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Outlook: Legacies of Caesarism

While the scientification of the Caesarism discourse in the early twentieth century—closely linked with Max Weber’s oeuvre and his attempt at an encompassing “sociology of Caesarism”—induced a turning away from notions and terminologies traditionally used in that context, the intensity of debates now mainly revolving around “leadership”, “plebiscitary” or “totalitarian democracy”, and “dictatorship” saw an increase rather than a decline in the wake of the First World War. This is by no means surprising. The “Great War” was not just a global conflict of an intensity never seen before in world history, with far-reaching repercussions politically, economically and socially; it also marked a turning point of civilization, which for many contemporaries fundamentally altered the perception of politics and the world more generally—and at the same time increased the appetite for radical (political) solutions to the observed “(identity) crisis”, be it real or imagined.

Among the most fervent and influential heralds of a looming “new age” was Oswald Spengler (1880–1936), whose *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (“The Decline of the West”) provided a provocative meta-philosophy of history rejecting Eurocentric and linear concepts of history.¹ The great theme of his two-volume *opus magnum* was a reworking of an older distinction between “culture” and “civilization”, with Spengler considering civilization as the result of culture losing its creative impulses and becoming overwhelmed by negative ones. Part of a perpetual cyclical process, “decline” was thus to be seen as the essentially natural termination of an earlier period of prosperity followed by a long-enduring era of decay, yet at the same time also the harbinger of a dawning new “age of culture”. In line with this interpretation, which was in sharp contrast to teleological understandings of continuous and inevitable human progress dominating the nineteenth century, Spengler considered Rome as the civilization that followed Greek culture, and the modern West as analogous to Roman antiquity.

In the context of Spengler’s edifice of ideas, *Napoleonismus* and *Cäsarismus* were introduced as historical-philosophical notions describing global and atemporal phenomena: “Napoleonism” characterized the “upspringing of formless powers”, which introduced the age of civilization, in the modern West embodied by Robespierre and Napoleon Bonaparte.² The “beginning of the age of gigantic conflicts”, which Spengler associated with the First World War, later marked the “transition from Napoleonism to Caesarism”.³ Caesarism in Spengler’s mind was characterized by “great individual

powers” becoming the destiny of entire peoples and cultures,⁴ and expressed a degeneration of civilization in which democracy had become subject to manipulation, corruption and despotism. Caesarism marked “the end of the politics of intellect [*Geist*] and money” epitomized by the “world-city” (*Weltstadt*), and returned the world to war, primitivism and “formlessness”:

By the term Caesarism I mean that kind of government which, irrespective of any constitutional formulation, is in its inward self a return to thorough formlessness. [...] all institutions, however carefully maintained, [are] thenceforth destitute of all meaning and weight. Of importance is exclusively the wholly personal power exercised by the Caesar [...] It is the homecoming from a form-fulfilled world into primitivism, into the cosmic-historyless. Biological stretches of time once more take the place of historical periods.⁵

For Spengler, Caesarism grows on the soil of democracy—particularly the emergence of the masses equipped with the right to vote, but always remaining an “object for a subject,”⁶—yet “its roots stretch deeply into the soil of blood and tradition”. What could be witnessed now, as before in history, was “the final battle between Democracy and Caesarism, between the leading forces of a dictatorial money-economy and the purely political will-to-order of the Caesars”.⁷

Spengler’s ideologically charged and somewhat esoteric use of “Caesarism” in the framework of a world-historical analysis no longer ascribed much intrinsic analytical value to the term, especially in the understanding of concrete political phenomena, and made for the “Caesarism” concept becoming one of the elements of his work that found least eager reception. By contrast, in identifying an age of decay, characterized by depravity and embodied by a corrupted and degenerated democracy doomed to perish, and suggesting the inevitable need for a fundamental (re-)ordering of things, Spengler had the finger on the pulse of the time.

The widespread understanding of the First World War as a rupture of historical dimensions and the need to rebuild Europe after 1918 provided space for “political experimentation”, and increased a susceptibility to authoritarian solutions in particular. This is especially true for the big loser of the War: Germany. Yet the fact that the “anti-democratic discourse” after 1918 was particularly intensive in that European nation in which the debate on Caesarism had been cultivated throughout the nineteenth century more than anywhere else, and in which Hitler was to come to power in the 1930s, inescapably raises the question as to the potential link between Caesarism and another “-ism” that proves no less conceptually challenging: totalitarianism. What is the relationship between the two? Is totalitarianism—especially Fascism and National Socialism—perhaps a radicalized version of Caesarism? Or are they distinct phenomena in their own right?

These questions will be taken up in the following section, with a focus on debates in the Weimar Republic. This enables discussions on the deficits and the possible future of Germany’s political system during the late Empire portrayed in the previous chapter to be further pursued.

7.1 From Caesarism to Totalitarianism?

The loss of the First World War was traumatic for Germany in a number of respects, not least intellectually. Not only had Germany's claim to a world status fatally foundered; the War also left a nation economically ruined and politically divided, faced with a perpetuated "cold civil war" even after the revolutionary upheavals of 1918/1919 and the suppression of leftist uprisings. A society torn apart and bogged down with stark social tensions did not bode well for the new Weimar Republic, which from the very beginning was stigmatized by the lost war, and radically challenged both from the political left and right. The Weimar Republic was a democracy that lacked a true democratic spirit.⁸ The widespread repudiation of (Western) parliamentary democracy and republicanism is encapsulated in Thomas Mann's (1875–1955) *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*: "Germany as a republic, as a virtue-state with a social contract, democratic popular government and 'complete absorption of the individual in the totality' [...] that would be the horror!"⁹

The unifying element of the fundamental criticism put forward against the Weimar Republic and its institutions from both extremes of the political spectrum was its distinct anti-liberalism. Yet while "liberalism" served as a bogeyman and (negative) combat term both on the political left and on the right, the—often militant—polemics against it and the counter-concepts put forward had a different thrust. While the (radical) political left advocated the ideal of a classless society ending the rule of the bourgeoisie, if required by means of a "dictatorship of the proletariat", the opposition against Weimar from what is usually referred to as the "German right" had a less distinct focus. Nevertheless, it was eventually even more potent than the opposition from the left—and at the same time demonstrates the difficulties of upholding clear-cut left-right distinctions in German politics after the First World War.

Among the currents of "right-wing" opposition against "liberalism" as represented by the Weimar Republic, two large groups can be distinguished: adherents of a more traditional nationalism, adhering to the model of the Bismarckian "power state"; and the representatives of a—for the most part younger—generation receiving much of the impetus for their fight against the new republic from their war experiences, and combining their anti-liberalism with a distinctly anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist (not to say "socialist") component.

Especially for the latter, the term "Conservative Revolution" has become established in scholarly literature.¹⁰ It indicates a general orientation towards the "past" and "tradition", yet unlike traditional forms of conservatism one explicitly linked with the aim of a revolutionary systemic change. Thus, it is an intrinsically dynamic and modern conception of conservatism, largely based on an "invention" of tradition: what is deemed worth preserving still needs to be created before it can then be maintained. Or, as one of the key representatives of the Conservative Revolution, Arthur Moeller van den Bruck (1896–1925), put it: "conservative is to create things worth preserving."¹¹ As a matter of fact, many authors of the Conservative Revolution did not advocate a conservative restoration, but a radical renewal of society. Their political thought was not anti-modern, but aimed rather at a different, "German" modernity.

Anti-Westernism, and setting Western liberalism and democracy—often associated with England and France—against a suggested “German political principle”, was a distinctive feature of the Conservative Revolution. Its most important conceptual juxtapositions included: constitutional formalism vs. expression of a popular will; anonymous bureaucracy vs. leadership; party interests vs. service to the people; society (*Gesellschaft*) vs. community (*Gemeinschaft*); civilization vs. culture.¹²

Politically, the efforts of the Conservative Revolution were directed at overthrowing the constitutional system of the Weimar Republic in favor of a new state order. These attempts to safeguard *Deutschtum* (“Germandom”) against the perils of Western liberalism and democracy were fully compatible and connected with the central features of the older Caesarism discourse: crisis, masses, leader(ship), and authority. In this context, nationalism and authoritarianism were not considered incompatible with (revolutionary) socialism, quite to the contrary, as Ernst Jünger (1895–1998) expressed in June 1926 with regard to the characteristics of the future state: “It will be national. It will be social. It will be able to defend itself. It will be structured authoritatively. [...] It is not reactionary, but revolutionary from the bottom up.”¹³

Within the overarching anti-liberalism, there were a number of other recurring *topoi*, with anti-parliamentarism and the repudiation of representative democracy being perhaps the most pervasive ones. Anti-parliamentarism at the time—which had a long tradition in Germany, but was by no means specific to Germany alone in the interwar period—needs to be seen against the background of a rapidly changing party system from parties of notables to modern mass parties. The consequences of this transition had been clearly addressed by the sociologist Robert Michels (1876–1936) as early as 1911 in his influential *Zur Soziologie des Parteiwesens in der modernen Demokratie* (“On the Sociology of Political Parties in Modern Democracy”), in which he had formulated his “iron law of oligarchy”: any complex political organization, no matter how democratic or representative it may claim to be, eventually develops into a rule by a small elite (oligarchy).¹⁴ These characteristics of mass parties could easily be taken as an argument against modern representative democracy and parliamentarism as a whole, with which such parties were inseparably linked.

