état*. For while the first idea left the country with a feeble parliamentary system unfit to assume responsibility, the second—together with a dearth of adequate education—generated a body of voters incapacitated to think freely. The consequences were disastrous: not a sovereign people, but an indifferent and spiritless one inept to govern itself, with universal suffrage merely a show of participation.⁵⁵

Parallel to critical engagement with concept and practice of Caesarism—whether in analytical or polemical terms, with *Césarisme* a political battle cry—there was, however, a considerable amount of writings distinctively positive towards Caesarism, too. Motivations and hopes associated with Caesarism certainly varied; but across the board there was, nevertheless, a consensus among the arguments put forward in favor of it: the need to overcome what was perceived as a profound crisis by means of a strong leader enjoying the support of the people. This craving did not have to be explicitly expressed in terms of "Caesarism", but it often was. Such was the case, for example, in an 1888 pamphlet entitled *Le Césarisme*.⁵⁶ Its author left no doubt that "Caesarism has become a necessity"; more particularly, that there was the "necessity of an authority, of a master, of a Caesar".⁵⁷ The pamphlet sketched a picture of France in dire need of a "saviour",⁵⁸ who alone could successfully pursue the renewal of a country faced with a deep and multidimensional crisis: political, economic and moral. The people would clearly sense that what they needed were not "masters", but "one master" who "is not afflicted by this plague called parliamentarism—this parliamentarism, which is nothing other than the enactment of the saying: 'speaking to say nothing'. Parliamentarism: a system that produces twenty fools for every competent person". The true wish of the people was clear and unmistakable:

This is what the people feel and this is why, when one is forced to ask their opinion, they will answer—faced with daily commotion, ministerial instabilities, poverty [which is the] effect of our government, the ongoing lowering of authority, the collapse of all that is grandeur, honesty, elevation—Caesarism! Caesarism!⁵⁹

What spoke in favor of Caesarism was not only that such form of government was the one required and desired by the people, but also that all relevant political groups in France could actually approve of it. Bonapartists were naturally in favor of Caesarism and had always fought for it; republicans could not refuse it, since their principal concern—universal suffrage—was guaranteed; and the monarchists' own claimant to the throne, Philippe d'Orléans, Comte de Paris (1838–1894), was a strong advocate of Caesarism.⁶⁰ In short, everything spoke for a shift to Caesarism, especially since it could and should not be confused with dictatorship: "The two systems are not at all alike.—Dictatorship rests on nothing solid or legitimate. Caesarism is authority based on an assent to its existence."⁶¹ The looming days of Caesarism, the author concluded full of pathos, would finally mark "the revival of the Fatherland".⁶²

This remarkable pro-Caesarism movement in late nineteenth-century France was nurtured by a number of factors: perceived deficits of the political system of the Third Republic, the formal basis of which were the Constitutional Laws of 1875, as well as unresolved social and economic issues; Napoleonic nostalgia, also generating hope for a future equally full of glory and international significance for the nation than the past had been; and not least revanchism directed against Germany to avenge France's humiliating defeat in 1870/1871. Caesarist sentiments at the time were not limited to political writing, but also found concrete political expression. Indeed, the chances of Caesarism (re-)assuming political importance in France were not bad, facilitated by the fact that there were potential points of reference for all relevant political groups in the country and not just the Bonapartists, as recognized also in *Le Césarisme*. The fact that even the monarchists under the leadership of the Comte de Paris showed some sympathy for Caesarist rule—though obviously under the proviso that Philippe d'Orléans would assume the role of the new Caesar himself—provides evidence that by the end of the nineteenth century advocates of monarchism considered (or rather: had to consider) Caesarism as a means to re-gain political power and to generate political legitimacy. This was particularly true for France with its distinctive revolutionary traditions and numerous regime changes since 1789, which had shattered traditional forms of dynastic legitimacy and belief in hereditary monarchy more so than in other parts of Europe. Against this background, and considering the election-based republican framework within which it had to operate for better or worse, it is understandable why French monarchism in the 1880s had a number of programmatic points in common with the "Caesarist idea": above all the acceptance of universal suffrage, coinciding with emphasis on "order" and a strong government, while parliamentarism was rejected as impotent and dangerous.⁶³

In the end, however, it was much less the Comte de Paris who became the face and concrete political epitome of the pro-Caesarism movement in France at the time, but another person: Georges Ernest Boulanger (1837–1891). Considering his few years in active politics and the relatively limited importance of the offices actually held by him during that time, huge interest has been paid to Boulanger by French historiography and beyond.⁶⁴ This is not only because of his illustrious and at the same time tragic course of life or the difficulties in trying to pigeon-hole him to any one common political scheme (left-right, progressive-reactionary), but also because he stands for a

larger political-social movement frequently equated with a specific variant of Caesarism even by contemporaries,⁶⁵ namely *Boulangisme*.⁶⁶

Born in Rennes, Georges Ernest Jean-Marie Boulanger graduated from the *École Spéciale Militaire de Saint-Cyr* and made a career in the French army, fighting not just in the Austro-Sardinian and the Franco-Prussian War, but also actively involved in crushing the Paris Commune in April and May 1871. Highly decorated, including the *Légion d'honneur*, Boulanger was appointed general in 1880 and *Directeur de l'infanterie* at the Ministry of War in 1884. In the same year, he became politically active under the tutelage of Georges Clemenceau (1841–1929) and the Radicals—forming the most leftist part of the French Republicans—, who assured Boulanger's appointment as Minister of War in January 1886. It was in this capacity that Boulanger quickly gained popularity, accelerating his military reform agenda by introducing, among other things, improvements for common soldiers, and also by appealing to revanchism through his uncompromising polemics and concrete actions against Imperial Germany, which gained him the nickname *Général Revanche*. In the wake of the so-called “Schnaebele incident” (April 1887), however, which had almost triggered a war with Germany, and with Boulanger increasingly seen as an embarrassment to the government and an incalculable foreign-political risk, he was dismissed on May 30, 1887.

But his removal as minister sparked extraordinary expressions of public support, with Boulanger obtaining 100,000 votes in the partial election in Seine, even though he did not even stand as a candidate. This fuelled his political ambitions and contributed to the creation of a myth surrounding his person. Boulanger's leaving Paris on July 8, 1887 to take command of an army corps in Clermont-Ferrand—all too obvious an attempt of the government to remove him from Paris—grew into a popular demonstration hitherto unknown in France, with tens of thousands of supporters seeing him off at the Gare de Lyon with posters titled *Il reviendra* (“He will come back”). The initial phase of Boulangist enthusiasm, which found its most distinct expression in such rallies, developed into the creation of an elaborate and powerful political organization. This was made possible by Boulanger gathering support, financial and otherwise, from most different political angles: Bonapartists, but also radical leftists and Blanquists as well as monarchists, all of whom considered the general a powerful vehicle to further their own interests. Following his discharge from the armed forces in 1888 under pretextual allegations of misbehavior, having again a contradictory effect on public opinion and boosting Boulanger's popularity, the “Republican Committee of National Protest” (*Comité républicain de protestation nationale*) was formed under the initiative of a group of radicals and leftist backers of Boulanger as an organizational basis to agitate against the government. In addition, Boulanger gained the support of the “League of Patriots” (*Ligue des Patriotes*), originally founded in 1882 as a gymnastics society to instil patriotic pride into the French youth, but gradually assuming a distinctively political character, and by 1888 openly committed to supporting the cause of the general declared to be the saviour of the country. The League played a formative role in the development of the Boulangist movement not just because of its appeal across the political spectrum, resulting from its underlying nationalist values largely shared also on the political left, but also due to

the elaborate organizational structure of the League, which could rely on a nationwide network and a high degree of party discipline.⁶⁷

On that organizational basis, the political campaign of the Boulangists focused on one key demand: the installation of an *Assemblée constituante* to revise the existing constitutional framework of 1875, declared as rotten to the core and the key obstacle standing in the way of reinvigorating the nation; notably with a view to introducing direct presidential elections, which would finally subordinate the executive to the sovereign people and brush away the "Republic of notables" despised by radicals and conservatives alike. The principal claim of *révision* was reinforced by a rhetoric of change and a set of demands best described as populist, lacking a clear ideological focus and addressing workers, peasants, the bourgeoisie and intellectuals alike, as manifest in the electoral manifesto *Programme du Général Boulanger* of April 1888. Underlying the vision of a strong nation with a civilizing mission was the explicit desire for "revenge"—mainly, but not exclusively, on the foreign enemy represented by Germany:

And then, confident in its mission of progress and civilization, seeing an era of justice, calm, order and freedom open before it, France, rid of those who enslave it, will wait, impassive and serene, for the Right, previously misunderstood and violated, to take resounding Revenge on Force!⁶⁸

Characteristic of the Boulangists' political campaigning and contributing to its effectiveness was the active usage of new techniques to mobilize support and voters. Rather than relying on traditional forms of exercising personal influence through networks of local dignitaries, the Boulangist movement made wide-ranging use of publicity through different media: campaign leaflets, paintings and photographs of Boulanger, popular histories, and songs extolling the general's virtues, such as the widely-known *C'est Boulanger qu'il nous faut* ("Boulanger is the One We Need").⁶⁹ In addition to these propaganda tools used more generally, campaign efforts were consciously directed at potentially receptive audiences and those electoral districts where success was deemed most likely.

