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Concluding Remarks

Among the most pervasive ideas of political thought in the second half of the twentieth century was that of (Western-style) liberal democracy as a universal model with no other true alternative. In the wake of the Second World War, democracy was increasingly seen not just as the only legitimate, but also as the only viable form of government in the long term, as the norm and *ultima ratio* of human development. Alternative forms of government and rule—most frequently summed up under the generic term “dictatorship”—were more or less explicitly interpreted as exception and aberration. Scholars might acknowledge the development of democracy as an often long and not always successful struggle; however, the main question was essentially why certain societies had become Western-style democracies,¹ while others had not (yet), and how existing dictatorships could effectively be transformed into democracies. In the wake of the so-called “third wave of democratization” from the 1970s onwards,² the latter question became formally institutionalized through numerous political transformation theories,³ which in their overwhelming majority were concerned with conceiving systemic changes as if the transition from absolutism or dictatorship to democracy was a natural one-way street.

It was in the logic of this goal-directed understanding of democracy that on a conceptual level the dichotomy democracy vs. dictatorship became narrowed down to democracy vs. “non-democracy”, as in Adam Przeworski’s work *Democracy and Development*.⁴ The collapse of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe did its part to increase the belief in the superiority of democratic systems, and some theorists—most famously Francis Fukuyama—were even tempted to declare that the progression of human history as a struggle between ideologies was largely at an end, with the world settling on Western liberal democracy after 1989.⁵

The widespread teleological assumption of democracy as the ultimate goal of history—hereby surmising the illegitimacy, defectiveness and transience of “non-democratic” regimes—also put into perspective the progress made in studying authoritarian and dictatorial political systems, and how democracies might turn into such systems. What was disregarded in particular for most of the second half of the twentieth century was the possibility of “democratic dictatorship”; that is, a hybrid system equally featuring elements of democracy and dictatorship. It was only after the millennium with the “Western model” proving to be anything but an “end of history” and instead becoming increasingly challenged, and with liberal and representative democracy globally on the defensive, that scholarly interest has been growing: not only

with regard to the threats to democracy due to its immanent deficiencies, but also the political, social and economic conditions under which democracy and dictatorship might potentially become merged. What has become more evident in recent decades is an incongruity between democracy as an ideal type, and democracy's often sobering (political) practice around the globe. This is particularly notable with respect to the principle of popular sovereignty as *the* center of modern democratic statehood, the meaning of which, however, has become largely distorted over time, and which today is instrumentalized by authoritarian and dictatorial systems alike as a source of legitimacy.

The present study has turned to a historical dimension of that field of tension between democracy and dictatorship discernible today, encapsulated by the concept of "(modern) Caesarism". More particularly, it has been concerned with providing a long-term analysis of Caesarism discourse and practice in the nineteenth and twentieth century, with three overlaying features deemed characteristic of this political and politico-theoretical phenomenon:

1. fusing both "dictatorial" and "democratic" elements, namely authoritarian—often charismatic—leadership by one person and an underlying popular legitimization, while aiming to neutralize intermediary representative bodies;
2. gaining full acuteness in the period during and after the American and French Revolutions only, when traditional patterns of political legitimacy shifted towards democratic ones; and
3. being always concomitant with a moment of distinct "crisis".

The aim has not been to come up with a fully-fledged "master theory" of Caesarism, nor to provide a clear-cut set of criteria defining "Caesarism", which would possibly allow certain historical or contemporary political systems and figures to be unequivocally qualified as "Caesarist(ic)". Rather, the overall objective has been to contribute towards pinning down and assessing Caesarism as an inherently dynamic and at the same time elusive phenomenon of public and scholarly discourse. This has been with a view to also demonstrating the intrinsic historicity of contemporary debates on democracy and dictatorship and their compatibility. Thus, two goals have essentially been pursued in parallel: on the one hand, to provide a "history of discourses", i.e., examining why, when, by whom and with which purpose Caesarism and related concepts were used to describe certain rulers and regimes; on the other hand, to distil elements for a historically grounded theory of Caesarism as a natural concomitant of all modern politics from the analysis of past discourses. Past and present equally demonstrate that the appeal of monocratic rule has not necessarily been disappearing in an age devoted to the principle of popular sovereignty. Quite to the contrary: it seems that the rise of the masses has created new leeway and possibilities for individuals striving for power—*prima facie* a paradox that has been at the core of the Caesarism discourse since the late eighteenth century. It is worth recapitulating the main stages of that vibrant discourse, which has seen quite a few shifts.