Carl Schmitt’s *Die geistesgeschichtliche Lage des heutigen Parlamentarismus* (1923) reasoned exactly along these lines: since “in the actual practice of parliamentary business, openness [*Öffentlichkeit*] and discussion have become an empty and trivial formality”, parliament as it had developed in the nineteenth century—namely as a political instrument of the bourgeoisie, supposedly based on the principle of general discussion—had “lost its previous foundation and its purpose”.¹⁵ For Schmitt, parliamentarism stood in the way of that form of democracy fitting the needs of the industrial age, namely plebiscitary mass democracy. Parliaments in his view were anachronistic institutions no longer suited to expressing a nation’s political will. Parliamentarism understood thus, as the product of liberalism in decline, was contrasted with a particular concept of democracy as *volonté générale*—the identity of the ruler and the ruled. It was hence not democracy *per se* which Schmitt and others were fiercely criticizing, but “parliamentary”, “party” and “liberal” democracy. Parties were not seen to be a necessary or even useful means for guiding the political process in a society of increasing plurality, but merely as a disintegrating force driven by selfish interests and

as such endangering the body politic.¹⁶ According to the protagonists of the Conservative Revolution, a true democracy was hallmarked by the nexus between a “strong leader” and the “masses”. The Conservative Revolution invoked the replacement of the contract-based “liberal” society, whose form of government was the parliamentary democracy, by an inwardly—and almost spiritually—united *Volksgemeinschaft* (“people’s community”), be it defined by “culture”, “blood” or “race”. Such an understanding corresponded with an authoritarian, if not totalitarian, conception of the state:

The people is the unity of those who have lived, who live and who will live; it is a whole that unfolds in generations. One does not grasp the will of the people through the ever more thorough development of a statistical election machinery [...]. It is quite conceivable that the real will of the people [*Volkheit*] be expressed more genuinely in a simple acclamation, in the self-evident and uncontested existence [*Dasein*] of an active political leadership and formation [*Gestaltung*]. The essence of democracy consists in the fact that the people emerge as a political whole. A democracy is only possible among equals, and it does not stop being a democracy when it dominates over unequals within the [same] state and puts them under a lesser law.¹⁷

Despite its featuring so centrally, however, more often than not the “masses” were perceived negatively by the proponents of the Conservative Revolution, and *Führertum* seen as a means to tame and guide the crowd. Accordingly, while it was consistently stressed that “it is not the form of the state that constitutes a democracy, but the participation of the people in the state”, there was rarely any doubt about the ideal of a “guided democracy—not parliamentarism”; one, in which a leader acted “as if his will was theirs and their will his, while in reality he gives them direction”.¹⁸ Or, to put it in the words of the Austrian author Karl Anton Prinz Rohan (1898–1975): “Not spineless subordination of followers to the leader’s *potestas patris*, but devoted subordination to the brotherly leader, recognised as strongest realisation of themselves.”¹⁹

The ideal of a *Führer-Demokratie* (“leader democracy”) manifests a genuinely elitist understanding, with the qualitative principle of leadership destined to prevail against the quantitative principle of majority rule by the masses. Moreover, it reveals a paradox element of the Conservative Revolution: while parliamentary democracy is attacked because of the presumed remoteness from the people of what today might be branded as “the establishment”, the Conservative Revolution is arguing for an exclusive rather than inclusive concept of politics itself.

In conceptual terms, by understanding democracy first and foremost as acclamation and by stripping it of its liberal elements, Schmitt and others not only arrive at a sharp conceptual distinction between liberalism and democracy, but actually suggest a sameness—or at least compatibility—between democracy and dictatorship. Accordingly, also the terminological construct “democratic dictatorship” was not perceived as a contradiction in terms, as Edgar Julius Jung (1894–1934) outlined in his programmatic work *Die Herrschaft der Minderwertigen*: “The call for a democratic dictatorship is understandable, because such a dictatorship seems suitable for re-establishing the contact between leader and people.”²⁰ Yet while most authors did not go into too much

scholarly reasoning in their advocating “right dictatorship”, Carl Schmitt aimed to provide a sound politico-theoretical foundation, which deserves closer attention.²¹

Schmitt’s *Die Diktatur* (1921) is based on the distinction between “commissarial” dictatorship on the one hand, “sovereign” dictatorship on the other, and focuses on the historical transition of the one to the other in the modern age.²² While traditional commissarial dictatorship as practised in ancient Rome was limited to emergency circumstances only—characterized by the limitation of its exercise with regard to both time and specified tasks—and merely an instrument to restore the previously existing order that had come to peril, sovereign dictatorship was of a fundamentally different character. According to Schmitt, the latter was inextricably linked with the development of the modern notion of popular sovereignty:

In the 18th century, an understanding of dictatorship appears for the first time in the history of the Christian West according to which the dictator still remains a commissar, but as a consequence of the constitutive, and not the constituted, nature of the people’s power, a direct commissar of the people [*Volkskommissar*—a dictator who also dictates to his principal [*Auftraggeber*], without ceasing to legitimise himself through that principal.²³

Unlike its commissarial predecessor, sovereign dictatorship—represented by individuals, but also political bodies like those of revolutionary France—was unlimited in its parameters and essentially set out to establish a completely new order. The central distinction between the two was therefore that while commissarial dictatorship must seek to make itself superfluous, sovereign dictatorship seeks to perpetuate itself. Schmitt accused the “*bürgerliche* political literature”—in as much as it paid attention at all—to completely misconstrue dictatorship. Liberals characterized dictatorship as “personal rule of one”, a feature they would consider inherently linked with two others:

firstly, that this rule is based on consensus of the people, however induced or assumed, and thus rests on democratic foundations; secondly, that the dictator avails himself of a strongly centralized governing apparatus, characteristic of the rule and government of a modern state. Napoleon I is the prototype of the modern dictator within such a conception.²⁴

Distinctive for the modern understanding of dictatorship was “the abolition [*Aufhebung*] of democracy on democratic grounds”, resulting in that “there is mostly no difference between dictatorship and Caesarism anymore and that [consequently] an essential element, namely [...] the commissarial character of the dictatorship, drops out”.²⁵ Thus, Caesarism was clearly associated with (modern) sovereign dictatorship, yet no longer assumed the role of a central analytical category,²⁶ but rather served as a placeholder for demonstrating the unreflective usage of dictatorship. This was a clear indication of the turning point of Caesarism’s conceptual application, especially marked by Max Weber’s work.²⁷

What did alarm Schmitt was that the communists with their doctrine of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” were the only ones seeming to take the concept of

dictatorship seriously and to recognize its real essence, namely being “a means to reach a certain goal”. For that very reason, “because its content is only determined by the interest of the intended outcome, in other words by a set of specific circumstances, [dictatorship] cannot be genuinely defined as the abolition of democracy”.²⁸ Yet while the communists would recognize the purely technical and temporary nature of dictatorship, which for them was the means to implement the transition to communism, one could not neglect the one crucial difference from the classical concept: whereas the dictatorship of the proletariat was a provisional instrument to create a new situation, classical commissarial dictatorship had been employed to restore a previously existing one. All in all, Schmitt considered the communists to be the true heirs of the French Revolution: not just because they represented a radical elite willing to use violent means in line with what they claimed to be a world-historical need and supposedly sanctioned by the masses, to which they could never effectively be held accountable; but also because “the dictatorship of the proletariat, identified with the people, as a transition to an economic situation in which the state is ‘withering away’, presupposes the concept of a sovereign dictatorship”,²⁹ as Schmitt outlined in the conclusion of *Die Diktatur*.