The Boulangists' modern form of political campaigning, together with widespread frustration over the *status quo* in the population and *vis-à-vis* the political establishment in particular, allowed for a number of by-elections victories in 1888. These successes increasingly alarmed the government. Boulanger reached his political peak in late January 1889, when he successfully ran as a deputy for Paris, easily winning the seat with an absolute majority. In view of his overwhelming popularity and support at least in the capital, the success of a potential *coup d'état* seemed anything but impossible, and many of his supporters urged Boulanger to seize the opportunity to violently overthrow the government—a possibility Boulanger's critics had publicly warned of in advance of his election victory.⁷⁰ Yet Boulanger procrastinated, insisting that power had to be won legally by sweeping the upcoming general elections in 1889. From that moment on, Boulanger's star fell inexorably and quickly.

The government and his political opponents stepped up their efforts to thwart what was now clearly perceived and portrayed as a direct threat to the parliamentary

Republic. On the one hand, doubts were actively nurtured about the candor of Boulanger's political plans and the instruments applied to that aim. His willingness to abstain from a violent regime change was particularly doubted, as was evident in *Le Paris* on February 12, 1889: "Is it by legal means that Mr. Boulanger can come to power? [...] No! He needs a helping hand."⁷¹ These allegations of a plebiscitary despotism looming behind an allegedly "national" party⁷² discredited the republican image of Boulanger and added to the alienation of many of his supporters on the political left, who saw in him a possible military dictator. On the other hand, legal measures were taken. Using the existing law, which banned the activities of secret societies, the *Ligue des Patriotes* was prohibited and dissolved in March 1889. Shortly afterwards, and hand in hand with the prosecution of some of his followers, a warrant for Boulanger's own arrest for conspiracy and other treasonable activities was issued. To the astonishment and disappointment of his supporters, Boulanger fled the country in April 1889. The public reputation of Boulanger and his political movement came under further pressure when the secret royalist funding of the Boulangist campaign became public. Faced with such difficulties, the Boulangists lost the general elections held on September 22 and October 6, 1889, respectively, capturing only 72 of the 576 seats in the Chamber of Deputies.

Demoralized by the defeat as well as by the increasingly remote image of leadership Boulanger presented, the various Boulangist fractions descended into quarrelling among themselves in the aftermath of the national elections, and the Boulangist movement eventually vaporized. Boulanger himself—after more than two years in exile—committed suicide in September 1891 at the grave of his mistress in Brussels, who had died a few months earlier, thus drawing a definitive line under the "Boulanger affair".

Boulanger and the "crisis" associated with him occupied only a short yet immensely important period in French history. Boulangism served as a magnifying glass for pressing challenges and ongoing political as well as social transformation processes at the end of the nineteenth century, with considerable ramifications for future politics and political theory alike. Hereafter, three interlinked aspects of Boulangism making it a "political crossroad of France"⁷³ will be taken into closer consideration:

1. Ideological and programmatic positioning
2. Mass politics
3. Legacy

Leaving aside those who used the term merely in a polemic way—branding it as being one-sidedly as either "radical left" or "radical right", "progressive" or "reactionary", "promise" or "temptation", depending on their respective political position—, open-minded commentators of Boulangism struggled to find a clear definition of what the characteristic features of the movement were, and placing it in terms of ideology and program. Arthur Meyer (1844–1924), director of *Le Gaulois*, made the following attempt in the newspaper's edition of October 11, 1889:

Boulangism [...]: a nation's vague and mystical desire for a democratic, authoritarian, emancipatory ideal; the mood of a country that, as the result of

various deceptions by the classical parties in which it had faith in the past, is searching, outside the norm, for *something else*, without knowing what or how, and is rallying all the discontented, the deprived and the vanquished in its search for the unknown. This state [of mind], of which we have seen an explosion recently, is nothing new. [...] In old times, it was [...] Messianism, with its added dimension of religion. More recently, it was Bonapartism, with its added dimension of glory. General Boulanger was born of this state of mind. He did not create Boulangism, Boulangism created him.⁷⁴

Meyer's approach to Boulangism is striking in a number of respects. Above all, it underlines the intricacy, indeed arbitrariness, of the material underpinnings of Boulangism, and that it is not a specific ideology or a clear-cut political organization, but first and foremost a "projection surface" for most diverse popular desires. With Boulangism serving as a melting pot of those parts of the population whose wishes and frustrations were not adequately taken up by the existing political class, Meyer saw parallels between Boulanger and Napoleon III, emphasizing that popular ideas would always give birth to someone who actually embodied them. This, at the same time, made it possible for the phenomenon to be associated with more than one specific person. Despite bearing his name, Boulangism was likely destined to survive him, according to Meyer. And while one may want to add that the same can be said of Bonapartism and the two Bonapartes as well, it seems particularly true of Boulanger, who was a less charismatic and "extraordinary" leader than Napoleon I or Napoleon III.⁷⁵

Boulangism as a movement lacking a clear ideological focus provided a home for all those feeling "disgusted" with the current state of affairs: not just Bonapartists who might see the general as a worthy leader following in the steps of the two Napoleons, but also Radicals, Blanquists, nationalists and monarchists, all of whom were keen to instrumentalize the general for their own ends—a presidential system replacing the existing parliamentarism⁷⁶ perceived as bourgeois for the Radicals; a social revolution or at least "socialist Caesarism" for the Blanquists; a war of revenge against Germany to regain Alsace-Lorraine for the nationalists; a restoration of kingship for the monarchists.⁷⁷ They shared a fundamental rejection of the existing system, and a deep desire for radical change. Whether in the end Boulangism was a vehicle of more left- or of right-wing policies is difficult if not impossible to answer, and might not even be of central importance. What is crucial, however, is that Boulanger and Boulangism represented a possible key to resolving the problem of mass politics as such for politicians on the political left and right alike.

It is worthwhile considering Boulangism as the trailblazer of modern mass politics in France. As an approach to politics which—more consciously than any other political movement before in France—aimed at actively integrating the people into the political process, Boulangism prefigured the mass movements which were to follow in the twentieth century.⁷⁸ One central feature of Boulangist mass politics grew directly out of the movement's ideological and programmatic vagueness, or rather "flexibility": its populism; that is, being able to "speak to the people". Rather than promoting a specific ideology or pre-defined program and trying to gain popular

support for them, Boulangism chose a different approach, namely creating its political program around the (assumed) “popular will”, being receptive to and taking up the wishes and concerns of the masses. In doing so, Boulangism not only eclipsed previous efforts of oppositional forces to acquire political power through a democratic-electoral process in French history, but was also distinct from the other—clearly ideologically framed—form of fundamental critique of the *status quo* at the time, Marxism, with which it was rivalling.

A second central feature of Boulangist mass politics was the way in which it was staged as a political movement not just *for* the masses, but indeed *of* the masses. Overall, political practice in France even during the Third Republic and among essentially all parties had remained highly elitist, susceptible to charges of venality and clientelism. The Boulangist campaigns in the 1880s, however, outlined an alternative style of political practice by offering the “little man” with no party affiliation potential access to the political process. This alternative style was visibly enacted at Boulangist mass rallies, which for some contemporary observers were more central in lending Boulangism its mystique (out of which the legend of Boulanger could grow) than the electoral-plebiscitary successes of the movement.⁷⁹ The French writer Auguste-Maurice Barrès (1862–1923), one of the most dedicated and active apologists of the Boulangist cause, later elevated the Boulangist mass rallies to popular celebrations symbolizing France’s national(istic) renaissance; notably in the second of his three-volume *Le Roman de l’énergie nationale*, entitled *L’appel au soldat*.⁸⁰ But even if one did not share such exaltation and was more inclined to see the Boulangist crowd as an anarchic mob,⁸¹ the fact that the masses had become a collective political force to be reckoned with could no longer be denied.

At the same time, this was also the key legacy of the Boulangist movement, discernible in two main regards; firstly in French politics itself. Boulangism continued to be present in French politics not only through the enduring political activities of Boulangists, especially in parliament, but also through its having had a lasting impact on the established parties and their policies. While Boulangism had already shaken stereotypical thinking that drew a clear line of distinction between political left and right, republicanism and monarchism, the success of the Boulangist movement shaped policies in the forthcoming decades, especially those of socialists and nationalists. For French socialism, the Boulanger crisis did not just mark the beginning of the government taking greater responsibility in providing social and economic welfare, but also helped trigger a change in the methods used for generating political (mass) support, *inter alia* by attempts to widen popular contacts and thus allowing decisions of socialist leaders to be informed by more “bottom-up input”.⁸² In turn, Boulangism was significant for French nationalism in that it marked the final breakthrough of militant nationalism becoming an acceptable and even desirable course of action for politicians across the political spectrum, even if this was only because they understood the manipulatory power of nationalistic rhetoric to activate the populace. Nationalism and populism became intrinsically linked, mutually reinforcing each other.

The second key legacy of Boulangism belongs to the field of political theory. More particularly, Boulanger provided a considerable boost to the “scientification” of debates on political leadership, legitimacy of power, and mass democracy. Even in the preceding

few decades, the emancipation of theoretical and analytical dealings with Caesarism (in its various facets) from political debate had become discernible. This received a fresh impetus and became a new focus of attention due to the role played by the "masses" in the Boulangist movement. Perhaps the most noteworthy example of the scholarly "processing" of Boulangism and its integration into a general theory is Gustave Le Bon (1841–1931), whose 1895 work *Psychologie des Foules*—published in English one year later under the title *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*⁸³—is considered to be a seminal work on crowd psychology. While many other contemporaries were content to describe "the masses" in tentative terms, Le Bon committed himself to analyzing crowd behavior especially during the "Boulangier crisis" more systematically, namely with a view to drawing conclusions from his findings for the present and future of mass politics.