What has been formative for the genesis and future development of Caesarism both as a concept and as political practice was the age of the French Revolution. This is for

two reasons: a) because the question as to the compatibility of the paradigm of popular sovereignty and rule by one arose in an unprecedented manner in that age, and b) because of the person of Napoleon Bonaparte, who shaped future debates on Caesarism by becoming established as a point of reference. Revolutionary language and policies of fundamental political and social renewal clearly heralded a new age, yet were soon confronted with experiences of fundamental “crises”: war, economic disorder, domestic terror. Against the background of these experiences, demands for a domestication of the Revolution were soon gaining ground, as was a “negative great parallel” with antiquity, in which contemporary commentators such as Edmund Burke or Joseph de Maistre portrayed the masses as new barbarians, and militarism as a distinctive feature of the time. However, in view of a Revolution increasingly getting out of control and devouring its own children, a potential “new Caesar” could—and indeed was by many—also seen as “saviour”, or at least a necessary evil. While there were other potential candidates for that role, it was Napoleon Bonaparte who eventually assumed it, combining talent, will to power, favorable framework conditions and luck.

The 18 Brumaire and the Consular Constitution following in its wake deviated from prior (constitutional) practice in both the American and French Revolution in as much as the sovereign will of the nation was now primarily projected on the head of the executive branch rather than on a representative legislative body. Correspondingly, plebiscites—rather than elections—assumed the role of central manifestations of the popular will. Napoleon and his regime thus embodied *the* central feature of what was later characterized as and associated with Caesarism: namely the principle that confidence comes from below while authority comes from above—with much of the political system being tailored to ensure that public confidence is given to the right man. With a view to “steer” the popular will, votes mainly served an instrumental purpose and were hardly more than a “seemly façade for dictatorship”.⁶ The plebiscitary model, which in itself was nurtured by his nimbus as a military genius, allowed Napoleon to steadily increase his authority and power via lifelong Consulate to hereditary Empire. Yet the structural fragility of the Napoleonic system became blatantly obvious when Napoleon’s star began to decline from late 1812 onwards, resulting in the Emperor’s deposition in 1814. Tellingly, however, Napoleon’s demise did not put an end to the “Napoleonic myth”.

To the contrary: the more time passed, the more the image of Napoleon as the nation’s rescuer, its glorious hero, reformer and visionary, became firmly established. Favorable analogies with other “great” figures of world history and especially Caesar could hence easily be drawn. Simultaneously, the ambivalence of Napoleon, his embodying pre-revolutionary, revolutionary and counter-revolutionary elements at the same time, his representing authority, progressiveness and (relative) stability alike, also allowed for him and his political regime to be seen as a singular and new phenomenon of human history. “Bonapartism” thus became established as a descriptor of a putatively new type of post-revolutionary rule even before the emergence of “Caesarism”, underlying the central importance of Napoleon as a person for nineteenth-century discourse on (new) forms of government. Among the first attempting to establish Bonapartism as a new illegitimate model in political theory was Benjamin Constant, who distinguished “monarchy” as a regular regime type from what he termed

“usurpation”: an illegitimate type embodied in Napoleon Bonaparte, with earlier though not entirely comparable precedents in Oliver Cromwell and Julius Caesar. Yet what contemporaries such as Constant—whose scholarly efforts actually anticipated many of the themes of the later “Caesarism” debate—fundamentally underestimated was the long-term potential immanent in the “Napoleonic model”.

Once the “revolutionary crisis” had abated and Napoleon’s rule come to an end, the debate on “Bonapartism” started to lose some of its vigor, but by no means its general significance. Even if 1814/1815 might mark a victory of the anti-revolutionary powers, the legacy of the Revolution had to be dealt with by nations and governments throughout Europe. Turning the clock back and pursuing strict neo-absolutist policies was in most cases not an option—or at least only a dangerously daring one, as the Spanish example demonstrated, where the restoration of autocracy by Ferdinand VII was soon followed by the 1820 revolt in favor of restoring the Cadiz Constitution of 1812. Organizing the body politic after the Napoleonic period obviously necessitated some form of reconciliation between Revolution and Reaction.