In Schmitt's later works, his strict distinction between commissarial and sovereign dictatorship is less pronounced. Whether one should go so far as to interpret this as an attempt to formulate a right-wing version of sovereign dictatorship by countering the communist “dictatorship of the proletariat” with a “dictatorship of the nation”³⁰ remains open to discussion. Nevertheless it is true that Schmitt plays a part in the—previously criticized—fusing of “(commissarial) dictatorship” with “Caesarism” as the expression of a post-revolutionary dictatorship based on popular sovereignty. In *Die Diktatur*, Schmitt had defined dictatorship as “necessarily a ‘state of exception’”,³¹ understood in the literal German sense of *Ausnahme* (“exception”). Yet his famous introductory sentence in *Politische Theologie* (1922) one year later suggested the possibility of a “perpetuated state of exception”, and signalled the endorsement of something resembling much more sovereign than commissarial dictatorship: “Sovereign is he who decides on the exception” (*Souverän ist, wer über den Ausnahmezustand entscheidet*).³² Rather than having a particular actor restoring a previous order in a crisis, the crisis actor now *is* the order itself.

“Exception”, and the intermingling of ordinary rule of law with governmental absolutism, is also characteristic of Schmitt's more practical political treatises dealing with the constitution of the Weimar Republic, and the emergency powers of the President of the Reich in particular, including *Die Diktatur des Reichspräsidenten* (1924), *Der Hüter der Verfassung* (1929, extended edition in 1931) and *Legalität und Legitimität* (1932).³³ Therein, Schmitt interprets the Reich as facing a sustained crisis, from which only the plebiscitary-legitimized President might provide salvation: “The President of the Reich stands at the center of an entire plebiscitary-based system of party-political neutrality and independence.”³⁴

Schmitt derived the right for presidential dictatorial action from Art. 48 of the Weimar Constitution, which granted emergency powers to the *Reichspräsident*,³⁵ but he was increasingly inclined to justify a—if necessary lasting—state of emergency on the grounds of an assumed pre-constitutional sovereign will of the people rather than the principles

enshrined in the constitution. In his writings of the late 1920s and early 1930s—drafted under the impression of a dramatic economic crisis and widespread political unrest—Schmitt argued that since the President of the Reich was elected plebiscitarily by the nation, there was no need for additional checks, constitutional or otherwise; simply because the President as a charismatic leader embodied the unity of the people's sovereign will, thus also legitimizing any emergency action deemed necessary.³⁶

According to the logic of Schmitt and others, dictatorship was invested with legitimacy by virtue of the fact that it was associated with “action”, that is the exact opposite of the despised “debate” considered the soul of liberal parliamentarism. This was to be condensed in the formula: “Dictatorship is the opposite of discussion.”³⁷ “Action” (that is: “dictatorship”), in turn, was indispensable within a framework in which all true politics was considered to be *Kampf* (“struggle”) and based on the distinction between friend and enemy.³⁸ For, as Schmitt had already written in 1922 about the *Bürgertum* as a merely “deliberating class” in reference to Donoso Cortés: “A class that concentrates all political activity in discussion, in press and parliament, is no match for an age of social struggles.”³⁹ Yet by invoking a struggle for the very survival of the state, it was possible to even justify a dictatorship as legitimate and in fact democratic which for the benefit of some abstract “public weal” and mystic *Volkheit* (“people-ness”) did not necessarily represent the will of the entire population: “That is why a dictatorship can be ‘democratic’ as a temporary necessity, if it corresponds to state necessity and thus to the will of the people [*Volkheit*], even if it does not correspond to the will of all private individuals.”⁴⁰

The concept of a powerful “*Führer* state”, entrusted with safeguarding an organically construed body politic, in which the individual was subordinated to the community and its charismatic leader, and in which national authority, heroism and glory should flourish again, inevitably raises the question as to whether the Conservative Revolution prepared the intellectual ground for National Socialism. Undoubtedly, the political thought of the “right” opposition against the Weimar Republic was for a good part compatible with the Fascist and National Socialist belief system. Many representatives of the Conservative Revolution arranged themselves with the Nazi regime after 1933, or even actively corroborated the regime's ideology and policies. Perhaps the most famous example is Carl Schmitt himself, who has earned himself the unflattering title of a “crown jurist” of the Third Reich. Joining the NSDAP in May 1933, Schmitt defended Hitler's seizure of power in *Staat, Bewegung, Volk. Die Dreigliederung der politischen Einheit* (1933) as both legal and desirable. Other than having served as the legal framework within which the *Machtergreifung* (“seizure of power”) had taken place, however, and for the good of the nation, the Weimar Constitution was a system that had been overcome.⁴¹ Schmitt praised the new “strong state”, which “raises and secures the whole of political unity beyond all forms of diversity”, and an all-pervasive *Führertum* as its guardian: “The strength of the National Socialist state lies in the fact that from top to bottom and in every atom of its existence it is dominated and permeated by the idea of *Führertum*.”⁴²

Schmitt's writings and his instrumental use of constitutional history provided a scholarly legitimization for the regime, which he supported unconditionally even in day-to-day politics. After the “Röhm Putsch” in 1934 (also “Night of the Long Knives”),

Schmitt not only defended the purge, but actually described it as imperative and an act of necessity in *Der Führer schützt das Recht*. The judiciary emanated from *Führertum*, and a true leader was always the ultimate judge as well: “The *Führer* protects the law from the worst abuse when, in moments of danger, he creates law directly as supreme judge by virtue of his *Führertum*.”⁴³

Nevertheless, such propinquity to the Nazi regime—with Schmitt inspiring it to use notions such as *totaler Staat* (“total state”) or *totaler Krieg* (“total war”)—was not discernible among all representatives of the Conservative Revolution. Many of the right-wing critics of liberalism and representative democracy during the Weimar Republic, who had fought for a plebiscitary-authoritarian “*Führer* state”, were in clear opposition to National Socialism. Among them were also Oswald Spengler and Edgar Julius Jung, who despised National Socialism as something spiritless and shallow, criticizing it not least for its obsession with a primitive form of anti-Semitism and political fanaticism—an attitude which they did not change even after Hitler’s seizure of power, as Spengler’s *Jahre der Entscheidung* and Jung’s *Sinndeutung der deutschen Revolution* (both 1933) testify.⁴⁵ Rather than Hitler, Spengler and Jung were inclined to see Benito Mussolini as the personification of their anti-democratic and anti-liberal ideals; as one of the “leaders of the future” who epitomized an age in which “[there is] disgust for all liberal and socialist party systems, for every popular form, which always compromises its object, for everything that appears *en masse* and wants to have its say”.⁴⁶

Yet the fact that the repudiation of National Socialism could easily go hand in hand with strong sympathies for Italian Fascism underlines the ambivalence of the Conservative Revolution. Criticism of National Socialism was specific and mainly directed against those elements perceived as excesses of crude ideology and political hubris. To many, Fascism appeared to be the better alternative merely because it embodied a more “pragmatic” materialization of the common ideals of anti-liberalism and authoritarianism than National Socialism with its traits of a fully-fledged “political religion”; indeed something closer to conventional “Caesarism” with a powerful and charismatic leader disposing of plebiscitary legitimacy governing the destinies of the nation at its center.

Perhaps the one who most forcefully interpreted and legitimized Italian Fascism along those lines, however, was someone outside the conservative-revolutionary school of thought, and socialized on the left of the political spectrum: Robert Michels, whose political thought dwelled on the social psychology of Gustave Le Bon and the charisma concept of Weber, while at the same time inspiring the work of Weber, with whom Michels was closely related both biographically and intellectually.⁴⁷ Even in his well-received work *On the Sociology of Political Parties in Modern Democracy* of 1911—tellingly dedicated to Weber—Michels had been keenly interested in what he termed “Bonapartism” and “(plebiscitary) Caesarism” respectively. *Bonapartismus* to him was:

the theory of governance by the individual will, originally emergent from the general will but emancipated from it and become sovereign, whose democratic history protects it against the dangers of its anti-democratic present. In [Bonapartism] the rule of the Caesars [...] becomes the real organ of popular sovereignty. [...] It is the synthesis of democracy and autocracy.⁴⁸

Since the elected leader represented the majority of the people, every opposition must be thus undemocratic. Conceived as “infallible”, he was entitled—indeed obliged—to crush any opponent of the government with reference to popular sovereignty, “since the chosen one can claim by right to represent popular sovereignty, which has been freely entrusted to him”.⁴⁹

In the context of his analysis, Michels—similar to Weber—considered a Caesaristic moment inherent in all modern-day politics, which was characterized by mass democracy and mass parties:

With democratically sympathetic crowds, Bonapartism always has a favorable chance of success, because it allows them to remain under the illusion of being masters of their masters, and it gives this illusion a legal [*rechtliche*] colour—that is, one suitable to the masses struggling for their “right” [*Recht*—by introducing the practice of delegation [*Mandatsübertragung*] via the broad masses of the people.⁵⁰

The leader appeared “to be put in his place by a free act of will, indeed at the pleasure of the masses, [and] to be their creature”, thus flattering the crowds, yet actually providing the leader with legitimacy and power hitherto unseen:

By virtue of the democratic process of his election, the elected leader is more qualified to regard himself as an expression of the general will, and as such to claim obedience and submission to his own will, than the born leader of the aristocracy. Whenever being accused of undemocratic behavior, the modern party leaders, like Napoleon, refer to the will of the masses, who would tolerate them, that is, their capacity as elected and chosen ones.