In his book, Le Bon argues that crowds are not only the sum of their individual parts, but do in fact form new psychological entities. Based on the underlying assumption later taken on board by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) that human action is dictated by unconscious impulses, Le Bon holds that as part of the mass, each individual loses his or her capacity to reason and acts mainly affectively. Notwithstanding the cultural and societal level of development, Le Bon regards the absence of (critical) judgement and the presence of excitability and credulity as characteristic features of crowds in general. Tending to think and act one-sidedly (whether it be for the good or the bad), crowds—in the context of which opinion formation was mainly carried out by means of emotional contagion—easily succumbed to suggestions and legends, and were correspondingly susceptible to manipulation by talented demagogues. From the point of view of political leadership, understanding the "mental constitution of crowds"⁸⁴ and the forces capable of making an impression on them thus allowed for the creation of promising strategies to win crowds over and convey political ideas, ideologies and doctrines.

In the context of Le Bon's theory of the masses and their (political) behavior, the idea and function of a "master" was seminal:

As soon as a certain number of living beings are gathered together, whether they be animals or men, they place themselves instinctively under the authority of a chief. In the case of human crowds the chief is often nothing more than a ringleader or agitator, but as such he plays a considerable part. His will is the nucleus around which the opinions of the crowd are grouped and attain to identity. A crowd is a servile flock that is incapable of ever doing without a master.⁸⁵

Leaders, who often started out as "followers", tended to be men of action rather than men of words, "recruited from the ranks of those morbidly nervous, excitable, half-deranged persons who are bordering on madness".⁸⁶ While nations had never lacked leaders, only few of them were men of ardent convictions stirring the soul of crowds—people like Peter the Hermit, Luther, Savonarola or the key figures of the French Revolution. In Le Bon's view, those capable of arousing faith, "whether religious, political, or social, whether faith in a work, in a person, or an idea"⁸⁷ were the only ones to be considered great leaders of crowds. With faith as one of the most tremendous

forces at the disposal of humanity, the influence of “apostles of all beliefs”⁸⁸ was accordingly great. In terms of leadership style, leaders of crowds wielded despotic authority not only because despotism was a condition of their obtaining a following, but also because crowds were naturally and inherently servile: “It is the need not of liberty but of servitude that is always predominant in the soul of crowds. They are so bent on obedience that they instinctively submit to whoever declares himself their master.”⁸⁹

For leaders to imbue the mind of crowds with certain ideas and beliefs, they had recourse to three main expedients, namely affirmation, repetition and contagion—with imitation being the most central effect of the latter.⁹⁰ A key factor for any leader’s eventual success, however, was their disposing of what Le Bon termed “personal prestige”: “It is a faculty independent of all titles, of all authority, and possessed by a small number of persons whom it enables to exercise a veritably magnetic fascination on those around them, although they are socially their equals, and lack all ordinary means of domination.”⁹¹ Napoleon was quoted as a particularly enlightening example of this kind of leader, whose prestige alone had made his historical deeds possible, outlived him and was even discernible to the present day.

One of the principal stepping-stones to prestige—if not *the*—was success. This, however, also made for the disappearance of success almost always followed by the disappearance of prestige: “The hero whom the crowd acclaimed yesterday is insulted to-day should he have been overtaken by failure. The re-action, indeed, will be the stronger in proportion as the prestige has been great.”⁹² Once a hero had fallen, the crowd would consider him a mere equal and take revenge for having bowed to a superiority that no longer existed. While prestige could disappear quickly by want of success, there was also the possibility of prestige being worn away in a longer process, notably by being subjected to discussion. For that reason, “the gods and men who have kept their prestige for long have never tolerated discussion”, since “for the crowd to admire, it must be kept at a distance.”⁹³

For his age, Le Bon stated an important phenomenon that was new in world history: governments’ inability to direct opinion. Previously, governments and a small number of writers and newspapers had constituted public opinion. Yet “to-day the writers have lost all influence, and the newspapers only reflect opinion.”⁹⁴ More and more, the opinion of crowds was developing into *the* guiding principle in politics, which thus became increasingly “swayed by the impulse of changeable crowds, who are uninfluenced by reason and can only be guided by sentiment.”⁹⁵ Modern crowds were characterized by selfishness and indifference to everything not linked to their immediate interests—to Le Bon unmistakable signs for a civilization in decay. Yet with the modern man being more and more a “prey to indifference” and unattached to ideals, traditions and institutions also had its positive side, considering the power that crowds possessed: “were a single opinion to acquire sufficient prestige to enforce its general acceptance, it would soon be endowed with so tyrannical a strength that everything would have to bend before it, and the era of free discussion would be closed for a long time.”⁹⁶

In the last part of his study, Le Bon turned to different types of crowds and their specificities. According to him, a general distinction was to be made between

homogeneous crowds (such as sects, castes and classes) and heterogeneous crowds (such as "criminal crowds", juries or parliamentary assemblies), with the latter being the focus of his interests. In times of mass democracy, one group received particular attention: "electoral crowds", defined as collectivities invested with the power of electing the holder of a certain function.

Of the general characteristics specific to crowds, electoral crowds displayed "but slight aptitude for reasoning, the absence of the critical spirit, irritability, credulity, and simplicity";⁹⁷ while the influence of the leaders of such crowds and the elements of successful leadership—affirmation, repetition, prestige, and contagion—were perceptible in their decisions. In Le Bon's eyes, electoral crowds were neither better nor worse than other crowds were, but no forthright rejection of universal suffrage or the underlying principle of popular sovereignty was to be derived from this. From a philosophical point of view, the "dogma of the sovereignty of crowds"⁹⁸ was as indefensible as the religious dogmas of the Middle Ages, but at this time it enjoyed the same absolute power that they formerly had enjoyed. Time alone could change this. Yet there was also a rational argument to be applied in favor of universal suffrage, bearing in mind the mental inferiority of all collectivities regardless of composition and intellect: "In a crowd men always tend to the same level, and, on general questions, a vote recorded by forty academicians is no better than that of forty water-carriers." Consequently, even if the electorate was solely composed of persons "stuffed with sciences", they would still be mainly guided by their sentiments and party spirit: "We should be spared none of the difficulties we now have to contend with, and we should certainly be subjected to the oppressive tyranny of castes."⁹⁹

Le Bon was not only making a plea for universal suffrage as a lesser evil than any other conceivable alternative, but also for parliamentary government. It was true that the general characteristics of crowds, including the preponderant influence of only a few leaders, were to be found in parliamentary assemblies as well. Fortunately, however, these characteristics were not constantly displayed. Rather, parliamentary assemblies only constituted crowds at certain moments, and the individuals composing them retained their individuality in a great number of cases. This enabled parliaments to sometimes produce excellent legislative work. Correspondingly, and notwithstanding the fact that parliaments tended to waste money and restrict individual liberties, Le Bon concluded that: "In spite of all the difficulties attending their working, parliamentary assemblies are the best form of government mankind has discovered as yet, and more especially the best means it has found to escape the yoke of personal tyrannies."¹⁰⁰

Overall, Le Bon's ideas were strongly influenced by personal experience, and by the standards of present scholarship, some of his arguments are no longer tenable. This is especially true for the way in which he stressed race as a determining factor for men's actions and crowd behavior, mirroring the *Zeitgeist* of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. At the same time, however, it is undeniable that Le Bon's work was not only convincing due to its catchy and sharp-witted character, but was also ground-breaking in terms of its sociological-analytical approach, paving the way for future scientific investigations into problems of mass democracy and politics more generally. What distinguishes Le Bon from other writers of his time is the way in which he painted a sober, realistic and at the same time pessimistic panorama of the masses

and political leadership, which forgoes any idealism or obvious political stance.¹⁰¹ Politics and leadership in an era of crowds are portrayed as being characterized not by elements of rationality or sagacity, but emotionality and manipulation. With crowds described as easily excitable, credulous and merely acting by instinct, the toolset of successful leaders was accordingly: leadership was not about intellect or greatness, but merely ability to supply the masses with illusions. Whoever was able to do this had the prerequisite to become their master. Congruently, since crowds were falling for illusion artists rather than truly great and talented men, there was no need for heroism—a crucial element for uniting leaders and the led—to be real: “It is legendary heroes, and not for a moment real heroes, who have impressed the minds of crowds.”¹⁰²

Little could be hoped for, even less expected, from an age in which the masses assumed power, and yet Le Bon was unable to identify a true alternative: not just because the idea of popular sovereignty had turned into a *sine qua non*, but also because the erratic behavior of crowds could not simply be contained by limiting the number of those enfranchised or taking part in the political process. Le Bon therefore propagated an early version of the dictum that democracy—particularly, parliamentary democracy—is the worst form of government, except for all the others.