Traditionally, criticism of rulers was countered with the argument that disobeying their orders meant sinning against God; “modern democracy holds that no one may disobey the order[s] of the oligarchs, for in doing so man would sin against himself, against his own will that he has voluntarily transferred to a representative.” Leadership in a democracy, Michels reasoned, was built on the fiction of a democratic omnipotence of the masses. As theoretically sound the idea of a free decision of the people might be, practice would prove that: “If not always the election, then reliably the re-election of leaders is executed by such methods and under the influence of such powerful suggestions and other coercive practices [*Zwangsvorstellungen*], that freedom of choice appears considerably impaired.”⁵¹

In 1911, Michels examined Bonapartism mainly out of analytical interest for its featuring traits that were characteristic of the history and present state of modern democratic and revolutionary parties. In the 1920s, however, when he was drawn to Italian Fascism, an increasingly personal sympathy for a Caesaristic form of rule became discernible. Michels, who had become an Italian citizen in 1913, applauded Mussolini’s seizure of power in 1922/1923 as an instructive case in point of Weber’s charisma concept, and aimed to convey this concept to Italian readers by sketching an idealized image of the nation’s new leader. In Mussolini, Fascism—to Michels “absolutely Carlylian” and a “prototypical example of the inner desires of the crowd for

heroship”—had found a “leadership character of great style”, as he outlined in 1924.⁵² Three years later, Michels described Mussolini as the ideal of a “charismatic leader”:

Today, another image of a believer and prophet [...] stands before the eyes of the sociological researcher, that of Benito Mussolini. [...] firstly, he is so to speak the only undisputed leader of a major party; secondly, he is also the dictatorial head of a great people and state. In him, the maxim of the identification of leader and state (*L'Etat c'est moi*) [...] has reached the maximum of its potential for development in practice.⁵³

After taking up a newly created chair at the University of Perugia in 1928—supposedly fostered by Mussolini himself—Michels intensified his efforts to provide scientific validation for Fascism by developing a Fascist theory of corporatism and leadership, and he became an open apologist of the regime and its *Duce*.⁵⁴

Michels' transition from a sharp critic of elitist tendencies in all mass organizations to a worshipper of a Caesaristic “*Führer* principle” embodied by Fascism may appear surprising. However, it is already inherent in his 1911 study of oligarchic tendencies in modern-day politics and his basic understanding of democracy as a deceptive illusion. In such framework, charismatic leadership appeared to be the most authentic and unequivocal transfer of the will of the many to the one, and “Bonapartism”—characterized by the demolition of parliamentarism and the construction of a “strong state”—the only salvation for modern nations from degenerating into non-democracies.

The fact that Michels continued to randomly use “Bonapartism” and “Caesarism” as analytical categories even in his writings of the 1920s and 1930s, while now conscious only to apply the concept of “charismatic leadership” whenever affirming Fascism and Mussolini, underlines two things: the eminent influence of Weber, and the acknowledged inadequacy of those terms as descriptors for concrete contemporary phenomena, be it because of their being so discredited, or because the historical associations evoked by them were deemed unsuitable.

It is, therefore, not surprising that in the propaganda and self-representation of National Socialism and even Fascism connections to Caesar(ism) and Napoleon(ism) were only cautiously established, if at all. In the case of Italian Fascism, the link to ancient Rome was evident in terminological terms alone, and Caesarism played an obvious part in the Fascist vision of the resurrection and the re-establishment of the *Imperium Romanum*. In this context, Mussolini undoubtedly saw himself in the tradition of Caesar and also Augustus,⁵⁵ yet at the same time—like Napoleon before him—he seemed to waver between welcoming and rejecting the Caesar label.⁵⁶ In the end, going beyond the aim of creating national myths and constructing identity by recalling the splendour and glory of antiquity and stressing direct parallels between the *Duce* and the Roman Caesars—particularly with respect to the concrete organization and exercise of power—remained a rare exception.

In Nazi Germany, actively fostering historical analogies between the *Führer* and “great men” of the past was no less tricky, with the two Napoleons in the focus. Occasionally, during the Third Reich writers set out to describe Napoleon I as a harbinger of a fundamental reshuffling of Europe that was now being accomplished by

National Socialism, and to portray Napoleon III as a “socialist Emperor” and precursor of the National Socialist *Führerstaat*:

The form of the state was new: an authoritarian and total *Führertum* of the people's Emperor; class interests and previous party-political ideas had drifted so far apart that only through the Napoleonic principle could France be saved from anarchy and decay: prohibition of all parties and rule of the entire interest of the entire people by the person of the non- and supra-partisan emperor. He received his authority by plebiscite from the entire people. [...] Napoleon prevailed in tattered France as a “Messiah of Order”.⁵⁷

Yet concomitantly, the shortcomings of Bonapartism were explicitly underlined as to leave no doubt about the historical references being inferior to the historical ingenuity of Hitler, the nation's charismatic⁵⁸ leader:

Napoleon [III] did not achieve, nor even earnestly strive for, consistent integration of the national will and inner connection with his people [...] Napoleon has missed what was crucial, adding the spiritual [*ideelle*] bond to material care.⁵⁹

Similar was the thrust of *Napoleon. Kometenbahn eines Genies* (1942) by the senior Nazi Party official Philipp Bouhler (1899–1945): Bouhler depicted Napoleon I as a model for “Europe's lasting reorganization”, endowed him with the nimbus of genius like Hitler, and drew parallels between the history of the Napoleonic Empire and that of the National Socialist *Reich*. Notwithstanding, he discovered a structural difference between the two regimes: Napoleon had lacked “an organization of the [entire] people”, which was the “iron foundation” of National Socialism and Fascism alike and guarantor of the “the unconditional execution of the commands of a leader, for the penetration of his will to the very last cells”.⁶⁰

Overall, however, parallels between the Bonapartes and Hitler were avoided by partisans of National Socialism: firstly, because of the *topos* of France as Germany's *Erbfeind*; and secondly, because the eventual fall of both Napoleons and their regimes did not seem to be a particularly good omen, even less an historical example worthy of pursuing. Occasionally, National Socialists even felt obliged to explicitly denounce such parallels and the relevance of the “Napoleonic legacy” for National Socialism more generally—manifest, for example, in the historian Walter Frank (1905–1945) vehemently repudiating any comparability of Hitler and Boulanger in 1931,⁶¹ which had been suggested by the Jewish lawyer Bruno Weil (1883–1961) in his *Glück und Elend des Generals Boulanger* (1931).⁶²

Reluctance to emphasize congruence of Caesarism and Bonapartism on the one hand, and Fascism and National Socialism on the other, by partisans of the latter was not only based on a fear of negative associations, and due to Caesarism and Bonapartism losing conceptual significance more generally; there was also a sense of peerlessness and singularity of the contemporary phenomena *vis-à-vis* anything world history had seen before, partly rooted perhaps in sheer arrogance, yet also in the genuine conviction that the totalitarian movements of the twentieth century were unlike Caesarism and

Bonapartism, respectively. This is also the gist of one of the few known instances in which “Caesarism” was actively used by Fascist leaders in public appearances, namely Oswald Mosley’s (1896–1980) address to the English-Speaking Union in March 1933. In outlining an “anti-determinist” version of Spenglerism and stressing the tremendous progressive implications of “modern science and mechanical development”, Mosley described Fascism as a synthesis of left and right adapted to the needs of the modern age—and different from (ancient) Caesarism:

It is, of course, true that fascism has an historical relation to Caesarism, but the modern world differs profoundly from the forms and conditions of the ancient world. Modern organization is too vast and too complex to rest on any individual alone, however gifted. Modern Caesarism, like all things modern, is collective. The will and talent of the individual alone is replaced by the will and ability of the disciplined thousands who comprise a fascist movement. Every blackshirt is an individual cell of a collective Caesarism. The organized will of devoted masses, subject to a voluntary discipline, and inspired by the passionate ideal of national survival, replaces the will to power and a higher order of the individual superman. Nevertheless, this collective Caesarism, armed with the weapons of modern science, stands in the same historic relationship as ancient Caesarism to reaction on the one hand and to anarchy on the other. Caesarism stood against Spartacism on the one hand and the Patrician Senate on the other. That position is as old as the history of the last two thousand years. But they lacked, in those days, the opportunities for constructive achievement which are present today [...]⁶³

According to Mosley, Fascism’s “modern Caesarism”—distinct from ancient Caesarism, but implicitly also nineteenth-century Bonapartism—together with modern science would deliver “order and progress” to the world, and promote the evolution of “Faustian man; a civilization which could renew its youth in a persisting dynamism.”⁶⁴

The perception of Fascism and National Socialism as being different from Caesarism is corroborated by post-1945 scholarship on totalitarianism, which in itself is part of Caesarism’s broader (intellectual) long-term legacy. Without wanting to enter into the ongoing debate on the usefulness and practicability of the totalitarianism concept as such, the specific features defining totalitarian regimes, and the question in how far certain regimes may or may not be termed “totalitarian” in the light of their political practice,⁶⁵ there is widespread consensus in at least one regard: that conceptually as ideal types, totalitarian movements are fundamentally different from autocratic regimes—which is also the thrust of the perhaps most prominent work in the field, Hannah Arendt’s (1906–1975) *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951).⁶⁶ Autocratic regimes, frequently referred to as “authoritarian regimes” in the social sciences, are denoted by the monopolization of political power by a single power-holder aiming to suppress opposition, but otherwise willing to afford society a degree of liberty. In contrast, totalitarian regimes seek to not only gain absolute political power, but also attempt to seize control of virtually all aspects of social life in order to command the thoughts and actions of their citizens completely. In other words, it is the attempt to dominate every aspect of everyone’s life with a view to change the world and human nature.

Caesarism throughout the nineteenth century had undoubtedly tended more towards authoritarianism than totalitarianism, both as concrete practice of rule and as politico-theoretical concept. When considering the specific criteria, which scholars have employed to define totalitarian regimes over time, it becomes clear that most criteria are not—or only to a limited extent—applicable to what can be associated with Caesarism. Of the six constitutive and mutually supporting characteristics of totalitarianism pinpointed in the classic 1956 work *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* by Carl Joachim Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, for example, none seems to entirely fit the nineteenth-century Caesaristic regimes and concepts of Caesarism/Bonapartism examined so far:

1. all-encompassing and generally binding ideology aimed at the creation of a new society with strong utopian and pseudo-religious elements;
2. single, hierarchically organized mass party, monopolizing all formal power, intertwined with state bureaucracy and typically led by a dictator;
3. elaborate system of terror, making extensive use of violence against both real and potential enemies to control both the population and party;
4. almost complete state monopoly on the means of mass communication;
5. almost complete state monopoly on weapons;
6. coordinated direction and control of the economy through central state planning.⁶⁷

Against this background, an essential difference between Caesarism and totalitarianism can legitimately be argued for, a view also widely held in specialized literature.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, while it would be misleading to consider totalitarianism merely as an offshoot of Caesarism, there is an unmistakable nexus between the two phenomena. Among the things they have in common, the following are particularly noteworthy:

- a distinctive revolutionary component aimed either at reshuffling the *status quo* or, conversely, preserving and stabilizing certain political and social conditions, with the revolution mainly conceptualized as one “from above”;
- the justification of crossing boundaries—legal, ethical or otherwise—with reference to a fundamental crisis, manifest, e.g., in the active use (or at least evocation as a possibility) of a coup to trigger a regime change or firming up an already established regime;
- (charismatic) leader figures appearing as “deliverer” or even “saviour” and “political Messiah”;
- an ideological-institutional layout connecting authoritarianism with anti-parliamentarism, and streamlining the plebiscitary principle for a largely unrestricted personal rule;
- instrumentalization of a centralist-bureaucratic state apparatus;
- ideological flexibility, borrowing both from the political right and left, and a distinct combination of jingoism and social—or even socialist—policies;
- central importance of programs and programmatic works suitable for a mass market, and active use of (mass) media; in connection herewith;

- aura—and partly also living practice—of a “popular” or “mass movement”;
- character of an international movement with trans-national and even global repercussions on public opinion and (foreign) policy.

In short: Caesarism is not totalitarianism. There is, however, considerable compatibility in some respects. Totalitarianism is akin to Caesarism, which by nature does tend towards the totalitarian. Both can be interpreted as an outcome of and reaction to the “modern age”: an age dynamizing all aspects of human existence, fundamentally altering existing patterns of social and economic life and challenging traditional forms of legitimacy, with the masses increasingly assuming the role of *the* central political “kingmaker”, but also facing alienation due to ever-fewer certainties.

Since the challenges associated with these changes continue to exist until today, it is not surprising that even the traumatic experiences with totalitarian regimes in the first half of the twentieth century have not made issues of authoritarian crisis management and strong charismatic leadership—in a nutshell: “Caesarism”—evaporate.

7.2 Caesarism’s Legacy in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Century

As has been demonstrated in the previous section, Caesarism continued to be a relevant and substantial issue after the First World War. By extending the examination of the long-term legacy of Caesarism in the twentieth and twenty-first century beyond German debates of the interwar period and the question of how Caesarism relates to Fascism and National Socialism, two central levels are discernible:

- I. Firstly, Caesarism as an explicit “theoretical-analytical legacy”, characterized by attempts—of a more or less elaborate kind—to (re-)use and (re-)interpret Caesarism as a social-scientific concept and tool.
- II. Secondly, Caesarism as a more implicit “substantial legacy”, living on in transmuted form as a pointed marker of a politico-cultural debate that spotlights fundamental problems and challenges of modern politics.

Let us turn to the “**explicit legacy**” of Caesarism first, in which two main strands can be distinguished: Caesarism used in the context of general political theory on the one hand, and as a tool for comparative study—namely to assess the extent to which politicians of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have followed the example of nineteenth-century predecessors—on the other.

When it comes to the use of Caesarism for and within **political theory**, it is not surprising that in view of the pervasive historical experience of Fascism, Nazism and Stalinism, studies have tended to assess Caesarism *vis-à-vis* those modes of domination that have come to be called “totalitarian” one way or another. Rarely is there a claim for the concept of Caesarism to be adequate for understanding the enormities perpetrated before and during the Second World War; but often, “totalitarianism” serves the function of an underlying “benchmark” and as the actual motivation to make Caesarism an object of research.

This also holds true for twentieth-century Marxist receptions of Caesarism under the impact of the totalitarian experience, an early example of which is Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937). Penned during his imprisonment in the 1930s, Gramsci's variegated and at the same time truncated reflections on the subject are undoubtedly—and indeed heavily—influenced by Mussolini's rule in Italy, yet are not explicitly concerned with Fascism and do aim at sketching a more universal “political theory” of Caesarism.⁶⁹ Gramsci sketched Caesarism as the expression of “the particular solution in which a great personality is entrusted with the task of ‘arbitration’ over a historico-political situation characterized by an equilibrium of forces heading towards catastrophe”.⁷⁰ Notwithstanding, the historical formation and significance of Caesarism varied over time and space, with progressive and reactionary forms of Caesarism distinguishable:

Caesarism is progressive when its intervention helps the progressive force to triumph, albeit with its victory tempered by certain compromises and limitations. It is reactionary when its intervention helps the reactionary force to triumph—in this case too with certain compromises and limitations, which have, however, a different value, extent, and significance than in the former.⁷¹

For Gramsci, Caesar and Napoleon I were examples of progressive, Napoleon III and Bismarck of reactionary Caesarism—a dualism complemented and partly correlated by the juxtaposition of “qualitative” and “quantitative” Caesarism, the former so innovatory that it marked the transformation of one type of state into another, while the latter represented merely an evolution of the same type of state.⁷² Thus, Gramsci considered Caesarism first and foremost to be both a “situation” and the “solution” to that situation, with a “great personality” as the instrument to that aim. Fundamentally deviating from mainstream thinking about Caesarism, however, he qualified his position by suggesting that a “Caesarist solution can exist even without a Caesar, without any great, ‘heroic’ and representative personality”. Parliamentary systems provided a mechanism for such “compromise solutions”; and Gramsci cited the British Labour governments of Ramsay MacDonald (1866–1937) as examples, with the degree of Caesarism claimed to have “increased when the government was formed which had MacDonald as its head and a Conservative majority”,⁷³ referring to the British National Government of 1931. Besides his suggesting that even governments without charismatic leaders, and especially coalition governments, could be of a Caesaristic nature, a second feature of Gramsci's analysis of Caesarism is worthy of comment; namely his claim that the conditions of Caesarism after Napoleon III, and its military element in particular, were considerably different from earlier versions of the phenomenon due to the nature of modern (civil) society and the existence of mass organizations:

In the modern world, with its great economic-trade-union and party-political coalitions, the mechanism of the Caesarist phenomenon is very different from what it was up to the time of Napoleon III. In the period up to Napoleon III, the regular military forces or soldiers of the line were a decisive element in the advent of Caesarism, and this came about through quite precise *coups d'état*, through military actions, etc. In the modern world trade-union and political forces, with

the limitless financial means which may be at the disposal of small groups of citizens, complicate the problem. The functionaries of the parties and economic unions can be corrupted or terrorized, without any need for military action in the grand style—of the Caesar or 18 Brumaire type.⁷⁴

Alluding to the struggle between labor and capital, bourgeoisie and proletariat, Gramsci argued that in the modern world “the equilibrium with catastrophic prospects” occurred not between forces which previously were able to fuse and unite—albeit after what was always a wearisome and bloody process—, but “between forces whose opposition is historically incurable and indeed becomes especially acute with the advent of Caesarist forms.”⁷⁵ The central lesson to be learnt was the following: since the whole nature of politics had changed, not only were the means different through which Caesarism maintained itself, but also the strategies by which Caesarism could possibly be countered—an assumption feeding directly into Gramsci’s principal concern to conceptualize a political theory fitting the complexity of state and society in the modern age.