In conclusion, it can be stated that by the turn of the twentieth century debate on “Caesarism” in the literal sense of the word—while still discernible—played a less prominent role in Europe than half a century before. This was also true for France, where the experience of the fall of the Second Empire had marked a major rupture. The material substance of the Caesarism discourse, however, was anything but gone, becoming instead intertwined with and embedded in broader debates on mass politics and its implications. In the French context, Boulangism is a most enlightening case of the continued potency of “Caesarism” within a new discursive framework, which was not least characterized by increasing disintegration of traditional ideological distinctions.¹⁰³ What made Boulangism appealing across the political spectrum was the promise of an authoritarian solution by means of the masses—which, however, did not necessarily indicate their actual ability to take effective part in a democratic process, or even the desirability of any truly democratic involvement.

In Germany, which throughout the nineteenth century had been a hub for discussion revolving around the concepts of Bonapartism and Caesarism, the situation was somewhat different from France. In Germany, too, the question of universal suffrage and how to tackle the repercussions of a mass society more generally had taken center stage by the end of the century, and there was also a similar tendency towards a “scientific” understanding of modern politics. More than in other countries, however, the concept of Caesarism continued to be a central reference point for political and theoretical reflection. This was not least due to the specificities of the German Empire’s political system.

6.1.3 Germany

By the late nineteenth century, “Caesarism” had become well-established in German lexica and encyclopaedias. Overall, it remained a negatively connoted term and concept, describing a form of government bordering on illegitimacy, which originally dated back to Julius Caesar, but for which the regimes of Napoleon I and even more

Napoleon III in France were considered modern archetypes. The entry *Cäsarismus* in the thirteenth edition of the *Brockhaus* (1883) is paradigmatic in this regard:

[...] The term C. has become common to characterize the Napoleonic system. In this sense it means a specific kind of monarchy, which is different from the absolute as well as the constitutional [monarchy] because of its democratic basis and the lack of legitimacy, whose core, however, is a personal, autocratic regime, based on the predominance of administration and the ruthless enforcement of state power. The constitutional competences of the legislative bodies are used for its disguise and it tries to surround itself with the dubious glamour of a self-created aristocracy.¹⁰⁴

It is noteworthy that entries to both Bonapartism and Napoleonism were missing, thus indicating that by then—at least in the German context—Caesarism had achieved the status of an overriding concept into which these other terms had been entirely merged.¹⁰⁵ This is also demonstrated by the second leading German encyclopaedia of the time, *Meyers Konversations-Lexikon*, the fourth edition of which (1886) exclusively referred to *Cäsarismus*. In comparison to the *Brockhaus* entry, however, the one in *Meyers* put a slightly different emphasis, stressing the populist elements of Caesarism and its underlying principle of popular sovereignty:

[Caesarism is] that political system which seeks to put a form of rule similar to the Caesarean power of ancient Rome in the place of modern constitutional monarchy. The latest example of C. was the second French Empire of Napoleon III. A related notion within the Caesarist style of government is the respect for a certain amount of popular favor and a certain reliance on the fourth estate, whose interests are promoted with a view to counterbalance the power of the parliamentary-minded bourgeoisie.

Moreover, by projecting popular sovereignty back to antiquity, no fundamental difference between traditional Roman and modern Caesarism could be identified by the author of the entry:

The only differences between the Roman Caesar [...] and the French Emperor were that the latter was answerable to the nation and at the same time hereditary, the former neither the one nor the other. However, since in both cases the people were constitutionally sovereign [...], Roman imperialism [*Imperatorentum*] could be termed a lifelong presidency, the French Empire a hereditary one.¹⁰⁶

While the latter was an unconventional interpretation not shared by many other commentators at the time, the assessment of Caesarism resting on a bond between leader and fourth estate to the detriment of the middle classes was a view widely held even in the 1850s and 1860s.

Notwithstanding the fact that reference works in the late nineteenth century mainly referred to French examples for modern instances of Caesarism, similar societal

and political challenges made for the relevance of the concept in Germany, too. With the introduction of universal (male) suffrage under Bismarck, the *Reich* had unmistakably become a sort of mass democracy, the consequences of which had to be dealt with—often by means of explicit reference to Caesarism. In the German context, the question of how to forge a bridge between the existing monarchical-constitutional system and the masses was of particular concern. Apart from political journalism and writing, this issue was also actively taken up within the emerging social sciences in Germany.

In 1888, Wilhelm Roscher (1817–1894), together with Gustav von Schmoller (1838–1917) founder of the “Historical School of Political Economy” and known for establishing “absolutism” as an epoch designation,¹⁰⁷ made an attempt to institute “Caesarism” as a scientific and universal category in his *Umriss zur Naturlehre des Cäsarismus*.¹⁰⁸ In the tradition of ancient constitutional theory and Polybios (200–118 BC) in particular, Roscher outlined a cyclical theory of political rule, the final step of which was Caesarism—essentially understood as a monarchical form of military dictatorship, resulting from a degeneration of democracy, which in turn had grown out of absolute monarchy becoming increasingly mixed with democratic features due to the increase of the middle classes.¹⁰⁹

Criticizing the arbitrary and inflationary use of the term Caesarism, which was widely abused to discredit any powerful monarchy today, Roscher considered the Janus-like character of *Cäsarismus* “with an extremely monarchical, an extremely democratic face” as its distinguishing feature and particular strength.¹¹⁰ Unavoidably, however, the democratic face obliged any Caesar—the greatest modern representative of which was Napoleon I—to always strive “to outshine everyone, and especially in such traits that please or impress the Everyman”.¹¹¹ Failure and defeat were accordingly fatal for Caesaristic regimes, the susceptibility to which Roscher did not limit to France. The fact that thus far France had been the only field of Caesaristic experimentation in the nineteenth century was not ascribed to Caesarism being merely a French phenomenon, a view still held by many of Roscher’s contemporaries. Rather, it was due to the nature of the French national character that most of the developments to be experienced by all European peoples took place particularly early and with exceptional speed.¹¹²

Apart from Roscher’s work, which found positive reception and severe criticism alike,¹¹³ another attempt to insert Caesarism into a “natural science” of the state had already been made a few years earlier by the political economist and sociologist Albert Schäffle (1831–1903) in his *Bau und Leben des Socialen Körpers*, published in four volumes between 1875 and 1878, with a revised two-volume edition following in 1896.¹¹⁴ Therein, Caesarism was described as:

The product of a long, tiring battle between aristocrats and democrats, rich and poor; from the anarchy of the civil war arose, simultaneously “society-rescuing” and democratic, the ancient Greek tyranny, the Roman imperialism [*Imperatoventum*], the modern Caesarie [*Cäsarie*]. It is the iron emergency tire of an inwardly rotten society. In highest potency, its monocrat finally declares himself God, he becomes *divus* Caesar!¹¹⁵

For Schäffle, the point of departure for a nation's degeneration towards Caesarism was a monarchical system, the ideal form of which was considered to be its constitutional variant. Characterized by a formal dualism between the crown on the one hand and a representative body on the other, constitutional monarchies were equipped with a built-in "check". This dualism, however, was also the potential source of a constitutional monarchy's fall:

If real opposites are powerfully fixed within this dualism, the constitutional state loses unity and falls victim to [...] powerlessness. A state's recovery from the instability of the power center then regularly ends [...] either with absolutism [*Absolutie*], even in the form of a new dynasty of Caesars, or with the formal overthrow of the monarchy, be it by an aristocratic, be it by a democratic republic.¹¹⁶

For constitutional monarchies to have a future, Schäffle formulated a clear condition:

[...] the constitutional hereditary monarchy can extend its life by protecting the fourth estate, in multinational states by protecting the equality of nationalities, as its life has been extended by protecting the third estate. If it fails in this task, then it is threatened [...] by the fate of the Bourbons, reduction to the despotisms of restoration, money and the proletariat (Caesarie), decline in popular rule or decline in the social republic. By granting universal suffrage, further development has already been forced into this alternative.¹¹⁷

Despite being formulated in general terms, these comments—together with the warning of universal suffrage being an almost irreversible step towards Caesarism—clearly had the political system of the German Empire in mind, with regard to which both Schäffle and Roscher advocated preserving the *status quo*.

Their respective attempts to incorporate Caesarism into a general explanatory framework sketching the perils to which constitutional monarchies were exposed when faced with democratic ambitions are noteworthy. Yet Dieter Groh is right in his observation that the works of Schäffle and Roscher also marked a step back:¹¹⁸ while Caesarism became part of socio-scientific theory formation, their studies failed to recognize Caesarism as a potentially original and modern phenomenon, as people such as Tocqueville and Lorenz von Stein had underlined long before. By sticking to the idea that the social and political "nature" of men expressing itself in world history followed a perpetual cyclic process, Schäffle and Roscher—like most other political commentators at the time—contented themselves with adapting traditional notions to new frameworks. Accordingly, they showed great awareness for the vital importance of the social question and its solution for the future of (constitutional) monarchy, but lacked any sense for new notions and concepts of political rule.¹¹⁹

Such a sense was clearly demonstrated by Max Weber. His central achievement was the development of a universal "sociology of domination" (*Herrschaftssoziologie*), born under the immediate impression of the Wilhelmine Period, when the idiosyncrasies and snags of the *Reich's* political system were becoming progressively accentuated.

6.2 The Wilhelmine Empire: Caesarism's Absorption into a Sociology of Domination

6.2.1 Wilhelm II and the Political System of the Late *Kaiserreich*

Undoubtedly, the accession to the throne in 1888 of the young Wilhelm II (1859–1941), lacking neither self-confidence nor a sense of mission, and even more the dismissal two years later of the “Iron Chancellor”, who had so forcefully shaped Prussian and German politics for three decades, marked a historical caesura.¹²⁰ Wilhelm II was considerably different from Bismarck in both style and political priority setting—differences engendering at least initially hopes for a new era to dawn among the wider public. Leaving aside later idealized retrojections of Bismarck's unchallenged and almost transcendental nimbus (to which even the retired *Reichskanzler* added an active part),¹²¹ it must not be forgotten that towards its end not only had most of the reformist spirit of the Bismarckian period vanished in favor of authoritarian-reactionary policies, but also much of the personal popularity of the Chancellor.

It is therefore not surprising that the young Emperor captured more sympathies, hopes and expectations than the old Chancellor was able to do at the time of his discharge.¹²² Wilhelm II represented a generational and supposedly also epochal change, which seemed to promise a departure from a parochial past and turning to a bright future. Indeed, there was hope that Wilhelm II would be able to recognize the signs and needs of his times, not least with regard to the ever-more dynamic economic and social transformation processes, towards which Bismarck had demonstrated an increasing lack of understanding.

By 1890, Germany had unmistakably turned into a modern industrial society,¹²³ with the elites of the economic bourgeoisie (*Wirtschaftsbürgertum*) gaining societal influence, as the educated middle-classes (*Bildungsbürgertum*) had done before them. In several respects, Wilhelm II did pay tribute to the ongoing change of society, for example by actively fostering the sciences (especially natural science and engineering), demonstrating proximity to industry and also cultivating an overall bourgeois personal lifestyle. Moreover, and in line with the nationalistic *Zeitgeist*, Wilhelm II induced a radical shift in foreign policy, replacing Bismarck's *raison d'état* with “nation” and “national glory” as guiding principles of the Empire. This was encapsulated in the dictum of Germany's right to a *Platz an der Sonne* (“place in the sun”),¹²⁴ and substantiated by Wilhelm's expansionist colonial policy. Not least with regard to the social question, which so many contemporary observers identified as key, Wilhelm raised expectations for a fresh start and a possible durable settling by launching a number of socio-political initiatives. Especially the so-called “February Decrees” of 1890, promising improved social security and workers' representation,¹²⁵ seemed to materialize the hope for an organic union of monarchy and democracy, the fourth estate and the Emperor; in short, the hope for a *soziales Kaisertum* (“social empire”), which Friedrich Naumann so astutely proclaimed in 1900,¹²⁶ taking up Lorenz von Stein's idea of a “kingship of social reform” uttered half a century before.

The Emperor's socio-political activism, however, was short-lived, and soon replaced by a decidedly anti-socialist stand, alienating both the Social Democratic Party and the

working class. In other respects, too, hopes *vis-à-vis* Wilhelm II were dashed, whose person and policies were perceived as increasingly anachronistic the longer his reign lasted. The reasons for this estrangement are many and varied. One central explanatory variable, however, is Wilhelm's particular concept of rulership.

Right from the beginning, the new Emperor left no doubt that he did not intend to take a back seat in political affairs, as his father and grandfather had done during Bismarck's chancellorship. Instead, he was keen on pursuing a "personal regiment" (*persönliches Regiment*)¹²⁷ and ruling with as little external interference as possible. Such an autocratic understanding—based on the idea of legitimist-monarchical legitimacy—inevitably clashed with parliament, which claimed a share in exercising the *Reich's* political power, and would not be reconciled with the postulation of popular sovereignty as ultimate source of state authority. The dilemma of Wilhelm's idea of legitimist-monarchical legitimacy being in stark conflict with the given constitutional framework and its democratic features could only be addressed by the Emperor stylizing himself as epitome of the nation, with a sort of *unio mystica* in place between him and the nation. Wilhelm II went to great lengths to propagate this particular kind of "popular emperorship", which was exclusively conceived as "emperorship on behalf the people", and making himself out to be the "born leader" (in a literal sense of the word) of the German nation. Wilhelm was thus claiming a leadership role in the tradition of the two Napoleons, which Bismarck—despite his actively using Caesaristic tools to achieve political objectives—never had and never assumed to have.

Whether Bismarck—as later alleged in *Mr. Punch's History of the Great War*—had actually warned of Wilhelm's "Caesarism" as early as 1888 is doubtful.¹²⁸ What is nevertheless clear is that Wilhelm's political style and approach was fundamentally different from that of Bismarck, and that many contemporaries felt compelled to warn of his Caesaristic intentions or even outward *Cäsarenwahnsinn* ("Caesaristic frenzy") with regard to the Emperor. The most prominent writing of the latter kind was Ludwig Quidde's (1858–1941) *Caligula. Eine Studie über römischen Cäsarenwahnsinn* of 1894, which was a weakly disguised frontal attack against Wilhelm II—causing the conservative *Kreuzzeitung* to denounce and scandalize it as *lèse-majesté*—and one of the most successful political pamphlets of the late Empire, seeing more than 30 editions.¹²⁹

In the end, the Caesaristic ambitions of Wilhelm II failed miserably; to a good part, because the Emperor lacked talent and was unable to compellingly embody the "Caesar" he strived to be, neither intellectually nor with regard to physical appearance. Even his being perceived as a symbol of "progress" did not hold for long. Paradoxically, while Germany did indeed represent an *Emergence into the Modern Era*¹³⁰ and an "Augustan age" around 1900, its self-proclaimed Augustus Wilhelm II was more a hindrance than a catalyst for it to unfold. Wilhelm II lacked both zeal and political will for change, especially in those areas where action was required most to make the Bismarckian system fit the needs of the twentieth century. This was with regards to the dominant role of army and bureaucracy in the state, the predominance of the nobility, the strong position of the agricultural sector politically represented by the Junkers, and not least the all-pervasive anti-parliamentarism. Worst of all, during the reign of Wilhelm II more than under Bismarck, the German Empire lacked any clear vision for

the future other than the arrogant claim of being a “world power”.¹³¹ It is therefore not surprising that while Bismarck became increasingly associated with the modern and even “revolutionary” elements of his policies over time, Wilhelm II was regarded more and more as a defender of the *status quo*. “Wilhelminism” thus appears to be not only as a periodical attribution, but also as the expression of a distinct “mentality” and political culture.

Regardless of whether or not one is inclined to follow the hypothesis of the German *Sonderweg* (“special path”) in the development of democratic structures having no equivalent in Europe, it can be stated that by the turn of the twentieth century, the economic and social as well as cultural development of the Empire on the one hand, and its political order together with its corroborating institutions on the other, were less and less congruent and drifting further apart. At the time of Bismarck, the gulf was not yet dramatic or at least sufficiently veiled by the euphoria preceding and following the formation of a German nation state. Wilhelm II however, rather than making efforts to bridge the chasm, contributed to its further aggravation by sticking—after a brief intermezzo at the beginning of his rule—to a strictly preservative course of action, the successful pursuit of which might have overtaxed even a more talented statesman than the Emperor.

Bismarck and Wilhelm II alike were faced with the challenges of a political “mass market”, which Bismarck seems to have been able to deal with more effectively. Wilhelm II struggled to respond to the changes of politics and the public sphere concomitant with a mass society, but was at best only partly successful in assuming the role of a “media emperor” and being seen as the shining national hero he wished to be.¹³² In his case, too, the mass media proved to be a double-edged sword: while they could be used for propaganda and legitimizing rule and ruler, they could also easily turn into a means for criticizing the established order and its representatives, and strip the monarchy of any remaining aura of dignity and “divine nature” it still might dispose of. The often very worldly “scandals” of the Wilhelmine age that found their way into the press and were publicly discussed, especially the Harden-Eulenburg affair, are a case in point.

During the reign of Wilhelm II, the problems of the Bismarckian system escalated and turned into a fully-fledged—though not yet open—systemic crisis, which was “as much a crisis of institutions as it was one of values and aims”.¹³³ The two options that offered themselves to bringing the political constitution of the *Reich* in line with an advancing industrial society were: a parliamentarization of the political system towards a parliamentary monarchy with the Emperor serving only as a depoliticized “dignified” component, or resorting to a plebiscitary-Caesaristic model of government. However, Wilhelm II was strictly opposed to the former, and inept of pursuing the latter.

The incapability of Wilhelm II to be the strong political leader, which his understanding of monarchical rule would have required,¹³⁴ together with the chronic weakness of German parliamentarism and the *Reichstag* in particular was finally fatal: it made it not only possible for the army to fill the existing vacuum during the First World War and establish a *de facto* military dictatorship under Paul von Hindenburg (1847–1934) and Erich Ludendorff (1865–1937), but also heralded the downfall of dynasty and Empire in 1918.

It was against the background of the systemic and eventually lethal deficits of the Wilhelmine Empire, with the political constitution of the *Reich* (and an Emperor longing to be more than just a constitutional monarch, but unable to be a Caesar) incongruent with its socio-economic setting and modernity more generally, that Max Weber developed his influential political sociology—a sociology, which was not least meant to provide explanations and potential solutions for the problems specific to Germany that in Weber's eyes had centrally to do with a lack of effective leadership.