Gramsci’s considerations on Caesarism were inventive, mainly in that he identified it as a structural problem embedded in class struggles and an issue also for parliamentary systems without the need for a proper “Caesar”, but also evasive and not particularly practical. Gramsci’s work, too, as Weber’s before him, is thus symptomatic for Caesarism becoming transformed from a common term of political discussion into a theoretical and at times highly specialized notion.

In line with the trend of it losing out as a common term and being used in more abstract and scientific terms, Caesarism has been processed mainly within political sociology and political science after 1945. In this context, Caesarism frequently features as part of a wider taxonomy of “democracy” and “dictatorship”, with varying degrees of importance ascribed to the term, and more or less analytical clarity and depth being demonstrated. Among the richest and most sophisticated efforts to come up with a social-scientific concept of Caesarism is the essay *Notes on the Theory of Dictatorship* of the German-American political scientist Franz Neumann (1900–1954), who died before his manuscript was finished.⁷⁶ Unwilling to use “despotism”, Neumann’s preferred designation of Caesarism is “dictatorship”, which he defines as “rule of a person or a group of persons who arrogate to themselves and monopolize power in the state, exercising it without restraint.”⁷⁷ Outlining three kinds of dictatorship, Neumann depicts Caesarism as the one type occupying an intermediate position between the two others: “simple dictatorship” and “totalitarian dictatorship”. “Simple dictatorships” were those in which power was exercised by either an individual or a group disposing of “absolute control of the traditional means of coercion only, i.e., the army, police bureaucracy and judiciary”. It was typical of countries and times distinguished by minimal mass involvement in politics and relatively low political awareness, and characterized by only limited social control exercised by the regime.⁷⁸ “Totalitarian dictatorships”, on the other hand, were all-encompassing. Though Neumann abstained from seeing totalitarian dictatorship as an exclusively modern phenomenon, considering regimes such as those of ancient Sparta or the rule of Diocletian as earlier versions of it, he argued that totalitarian dictatorships would only develop their full

potential in the framework of an industrial society and by means of modern technology and science. Largely following Arendt, Friedrich and Brzeziński in characterizing totalitarianism, Neumann, too, considered pervasive social control, a quasi-abolition of any rule of law, and the monopolization of power by one state party together with the absorption of the private sphere into the state apparatus permeated by a strictly hierarchical leadership principle as defining features.⁷⁹ Distinct from both “simple” and “totalitarian” were “Caesaristic” dictatorships, which would arise in situations where an individual was “compelled to build up popular support, to secure a mass base, either for his rise to power or for the exercise of it, or for both”.⁸⁰ What, therefore, distanced Caesarism from “simple” dictatorship was dependence on the masses; or, to put it another way: its being contingent on “democratic” conditions, in which the crowds must be reckoned with as a political force. With regard to totalitarianism, in turn, “Caesaristic dictatorship”—which to Neumann was always personal in form—differed in that it was not an entirely unchecked police state, and that the division between the private and public sphere remained vaguely intact. Neumann admitted that totalitarian regimes indeed possessed a “Caesaristic element”, not least in that “the masses’ identification with a leader, the hero” was to be witnessed “in all Caesaristic and totalitarian movements”. However: “Up to the nineteenth century at least, Caesaristic dictatorship does not necessarily lead to a totalitarian system, nor is the totalitarian state necessarily the result of a genuine Caesaristic movement. Totalitarianism is thus a separate problem.”⁸¹

Ipsa facto, Neumann’s reasoning implied that in the modern age dictatorship was only possible either in the form of Caesarism or totalitarianism, since with the rise of the masses, “simple dictatorship” had become largely unfeasible. Two other aspects of Neumann’s analysis are worth noting as well: firstly, claiming a pan-historical applicability of Caesarism, which was especially, but not exclusively, a phenomenon of the period after the “Great Revolutions” of the eighteenth century; secondly, his emphasizing the role of specific class relationships for the actual function of (Caesaristic) dictatorship, with three possible constellations being distinguished: a) an insurgent, disenfranchized social class aspiring to gain power, with the existing political system being resistant to such aspirations, in which case dictatorship arises as a “conflict resolution” either transitorily (if the aspiring class is politically mature) or indefinitely (if that class is immature); b) a social class threatened by demise striving to preserve its power, in which case dictatorship functions as a guarantor for the preservation of the *status quo*; and c) a “doomed” class aiming to restore their previous pre-eminence, in which case dictatorship is a means to reversing the existing social and economic order to that aim.⁸²

Neumann’s efforts to establish Caesarism as a politico-theoretical ideal type within a general theory of dictatorship were ambitious and not lacking in sophistication, but they were not without shortcomings either. While one might want to condone certain inconsistencies in the text due to its fragmentary nature, at least one point of criticism nevertheless remains: Neumann’s ahistorical approach, with Caesarism almost completely detached from concrete historical contexts and at the same time somewhat arbitrarily applied as a brand to most different figures from antiquity through to the twentieth century.

The ahistoricity of Neumann's essay, partly owing to the need for high abstraction in order to be able to arrive at a "general theory", is symptomatic for "attempts to 'operationalize' Caesarism"—namely by transforming it from a vernacular term of public discussion into an analytical tool of social science—having in general been "largely unsuccessful or implausible on various counts. Some are factually inaccurate or anachronistic; others are too general, or speculative or teleological; still others fail to bear any clear relationship to Caesar himself", as Peter Baehr judges harshly yet on the whole accurately.⁸³ Overall, such attempts have remained small in number after 1945, manifest also in the fact that "Caesarism" or "Bonapartism" had at best led a shadowy existence in increasing efforts to come up with a modern typology of rule and regime types after the Second World War. By and large, these efforts have two commonalities: firstly, they continue to consider the (nation) state as the main place and frame of political rule, though with "state" increasingly becoming replaced by "political system" in order to go beyond a merely legal understanding of "state", cover also socio-political and socio-cultural dimensions and underline the "organic" interactions of the political with other spheres of modern societies; secondly, modern typologies of political rule are decisively marked by a pervasive dichotomy between democracy and dictatorship.⁸⁴ Starting from this general dichotomy, which has become almost hegemonic in the second half of the twentieth century, different subtypes are then derived, frequently following a double division as well: parliamentary vs. presidential democracy, authoritarian vs. totalitarian dictatorship, etc. Hardly ever, however, does Caesarism play a noteworthy role in these (sub-)typologies or is even mentioned.