6.2.2 Max Weber: Sociology of Domination and "Leader-Democracy"

Karl Emil Maximilian Weber (1864–1920), whose comprehensive work has profoundly influenced social theory and research, was politically engaged throughout his life. This is manifest not only in his political activities, but also in his political writings. Weber accompanied the politics of his time, while at the same time receiving central inputs for his oeuvre thereof. One would not be mistaken in claiming that a central part of Weber's political sociology—embedded in his general sociological framework—is a direct reflection of and immediate answer to the experiences of the German Empire (whose existence is largely congruent with Weber's lifespan), and more particularly the deficits of its *politischer Betrieb* (literally: "political enterprise")¹³⁵. Although becoming ever more visible towards the end of the Wilhelmine period, Weber saw these deficits for the most part already immanent in the Bismarckian system. He pinpointed seven faults in particular:¹³⁶

1. the structural "impotence of parliaments";¹³⁷
2. the supremacy of the civil-service apparatus (*Beamtentum*), which guaranteed good administration, but produced "negative policies";¹³⁸
3. the dominance of "parties of political principle" (*gesinnungspolitische Parteien*), having the character of "minority parties";¹³⁹
4. German career politicians being of a deficient type: "They had no power, no responsibility, and could only play a fairly subaltern role as notables, with the result that they were animated yet again by the instincts which are typically to be found in guilds";¹⁴⁰
5. an authoritarian-style capitalism, suffocating the potential of modern-liberal capitalism;¹⁴¹
6. the existence of rivalling and non-transparent "parallel governments", especially towards the end of the Empire in the shape of the Supreme Army Command (*Oberste Heeresleitung*);¹⁴²
7. the fact of a "democracy without a leader, which means: rule by the 'professional politician' who has no vocation, the type of man who lacks precisely those inner, charismatic qualities which make a leader";¹⁴³ becoming most evident at the turn to the Weimar Republic.

In tracing the root of these faults and attempting to identify solutions, the concept of *Cäsarismus* assumed a key role.¹⁴⁴ Corresponding to the—at first somewhat surprising—double function ascribed to Caesarism as source of trouble and salvation alike, the term appears in two overlapping, yet at the same distinct contexts:

- I. as a “political combat term” to condense and express criticism of Bismarck’s legacy, mainly (though not exclusively) used in Weber’s private correspondences, political journalism and public lectures;
- II. as an analytical category—often in guise of “modern” and/or “plebiscitary leadership”—to disclose the very nature of modern politics and its needs.

I. Caesarism as a “combat term”

Weber primarily reproached Bismarck for having thwarted the modernization of the Empire’s political institutions along the lines of parliamentarism and true democracy through his “Caesarism”. While demonstrating appreciation for Bismarck as an outstanding personality and statesman, Weber denounced the Chancellor’s political legacy as disastrous for the nation. This was, for example, with regard to the “Caesarist” abuse of universal suffrage for demagogic and reactionary purposes, which Weber had criticized as early as 1884, and which to him—sharing the views of other liberals, such as Hermann Baumgarten or Heinrich von Sybel—threatened to nullify the great achievement of national unification.¹⁴⁵ But the malign influence of Bismarckian Caesarism went far beyond electoral manipulation.

Weber acknowledged that even liberals had considered “Caesarism—government by a genius—the best political organization for Germany”, if there were “the slightest chance of some new Bismarck always emerging to fill the highest position”, but in accepting that this was impossible had attempted to secure a strong parliamentary and party system capable of “attracting great political talents”.¹⁴⁶ Bismarck, however, had frustrated any such attempts by all possible means. His towering status had cast a shadow over the Empire, which did not allow for the political landscape to flourish. In the end his legacy was:

a nation without any political sophistication, far below the level which in this regard it had reached twenty years before [i.e. 1870]; a nation without any political will of its own, accustomed to the idea that the great statesman at the helm would make the necessary political decisions [...] a nation accustomed to fatalistic sufferance of all decisions made in the name of “monarchic government”, because he had misused monarchic sentiments as a cover for his power interests in the struggle of the parties.

And perhaps worst of all: “The great statesman did not leave behind any political tradition. He neither attracted nor even suffered independent political minds, not to speak of strong political personalities.”¹⁴⁷ The consequences of Caesarism in its Bismarckian manifestation were all the more disastrous since they had direct power- and geo-political effects: a nation politically immature and institutionally feeble was incapable of pursuing the imperialist *Machtstaatspolitik* (“power politics”) necessary for guaranteeing Germany an adequate status in the world, which Weber fiercely argued for throughout his life.¹⁴⁸

Another point of Weber’s criticism of Bismarckian Caesarism concerned its “illegitimacy”—not understood in terms of normatively (and from the outset) “unjust”

or "illegal", but in a rather specific "constitutional" sense, hence already pointing to Weber's sociological valorization of the Caesarism concept. In his *Parlament und Regierung im neugeordneten Deutschland* (1918), Weber argued that in an age of mass democracy, the political leader was no longer determined in traditional ways:

Active mass democratization means that the political leader [...] gains the trust and the faith of the masses in him and his power with the means of mass demagogy. In substance, this means a shift toward the Caesarist mode of selection. Indeed, every democracy tends in this direction. After all, the specifically Caesarist technique is the plebiscite. It is not an ordinary vote or election, but a profession of faith in the calling of him who demands these acclamations.

The Caesarist leader could rise either in a "military fashion, as a military dictator like Napoleon I, who had his position affirmed through a plebiscite", or in a "bourgeois fashion, through plebiscitary affirmation, acquiesced in by the army, of a claim to power on the part of a non-military politician, such as Napoleon III":

Both avenues are as antagonistic to the parliamentary principle as they are (of course) to the legitimism of the hereditary monarchy. Every kind of direct popular election of the supreme ruler and, beyond that, every kind of political power that rests on the confidence of the masses and not of parliament—this includes also the position of a popular military hero like Hindenburg¹⁴⁹—lies on the road to these "pure" forms of Caesarist acclamation.

In particular, this was true of the position of the President of the United States, "whose superiority over parliament derives from his (formally) democratic nomination and election"; but the "hopes that a Caesarist figure like Bismarck attached to universal suffrage and the manner of his antiparliamentary demagogy" would point in the same direction, "although they were adapted, in formulation and phraseology, to the given legitimist conditions of his ministerial position". The circumstances of Bismarck's departure from office demonstrated "the manner in which hereditary legitimism reacts against these Caesarist powers".¹⁵⁰

For Weber, Caesarism of the Bismarckian kind was thus "illegitimate" in a double sense: on the one hand, because it was void of and betrayed the legitimacy of the hereditary monarchical system; on the other, because it was Caesarism of a "pure" and unrestrained form. In other words, it was all about the dosage of Caesarism. Correctly dosed, Caesarism was not just beneficial, but actually the guarantor and a *sine qua non* for the successful functioning of modern political systems. This refers directly to Weber's more analytical usage of Caesarism especially in his scholarly work.

II. Caesarism as an analytical category

In Weber's scholarly work, Caesarism appears as an inevitable accompaniment to modern politics and as its very soul, even though frequently concealed behind the language of "plebiscitary leadership". What makes his theoretical approach both

exceptional and appealing are Weber's endeavors to reconcile "Caesarism" and "parliamentarism"—which until then had been almost exclusively regarded as an antithesis—and amalgamate them to guarantee a balanced, stable and durable political order suiting the needs of modernity. To that he adds democracy as a third component. Within his functional model of parliamentary democracy, the triad democracy—Caesarism—parliamentarism finds its counterpart in the three actors *demos*—leader—parliament, the close interaction of which is deemed indispensable.

Applying his model to Germany, Weber was hopeful that well-conceived Caesarism offered an opportunity to rekindle the country's parliamentarism and overcome the weaknesses of its political system. But how could that possibly be done? The key for Weber was the cultivation of Caesarism in the context of a solid, vibrant and watchful parliamentary-democratic framework, and to use its potential for mass mobilization as well as national leadership. The "parliamentary Caesarism" he had in mind relied on modern mass parties, "the children of democracy, of mass franchise, of the necessity to woo and organize the masses, and develop the utmost unity of direction and the strictest discipline".¹⁵¹ Its essence, though, was the principle of the free (s)election of the leader:¹⁵² that was the core of democratic rule (*Herrschaft*). Caesarism was no less than *the* central instrument to guarantee the proper selection of the leader. Pointedly, Weber noted in *Wahlrecht und Demokratie in Deutschland*: "'Caesarism' [is] the election of the leader."¹⁵³

Weber acknowledged differences. While the "Caesarist-plebiscitarian element" was always attenuated in a "democratized hereditary monarchy" such as Britain, for example, it was much stronger in a political system like the United States with an elected president.¹⁵⁴ Nevertheless, that element was always present in any system featuring democratic principles. For Weber, the *demos* entrusted with providing the "plebiscite" for the Caesar-to-be were the masses: true, that *demos* had to mature in a genuinely liberal-democratic system, characterized by the postulate of self-determination at all levels, but it comprised the entire population, which should enjoy equal (voting) rights. Weber was consequently not only positioning himself against electoral restrictions such as the one represented by the Prussian three-class franchise; he was also distancing himself from those warning—often by invoking Caesarism—of the danger of "the masses" (mainly represented by the fourth estate) and of the demagogues at their head. As early as in 1895 he stressed to that effect: "The danger does not lie with the masses [. . .]. The deepest core of the socio-political problem is not the question of the economic situation of the ruled but of the political qualifications of the ruling and rising classes."¹⁵⁵