One of the few examples is Karl Loewenstein's (1891–1973) influential work *Political Power and the Governmental Process* (1957), wherein he classifies political systems according to the way in which power is applied and controlled, distinguishing between "constitutionalism as the shared, and autocracy as the concentrated, exercise of political power",⁸⁵ and convinced that all types of government both of the past and present could be fitted into one of the two categories. Within the group of autocratic systems, Loewenstein not only distinguishes between authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, but also further differentiates, albeit without too much theorizing, "three patterns of autocracy": "absolute monarchy", "neopresidentialism" and "Napoleon's plebiscitary Caesarism".⁸⁶ The power mechanisms of the latter, according to Loewenstein, would present "an authoritarian power configuration administratively just as efficient as that of the *Ancien Régime*", which was "hidden behind a façade elaborately decorated in the style of the democratic ideology inherited from the antecedent French Revolution".⁸⁷

As seldom as Caesarism was incorporated into political theory and political typology, as rarely was it employed in the Spenglerian tradition as integral part of a philosophy of history after the Second World War. One exception is Amaury de Riencourt's (1918–2005) *L'ère des nouveaux césars* of 1957.⁸⁸ In a variation of Spengler's thought, de Riencourt portrayed the Western World as being on the brink of Caesarism, the result of European "culture" having been superseded by American "civilization" and now in irreversible political, economic and moral decline. Considering European culture (which was ending) and American civilization (which was emerging) merely as different phases of the same society, his argument rested on two key assumptions: one, that expanding democracy would lead "unintentionally to imperialism, and imperialism

inevitably end in destroying the republican institutions of earlier days”; second, that the greater the social equality, the dimmer the prospects of liberty, and that “as society becomes more equalitarian, it tends increasingly to concentrate absolute power in the hands of one single man”. Against this background, Caesarism for de Riencourt was neither an ideology, nor a specific form or style of government, but the particular expression of a historical development in which human society followed the eternal biological rules of birth, growth, blooming, decaying and eventually death:

Caesarism is not dictatorship, not the result of one man’s overriding ambition, not a brutal seizure of power through revolution. It is not based on a specific doctrine or philosophy. It is essentially pragmatic and untheoretical. It is a slow, often century-old, unconscious development that ends in a voluntary surrender of a free people escaping from freedom to one autocratic master.⁸⁹

With the twentieth century identified as the “dramatic watershed separating the culture behind us from the civilization that lies ahead,”⁹⁰ Caesarism—the concentration of power in the office and person of the chief executive—would increasingly become an issue, epitomized especially by the United States of America and its president. The dawning “(American) Caesarism” was growing organically, nurtured by internal and international factors alike. As for internal factors, today’s Western society and above all American society, following the example of previous civilizations, tended towards democratic equality, producing mediocrity and anonymity in its wake. The more uniform the level of society was, de Riencourt argued, the greater the compact emotional power of the multitude of like-minded people—a power that would need to be “concentrated and personalized by one man who acts as its articulate spokesman”. Today, no one else than the “incumbent of the most powerful office in the most powerful state in the world” could be that man.⁹¹ Representative parliamentary bodies such as the US Congress were unsuited to providing an alternative to the masses’ craving for a personal leader, since the larger a community would become, the less it would respect an assembly, and the more it would be attracted by an individual man. The underlying reason for this was plain, as de Riencourt outlined:

The larger the masses, the more they display *feminine* traits by emphasizing emotional reactions rather than rational judgement. They instinctively tend to look for masculine leadership as a compensation—the leadership they can find in a strong man but never in an assembly, which is after all only a reproduction in miniature of their own faults and weaknesses. Instinct always prevails in the end.⁹²

Besides internal factors were such of an international nature that accompanied the growth of democratic civilization and prepared the ground for Caesarism, namely “the development of imperial expansion, military might, and foreign commitments”⁹³ that would further increase the power of the executive body. With regard to the United States, de Riencourt stated that while the trend towards an all-powerful executive was still hidden at the time when Alexis de Tocqueville had examined the US, it was unmistakable today, with the president disposing of extensive powers

both at home and in foreign affairs, while Congress was left with very little means to actually check the government and its actions. The first fully-fledged American Caesar was still to come, but the path to that was predestined and more obstacle-free than that of the ancient Caesars, since democratic equality with its concomitant conformism was much more strongly developed in modern societies and especially in the US than anytime before in world history:

Future crises will inevitably transform [the President of the United States] into a full-fledged Caesar [...] Today he wears ten hats—as Head of State, Chief Executive, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Chief Legislator, Head of Party, Tribune of the People, Ultimate Arbitrator of Social Justice, Guardian of Economic Prosperity, and World Leader of Western Civilization. Slowly and unobtrusively, these hats are becoming crowns and this pyramid of hats is slowly metamorphosing itself into a tiara, the tiara of one man's world imperium.⁹⁴

Overall, the future thus looked bleak to de Riencourt, who nevertheless saw a possible ray of hope: while in modern times man's technical knowledge made it possible for him to either build a heaven on earth or destroy his planet, "his historical knowledge makes it possible, for the first time, to avoid those deadly shoals on which every other Civilization has destroyed itself".⁹⁵ In other words: while Caesarism might be inevitable, mankind's responses to it were not predetermined—and might actually be informed not only by the lessons to be learnt from the past, but also by the sheer fact that modern technological power no longer allowed for those mistakes to be made which past civilizations had been free to indulge in.

Slightly more active than in political typology and political philosophy was the use of Caesarism as a tool for **comparative study**—a second strand of Caesarism's explicit legacy in the twentieth century. Characteristically, historical-comparative studies of "concrete" contemporary Caesarism and especially Caesar figures after 1945 were focused on France. These studies were mainly concerned with analyzing the extent to which (French) politicians of the twentieth century had followed the example of their nineteenth century predecessors.⁹⁶ Among those who became objects of comparison was Philippe Pétain (1856–1951), whose role as *Chef de l'État Français* from 1940 to 1944 evoked parallels with the two Bonapartes: not only his nimbus of the alleged saviour in a fundamental national crisis, nurtured by a distinct personal charisma resting on past deeds,⁹⁷ and his personalized style of government made for Pétain being considered a potential twentieth-century expression of Caesarism; also—and in particular—the "Bonapartist" model of the regime change of 1940 facilitated a comparison with 1799 and 1851, respectively.

More still than Pétain, however, it was another military leader who was associated with Caesarism and seen in the tradition of nineteenth-century French Bonapartism: Charles de Gaulle (1890–1970). Since his establishing the Fifth Republic and becoming its first president, thus making him the most central political figure in post-war France, it has been observed that Gaullism and Bonapartism have a number of elements in common: a quasi-monocratic political regime, supported by a centralized administration; pro-business policies going hand in hand with "social concerns"; a

visionary modernization agenda paired with Saint-Simonian technocratic reformism; assertive foreign (and military) policies in the national interest; and attempts to control the media of mass communication. What is particularly characteristic for both de Gaulle and the two Napoleons are their attempts to constitutionalize a crisis(-born) form of strong and leader-centered government—notably by means of plebiscite. In other words, to legitimize the “heroic leader”⁹⁸ underlying the new institutional order by appealing to popular sovereignty. The Constitution of the Fifth French Republic, approved in a constitutional referendum on September 28, 1958 with an overwhelming 82.6 percent of the votes in favor, is such that can be associated with Bonapartism and Caesarism.⁹⁹ Clearly, a predominance of the executive *vis-à-vis* the legislative branch is discernible, with the President of the Republic disposing of a number of constitutional powers and prerogatives, such as:

- being the guardian of the Constitution and the Nation, entrusted to guarantee the proper functioning of the public authorities and the continuity of the State, national independence, territorial integrity and observance of treaties (Art. 5);
- appointment of the Prime Minister and the other members of the Government (Art. 8);
- presiding over the Council of Ministers (Art. 9);
- promulgation of all Acts of Parliament, combined with a (suspensive) veto (Art. 10);
- dissolution of the National Assembly and calling of new elections (Art. 12);
- commander-in-chief of the armed forces (Art. 15);
- granting of pardon (Art. 17).

Particularly momentous for the role ascribed by the Constitution to the President as a mighty and quasi “extra-constitutional” authority are the provisions of Art. 16, granting him exceptional and almost dictatorial emergency powers whenever “there exists a serious and immediate threat to the institutions of the Republic, the independence of the Nation, the integrity of its territory or the fulfilment of its international obligations”, and when the “regular functioning of the constitutional public authorities has been interrupted”. In this case, the President is free to “take the measures required by the circumstances”. Perhaps the most “Caesarist” feature of the Constitution, however, is the President’s right specified in Art. 11 to submit government bills to a referendum, thus putting him in a position to circumvent parliament and directly appeal to the sovereign nation. The significance of that stipulation is manifest in that it has not only been applied to matters of ordinary legislation, but also used as a means to foster constitutional change—famously in 1962 by de Gaulle himself in order to enforce direct election of the President of the Republic. The politically most controversial and eventually successful constitutional referendum of October 28, 1962 further strengthened the executive at the expense of parliament, providing the President with more status and thus greater influence even without infringing upon constitutional powers: with the President now disposing of political legitimacy in his own right and independent of parliament, it was he who could now claim to embody the sovereign will of the entire nation.

In view of a constitutional system deliberately concentrating power and prestige in the president while marginalizing parliament, the French Fifth Republic has frequently

been characterized as a “monarchical republic”. Emerging as a reaction against the failings—real and perceived—of the parliamentary systems of the preceding Third and Fourth Republics, both of which stood for weakness, instability and lack of leadership, the constitutional order of 1958/1962 gave authority to a potent leader embodying national unity and keeping political factions in check: a “republican monarch”¹⁰⁰ disposing of constitutional powers far greater than those of most other office holders in modern democratic systems, including the President of the United States.