While accepting the masses as a political force, however, Weber was not at all effusive with regard to their abilities for political participation, and in how far they actually should participate. Acclaiming the leader was the prerogative of the masses—this was their main, but essentially only political function. Weber considered it naïve to believe that (mass) "democracy" could be taken literally as "rule of the commoners". That "the great political decisions, even and especially in a democracy, are unavoidably made by a few men", Weber considered as a fact only dogmatists could fail to acknowledge.¹⁵⁶ Even the idea of "choosing" the leader *sensu stricto* was a chimera: "it is not the politically passive 'mass' that produces the leader from its midst,

but the political leader [who] recruits his following and wins the mass through 'demagoguery'.¹⁵⁷ "Mass democracy, ever since Pericles", Weber summarized in *Parlament und Regierung im neugeordneten Deutschland*, "had always had to pay for its positive successes with major concessions to the Caesarist principle of leadership selection".¹⁵⁸

In the context of Weber's elitist understanding of the relationship between leader and led, which shows very clear resemblances with Le Bon's assessment of crowds,¹⁵⁹ parliament was anything but redundant—provided it was not a parliament of the Bismarckian and Wilhelmine kind, which only fostered negative selection of the political leadership personnel. As a powerful institution, entrusted with the necessary constitutional rights, parliament was an essential means of Caesarist selection and control, also since it was seen as the breeding ground for responsible Caesarist figures, with their personalities forged in parliamentary life. Likewise, parliamentary Caesarism presented a solution for the "Achilles heel of purely Caesarist domination",¹⁶⁰ namely leadership succession, in assuring that succession would proceed without major disruption, preserving continuity and civil liberties.

From the very beginning, Caesarism was a central concern and component of Weber's political sociology, and it remained such until the end of his life. At the same time, however, it can be observed that Caesarism underwent a process of both transformation and integration in his scholarly work.¹⁶¹ "Transformation" insofar, as Caesarism as a term became interchangeable with a number of other expressions that essentially superseded it: *plebisitäre Demokratie* ("plebiscitary democracy"), *Führer-Demokratie* ("leader democracy"), *plebisitäre Führerdemokratie* ("plebiscitary leadership democracy"), or simply *plebisitäre Herrschaft* ("plebiscitary rule").¹⁶² "Integration" took place—most discernible in Weber's never-finished magnum opus *Economy and Society* (*Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*)—in the form that Caesarism's cognates themselves became absorbed into (and understood as expressions of) the sociological concept of "charisma".¹⁶³ In his late sociological writings, charisma is portrayed as integral to all modern kinds of rule. Caesarism, rendered now as a form of charisma, became "simply the democratic corollary of an overarching and inescapable iron law of leadership"—a move that allowed "Weber's own value commitments" to be "camouflaged under a scientific rubric".¹⁶⁴

The latter already anticipates part of the answer to the inevitable question why—if it was so central to his political thought—Weber did not simply make Caesarism, but charisma, the leadership concept par excellence. As has already been demonstrated, Caesarism continually proved to be a polemical and highly charged term throughout its chequered history. Its usability as a "neutral" and "scientific" concept was therefore considerably limited from the outset. Moreover, Caesarism was a notion largely confined to the political arena, whereas Weber was aiming for a universal sociological category embracing all forms of leadership. Finally, Caesarism was associated with illegitimacy; if not necessarily in normative terms, in any case with regard to—in Weber's days still predominant—monarchical-hereditary forms of government. Accordingly, Caesarism proved difficult in being incorporated into Weber's classification of *legitimate Herrschaft* (with its three "pure" types of "traditional", "legal", and "charismatic" government),¹⁶⁵ which represented a radical break with traditional concepts of

legitimacy by moving *Legitimitätsglaube* ("belief in legitimacy") center stage: the criterion of whether a certain form of rule is legitimate or not is whether those ruled accept this rule as just and valid,¹⁶⁶ thus making antique strains of legitimacy sociologically obsolete. Charisma could thus avail itself of characteristics that were usually attributed to Caesarism, while avoiding connotations of illegitimacy or even tyranny that Caesarism had accumulated over time.¹⁶⁷

Whether born of frustration¹⁶⁸ or curiosity, Weber's work set standards for political sociology in general and the discourse on Caesarism in particular. His combining parliamentarism on the one hand with "plebiscitary leadership democracy" (that is: Caesarism) on the other was directed at specific German conditions and an intellectual answer to a deep anxiety over the Bismarckian legacy, but was suitable for universalization. Negatively, Caesarism stood for all that could go wrong if authoritarian ambitions of *one* (even and especially if a genius) were not restrained in an environment of mass democratization, for which the system of the German Empire was paradigmatic. Positively, however, it affirmed what political leadership could do in an age of the masses if it were given the proper parliamentary conditions in which to thrive.

Notwithstanding the stringency and persuasiveness of his considerations, towards the end of his life, Weber, too, had to experience first-hand the often challenging relationship between theory and practice—particularly in politics. Following the disastrous end of the First World War for Germany and the collapse of the monarchy, political-constitutional reconstruction of the country was a primary need. Weber committed himself both in writing and practically to that reconstruction, the latter also in his function as a member of the constitutional commission under Hugo Preuß (1860–1925), which was entrusted with the preparation of what was to become the Weimar Constitution. In both contexts, however, Weber was forced to realize that the infant Republic was being torn apart by diverging interests, and that Parliament—in which he had placed so much hope—was unable to fulfill its envisaged role. With an overwhelmingly negative stand towards strong personalities at work in contemporary German parliamentarism, as Weber saw it, Parliament could not be expected to supply nor control the leaders the country was in such dire need of. Under the *de facto* conditions of post-war Germany, the earlier synthesis between leader and Parliament crumbled. In the central debates on how the office of the new *Reichspräsident* should be designed, Weber remained faithful to his politico-theoretical oeuvre and advocated a directly elected and powerful officeholder: the right to directly elect the leader was no less than the "Magna Charta of democracy", a president chosen by the people and entrusted with encompassing rights—including dissolution of parliament and initiate referenda—"the palladium of genuine democracy, which does not mean impotent self-abandonment to cliques but subordination to leaders one has chosen for oneself".¹⁶⁹ Yet since Parliament had tumbled as corrective and guardian, the masses alone were left as arbiters of a supreme leader—the very same masses Weber had always described as gullible and emotional.

Witnessing the practical implications of the new Weimar Constitution coming into force on August 14, 1919¹⁷⁰ was not granted to Weber, whose sudden death in June 1920 abruptly ended a productive scholarly life.

6.3 Conclusions

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the transition to mass politics was no longer something to be feared or hoped for, but an irreversible fact. Mass politics found expression in the extension of franchise and means of broader political participation as well as in the emergence of mass parties and movements across the political spectrum. Crowds were not only becoming a prime factor sustaining political organizations; with their entering the political realm, also new political instruments—and indeed new political narratives and myths—had to be forged in order to cope with the *élan* of the populace.

Late nineteenth-century discourse on "Caesarism" lay under the spell of the accelerating "popularization" of politics, which was going hand in hand with far-reaching economic and societal changes unfolding at a speed unseen before in European history. Traditional elements of debate were perpetuated, especially in how far Caesarism was an illegitimate form or style of government, and whether it was a universal phenomenon or specific to certain nations or cultural environments. However, this was under a considerably different framework, with Caesarism more and more becoming an issue of and even synonym for "politics of crowds".¹⁷¹ This holds true for all national cases that have been taken into consideration, notwithstanding existing differences of focus and the fact that the intensity of debate varied considerably between countries, with Britain, the United States or Italy comparatively less engaged with Caesarism than France or Germany. As before, Caesarism continued to serve a range of specific purposes: that of a negative foil to contrast a desired political condition or underline the qualities of one's own (national) political system *vis-à-vis* others, as manifest in British and German observers denouncing Caesarism as "French", Italians in turn as "French" and "German"; a polemic notion in domestic day-to-day politics, for example to discredit presidents' or prime ministers' power ambitions in the USA and Britain, respectively; yet also as a political promise and potential solution to break down existing power structures and address the deficiencies of a current political system. But in essentially all instances, Caesarism was now seen in the context of mass democratization and its associated challenges. Concomitant with this shift in perception, Caesarism as both a term and concept was being replaced and taken up by others. This can also be witnessed with regard to France and Germany, where Caesarism had played a prominent role in political theory and practice for a long time.

In France during the 1870s and 1880s, Caesarism quickly evolved from a central concept to characterize the Second Empire—be it its assumed strengths or faults—to an integral part of debates on the political life of the Third Republic and its shortcomings. "Boulangism" epitomized the transformation of Caesarism (and Bonapartism) under the specific French conditions in the wake of the second "Napoleonic experience". Growing out of a claimed need for a more democratic style of politics appropriate to the needs of the modern age, Boulangism as a political tool and power-technique appealed to people from different political quarters, including radical left-wingers and monarchists. "Situated between the revolutionary politics of the past and the mass politics of the future, born of the radical left yet issuing in a radical right [...]",¹⁷² its intrinsic versatility found expression in Boulangism contributing to the rise of

(democratic) socialism and (popular) nationalism alike. Thus, though Georges Boulanger was just a short episode in French history, the experience of Boulangism would yield considerable long-term repercussions in French political and intellectual life. Among other things, it fed into—and at the same time generated much of—the emerging social sciences’ interest in modern mass politics and leadership, for which Gustave Le Bon is a central representative.