The widespread perception of the Fifth Republic as essentially a “monarchy” made polemical analogy with Bonapartism irresistible, especially among the (leftist) critics of de Gaulle. Most prominently, it was François Mitterand (1916–1996), who in 1964 launched a fierce attack against what he considered *Le coup d'état permanent*.¹⁰¹ For Mitterand, de Gaulle was the true successor of the two Napoleons, both in spirit and in deed:

Like the first Bonaparte, he would only hold the crown for himself, and tore it from the hands that brought it to his brow. Like the second Bonaparte, he desired only one form of consent to the omnipotent gesture: the consent of the people. Duly conditioned by the tested formulas of the Napoleonic plebiscite, universal suffrage acquiesced.¹⁰²

Mitterand's political pamphlet harshly criticized the imbalanced constitutional order erected by and around de Gaulle no less than the latter's inability—indeed unwillingness—to fill the promised role of the President as an arbiter, and his dangerously depoliticizing the nation: “by replacing the representation of the nation with the infallibility of the leader, General de Gaulle focuses the interest, curiosity, and passions of the Nation on himself, and depoliticizes the rest.”¹⁰³ Paradoxically, however, it was later Mitterand himself who, once in office, more than any other of de Gaulle's successors as President of the French Fifth Republic stretched the powers of the office and did his utmost to maintain the aura of the French Presidency as a sacred institution—telling evidence of perceptions being always subject to one's own position, and the attraction of power more generally.

In as much as the powerful and all-pervasive presidency enshrined in the Constitution may be taken as an argument for de Gaulle's Fifth Republic being an institutionalized version of twentieth-century Bonapartism in the tradition of Napoleon I and Napoleon III, it is the Constitution which also demonstrates the challenges of simple historical analogies, and the shortcomings of Caesarism as a tool for comparative study more particularly. Not only were the specific framework conditions under which de Gaulle seized power and had the Constitution of 1958 approved by a referendum considerably different from both the situation in 1799 and 1851. The political system of 1958/1962 also provided for a synthesis of Bonapartist and genuinely republican traditions within a constitutional order that since its establishment has allowed for the actual expression of citizens' democratic free will, rather than just serving as a vehicle for confirming or strengthening personal power of the nation's leader—which was characteristic for the regimes of both Napoleon I and Napoleon III.

The periods of *cohabitation* since 1958, during which the president did not dispose of a majority in parliament and government was thus divided between him and the prime

minister, can be seen as an expression of the limits of the office of the Fifth Republic's "Caesar," and his being embedded in a genuinely democratic political culture. This is also manifest in that since de Gaulle's fundamental reshuffling of France's political system, none of the French Presidents has made an attempt to perpetuate power claims beyond their terms, neither by abusing the office's powerful legal instruments—above all plebiscite—nor even less so by violent means. Quite on the contrary: de Gaulle himself set the example for his successors, taking the consequences of the rejection of his proposed reform of the Senate and local governments in a nationwide referendum on April 27, 1969, and resigning the presidency outright one day later, in the middle of his second seven-year term. De Gaulle's voluntarily renouncing power after what he considered a personal vote of no-confidence was in sharp contrast to Napoleon I and Napoleon III, who were swept away by external force—together with their respective regimes as such.

Indeed, what can be considered a *signum* of the Fifth Republic and made it fundamentally different from the Bonapartist regimes of the nineteenth century was the successful and overall stable institutionalization of the political system, which was no longer at the mercy of the *one* individual leader. In other words, the Fifth Republic had found means to resolve the problem of succession in a genuinely leader-centered system—may it be described as Bonapartist or not. De Gaulle himself was keenly aware of the need to allow for at least some moving away "from heroic toward humdrum leadership"¹⁰⁴ in the long run, and his forcing through direct elections of the President in 1962 can be seen from this particular angle. For, as de Gaulle confided to his *aide-de-camp* in April 1961, full of self-confidence, but also anxious about his succession:

In fact I re-established the monarchy [*sic!*] in my favor; but after me there will be no one to impose himself on the country. I was elected without the need of a referendum; after me it will not be the same. So it will be necessary to establish a presidential system to avoid returning to the struggles of the past. The president of the Republic must be elected by universal suffrage. Elected in this way, he will—whatever his personal qualities—have some semblance of authority and power during his mandate.¹⁰⁵

The problems arising even in the French setting of "Bonapartism" and "Caesarism" being used as an analytical tool to draw systematic and direct historical comparisons were likely to be even more distinct in other national contexts. It is therefore not surprising that such scholarly attempts have rarely been made.

In a less "scientific" manner, however, the element of (historical) comparison has played out significantly in yet another respect: Caesarism being used not so much as an instrument of research, but a means to describe and often harshly criticize contemporary political conditions and challenges—especially real and perceived deviations from (representative) democratic government—by evoking historical analogies. This refers to the second layer of Caesarism's legacy today, namely its "**substantial legacy**": in its being polemically employed without a conscious analytical purpose, "Caesarism" proves to have become a negative *topos* of political discourse—and indeed political practice—meant to mark crisis phenomena of modern politics. This is, for example,

when commentators of US, Russian or Israeli politics and their leadership today talk of “symptoms of creeping Caesarism” and state that “Caesarism is on the rise”¹⁰⁶ in order to capture in a catchphrase certain features and trends of these political systems and their representatives.

After all, its “substantial” legacy may be considered the most sustained bequest of “Caesarism”, though that legacy tends to be subdued and harder to discern. More often than not it is of an implicit kind, with the term “Caesarism” (or “Bonapartism”) not necessarily used explicitly. Instead, Caesarism lives on in transmuted form, and its “substantial legacy” today mainly crystallizes around a number of alternative key terms and concepts: (charismatic) “leadership”; “direct democracy” favored over parliamentarism (often accompanied by a denunciation of “élites” and/or the “establishment”); ideas of “managed”, “directed” or “steered” democracy; and “populism”. Contemporary debate on populism in particular takes up many of the elements and concerns present in past discourses on Caesarism, especially those of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century with the advent of universal suffrage and modern mass democracy. Today’s populism debate¹⁰⁷ in all its discernible ambivalence, too, reflects the insight of Weber and others that modern (democratic) political systems are neither conceivable nor viable without a Caesaristic moment, given the fundamental shifts in political legitimacy in the post-revolutionary age with politicians increasingly required to prevail in democratic procedures inner-party and beyond, and the gaining and preserving of the masses’ trust turning into a *sine qua non* for exercising political power; but that in the end it is the form and intensity of the Caesaristic element which is decisive, the latter being necessary and positive as an instrument to guarantee competent and efficient governance, yet of utmost danger and negative if merely a means to the end of authoritarian (one-man) rule and qualifying (representative) democracy as such. Thus, populism—as Caesarism, too—might be more appropriately characterized in terms of “mirror of democracy”¹⁰⁸ than “counter-democracy”.¹⁰⁹

Among the features of populism, the delineation of a profound “crisis” (real or alleged) combined with a clear concept of an enemy as well as harsh criticism of the existing political elite and/or system by self-proclaimed “underdogs” (“Us against them”), the passionate plea for determined leadership to overcome the status quo by charismatic figures actively instrumentalizing mass media, the discernible ideological indeterminacy with authoritarian traits combined with leftist policies, and the preparedness to reshuffle political institutions and “cross frontiers”—rhetorically and otherwise—are the ones that demonstrate clearest resemblance with Caesarism discourses of the past. It is true that in other respects populism certainly features elements unknown to or less relevant in past debates on Caesarism,¹¹⁰ and it would be wrong to equate the one with the other. Debates on the potential need or dangers of a “Caesar” in the nineteenth and early twentieth century largely took place in the context of democracy still emerging or solidifying itself, while today’s populism is essentially a “post-democratic” phenomenon nurtured by dwindling faith in the problem-solving competence of existing democratic systems, more particularly parliamentary government, its checks and balances and basic freedoms. Moreover, while “personalization of rule” in the context of past Caesarism discourses still clung to reminiscences of traditional monarchical forms of government and could be seen as “rule by one” becoming merely transmuted under the auspices of

the Revolution's paradigm of "popular sovereignty", today's *penchant* for strong leaders is first and foremost an expression of politics and polities perceived as too abstract or anonymous becoming "re-personalized".

What both phenomena undoubtedly have in common, however, is discontentment with the *status quo* and the search for *the one*: a figure (charismatic or not)¹¹¹ who promises to solve problems, and on whom hopes can be pinned particularly in times of peril and despair—even, or perhaps especially, in an age of popular sovereignty. The search for mastery, which all too often is hardly more than an "illusion of mastery",¹¹² seems to have been equally as pervasive in the past as it is in the present and is likely to be in the future.