In Germany, developments showed striking parallels to those in France. There, too, the contemporary political environment was the driving force for the “scientification” of debates on modern mass politics. Unlike France, however, it was not the ultimately failed “Caesaristic ambitions” of one general (as well as the movement supporting him) and the challenge they had represented for the existing political order that served as a reflection surface. Rather, it was the existing political-constitutional order itself in its Bismarckian and Wilhelmine version that served this function.

The political system of the *Reich* exhibited a number of structural elements that could be termed “Caesaristic”, resulting from the legal and practical dominance of the monarchical principle in the Empire juxtaposed against increasing democratization processes and the weakness of German parliamentarism. In this context, Caesarism—a plebiscitary monarchy—afforded a possible expedient to reconciling monarchical claims to sovereignty and power with a “democratic imperative”. The actual form, however, in which Caesarism expressed itself, largely differed between Bismarck and Wilhelm II: while the former had successfully fostered “instrumental Caesarism” as part of the repertoire of *Machtspolitik* in order to achieve concrete political objectives, Wilhelm showed appetite for personal Caesarism, but failed miserably in his desire. Pointedly, the Wilhelmine period can be characterized as an epoch of Caesaristic desire, yet lacking the necessary Caesar, with the Emperor being neither an authentic *Bürger-Kaiser* (“Citizen Emperor”)¹⁷³ nor a talented populist. In a somnambulist manner and politically stagnating, with a constitutional system tailored for an autocrat, yet lacking responsible leadership, and the monarchy unable to fulfill the task of lasting “societal integration”,¹⁷⁴ the Empire under Wilhelm II steered not only into the catastrophe of the First World War, but also into its own institutional collapse.

It was from the personal experience of the Wilhelmine Empire, in which the deficits immanent in the Bismarckian system became pronounced, that Max Weber drew inspiration for his sociological oeuvre and especially his political sociology. But while his thinking was based on the critical encounter with the specific political and institutional situation in his fatherland, Weber like no other political thinker before him managed to integrate the phenomenon of Caesarism as a centerpiece into an equally compelling and general theoretical framework—an achievement to be aptly condensed to: “from German politics to universal sociology”.¹⁷⁵ His role in the theorization of Caesarism and its lasting disentanglement from specific historical cases can therefore hardly be overestimated.

To Weber, Bismarck was the embodiment of a Caesarist ruler—just of the wrong sort, who represented a “pure” and unrestrained version of Caesarism. What proved fatal, however, were much less Bismarck’s personal traits than his legacy both personal and institutional. In Weber’s eyes, the cruel irony of the state Bismarck established was not only that its leader tolerated no independent politicians as long as he was alive, but

also that once the "Iron Chancellor" was dead, there was no one of comparable political ability to replace him. Weber was convinced that political virtues and vices alike were strongly conditioned by institutional factors, and that while political arrangements would not automatically produce great leaders, they could at least facilitate and help cultivate them. It followed therefore that the vital desideratum for Germany was to organize a political system conducive to nurturing leadership qualities and selecting the most gifted leaders. To that aim, Caesarism—the absence of which was unthinkable for Weber in any democratic body politic—was not at all to be removed from the political process. Instead, it had to be carefully nurtured in such a way that those with a vocation for politics could actually practice their art in a manner combining conviction with responsibility. What Weber conceptualized was a functional model of "parliamentary Caesarism".

At its heart was a demos entrusted with the free selection of a leader disposing of charismatic traits; a "Caesar", who—perpetually tested in a democratic process—was subjected to a dynamic bond with the demos. Both were conceived as intrinsically linked in another regard, too: while democratic leadership required both a democratic constitution and a politically interested citizenry, liberty and self-determination of the individual were only to be achieved under the umbrella of Caesaristic-charismatic political leadership. Under the conditions of ever-increasing bureaucratization of all forms of social interaction, only such leadership could guarantee a maximum of political dynamism and an optimum of governance. The third component in Weber's concept was parliament, whose role was twofold: on the one hand, it acted as a second counterbalance to the bureaucratic state administration; on the other, it was the place in which future leaders were "produced", and at the same time the one by which they were controlled and politically framed.

Weber's Caesarism concept was no less than a universal theory of democracy under the conditions of the modern (mass) age. Its thrust, however, was purposively rational. Neither Caesarism nor even democracy were seen as an end in themselves, but mainly as a means to enhance a nation's power. This is one central point of potential normative criticism that can be put against Weber's "plebiscitary leader democracy". Moreover, with hindsight there are a number of analytical shortcomings regarding Weber's theory and conceptualizing of Caesaristic leadership, four of which are particularly worthy of note:¹⁷⁶

1. Negligence of the complexity and imponderability of politics: Weber paid little attention to the interdependencies between the political system and society, or to those between demos and political leader. Moreover, Weber underestimated the risks inherent in a powerful "Caesar" taking on a life of its own, while overestimating the suitability of democratic competition and parliament for the selection of competent leaders.
2. Distinctively speculative component: The concrete form and functioning of a developed "leadership democracy"—integrating both parliamentary and presidential elements—remained largely untold by Weber, not least since he lacked any clear comparative benchmarks.
3. Reductionist understanding of politics as competition, soliciting allegiance and especially struggle: Weber's understanding that "politics is [...] struggle"¹⁷⁷ and a

“striving to influence the distribution of power between and within political formations”¹⁷⁸ claimed confrontation as the only way to sustainably handle political affairs and provide leadership personnel. He thus neglected the possible shortfalls of a competition-based system—for example candidates lacking public and media impact losing out to those “staging” rather than “doing” politics—and was ignorant of the alternative of a “consensus” and “deliberative democracy”.

4. Deficient overall concept of democracy: With a conscious parallelism between parliament and a directly elected leader, Weber opted for an interference-prone political architecture susceptible to latent conflict. His concept of a leadership democracy also lacked clearly defined institutional checks against a unilateral striving for power by either the executive or the legislative body. In an idealistic manner, Weber suggested that the political process itself would guarantee a balance between ruler and ruled, parliament and *Führer*—taking for granted that demos and parliament would be able to muster the required unity and assertiveness if necessary to confront a power-conscious “Caesar” striving for autocracy and dictatorship.

Weber’s concept of Caesarism and his democracy theory were clearly not without their faults, yet it seems idle to dwell on them here. Not only, since it is all too easy to raise criticism *a posteriori*, with history and political science having progressed for a century, but also because those faults cannot obscure the intellectual accomplishment of Weber and the innovative nature of his political thinking. It seems justified to claim that Weber marked the final and most decisive break from mainstream dealing with Caesarism in nineteenth-century Europe. The clearest expression of that emancipation is the steering away from the language of illegitimacy, with which Weber’s compatriots Roscher and Schäffle and many other thinkers before them, including Auguste Romieu, had essentially characterized Caesarism. Weber, in contrast, erased the normative and condemnatory connotation of illegitimacy as futile (since democracy was just inconceivable without Caesaristic elements) and actually hindering scientific discussion. In his sociological view, Caesarism was genuinely legitimate provided that the ruled believed in the authority of the Caesar and voluntarily complied with his orders.

Weber’s analytical and multi-dimensional use of “Caesarism”, his reframing of the concept and its active integration into a general synopsis of democracy allowed for a much broader applicability than before. Henceforth, Caesarism was no longer a concept to be exclusively applied to the usual suspects such as the two Napoleons or Bismarck. According to Weber, it could also be used for figures as diverse as the presidents of the United States, a Hindenburg or a Gladstone, all of whom depended on the “trust of the masses rather than that of parliaments” for their political power, durability of rule and legitimacy—notwithstanding the precise technical means through which such trust was obtained.¹⁷⁹ Weber convincingly argued that the real antithesis of modern politics was not parliamentarism vs. Caesarism, but “positive” vs. “negative” Caesarism, leadership democracy vs. leaderless democracy. What he was essentially arguing for was “constitutionalized Caesarism”¹⁸⁰—one accepting Caesarism as a given fact *and* something beneficial, provided it was institutionally tempered.

But Weber went beyond giving Caesarism a political-democratic meaning; he also "redescribed it in sociological terms under the rubric of charisma, thus stabilizing, and to a degree erasing, a highly contestable idea that now largely disappeared beneath the imposing categories of legitimate *Herrschaft*".¹⁸¹ Rather than trying to rehabilitate a highly disputed and politicized term for scientific purposes—something also Weber evidently felt unable to do—he had Caesarism wrapped up in his master concept of charisma, which has had a lasting impact on twentieth and twenty-first century political thought. In so doing, however, Weber also heralded the death knell for Caesarism as an analytical category.

At the time Weber died, the debate on Caesarism was losing the considerable vitality it had enjoyed for most of the nineteenth century. Caesarism gradually disappeared from public discussion, "a once vibrant and visceral term giving way inexorably to specialist usage in political theory and political sociology".¹⁸² The success of the charisma concept on the one hand, Caesarism increasingly turning from common to specialist knowledge on the other, found concrete expression in the former soon becoming incorporated in lexica and encyclopaedias as a modern political concept, while Caesarism was gradually phased out.¹⁸³ Irrespective of these conceptual changes, however, the very substance of the Caesarism debate—the question of leadership appropriate to an "age of crowds" and how to reconcile authority and democracy—did not lose any of its acuteness. Instead, nineteenth-century discourse on Caesarism not only found eager—though intricate—reception in political debates during the 1920s and 1930s, but also continued to live on as a central sublayer of political thought throughout the entire twentieth century until today.