The most pervasive attempt to that aim was “constitutional monarchism”—that is, making constitutional concessions and allowing for limited political participation of the people through representative bodies, in order to defend monarchical power and above all “monarchical sovereignty” against the revolutionary encroachments of popular sovereignty. Parallels between constitutional monarchism and Bonapartism are discernible, not just at the meta-level of trying to reconcile what appears to be irreconcilable. It can also be argued that in both cases a traditional monocratic element of rule is revered, though with a different emphasis: while constitutional monarchism can be seen as the attempt to merge monocracy with constitutionalism as the one key innovation of the Revolution, Bonapartism aims at combining monocracy with popular sovereignty as the other. Yet while constitutional monarchism—following the example of the French *Charte constitutionnelle* of 1814—developed into a successful European model during the Restoration period, Bonapartism and the underlying principle of the “sovereign nation” faced open resentment by the ruling classes, thus being of almost no practical political relevance in the decades after Napoleon’s fall.

At the level of political thought, however, the assessment of Napoleon’s regime and Bonapartism was actively taken further, particularly in the context of ongoing debates on the legitimacy of political rule. For the most part, the Napoleonic legacy was seen critically: as the epitome of a specific form of despotism resultant from some misguided “popular will” coinciding with the unrestrained hubris of a political upstart. Nonetheless, the repudiation of Napoleon and the political “radicalism” he represented was not unanimous. In the orbit of Hegelian philosophy, the widely held view that it was “great men” that made history and brought societies forward was further corroborated. This idea found particularly fertile ground during the period of European Restoration, characterized by an increasingly perceived “stagnation” of political and social life. Especially in *Vormärz* Germany, political and national expectations—liberalization, constitutionalization and national unification—remained largely unaccomplished. The longer attempts were made to merely preserve the *status quo*, also by means of oppression, the more frustration grew in the “age of Metternich”, and the more positive the image of the former pariah Napoleon became. Especially the

movement of the Young Germans advocated radical change, considering a “national dictatorship” to be a possible—perhaps the only—alternative in a situation that was seen as no less than a fundamental crisis both intellectually and politically. What Germany desperately needed in the eyes of contemporary observers like Heinrich Heine was a “Germanic Napoleon”.

Even among those repudiating the “Napoleonic model” there was growing awareness after 1815 that Bonapartism might not have been a one-off experience only, but that this phenomenon was intrinsic to and typical of modernity. The perhaps most important analytical contribution to understanding Bonapartism as structurally inherent in post-revolutionary societies was provided by Alexis de Tocqueville. Assessing an age which to him was above all characterized by the paradigm of increasing equality, Tocqueville offered sharp insights into the—for the most part hidden—dialectic of “popular sovereignty” and despotic rule, and the “fragility” of democracy in view of ever-present desires for leadership and guidance.

It was due to the scholarly work of Tocqueville and others that Bonapartism became more and more detached from the person of Napoleon and established as the designation of a particular and new type of regime; that is, Bonapartism turned from a predominantly ideological to a more politico-theoretical term. Accordingly, despite the debate losing some of the immediacy it had enjoyed during and in the immediate aftermath of the Napoleonic age, the 1820s, 1830s and 1840s are most instructive for the dynamic development of a concept that in the wake of the Revolution of 1848 was suddenly in the spotlight again.

The mid-nineteenth century represented the second “formative period” of the discourse on Caesarism. While the Revolution of 1789 and Napoleon Bonaparte had laid the ground—though not yet by explicitly using the term “Caesarism”—and provided it with a lasting spin, the Revolution of 1848 and its repercussions corroborated and redefined the discourse: not just conceptually, with Caesarism becoming durably established besides Bonapartism and slowly superseding it due to the former representing greater universality and smacking less of French exclusiveness; but also in terms of determining the substance and role of Caesarism. Perhaps the single most important factor in Caesarism assuming new meaning and focus was the growing importance of the “social question”, which in the early 1800s had not been the vital issue it was a few decades later. With existing political systems becoming increasingly challenged by dynamic socio-economic transformation processes, it was again France that in 1848 assumed the role of a European vanguard, proving the supposed stability of the European Restoration a chimera.

The collapse of the July Monarchy and the establishment of the Second Republic in February 1848—which served as the initial spark for a wave of revolutionary upheavals throughout Europe—inspired hopes of democratization and social change. At the same time, however, political disorder and uncertainty following in the wake of the regime change prompted fears of a radicalization of the Revolution. Public desires for a progressive reformer and crisis manager were thus equally present at the time. The one politician who in the French context was best able to stage himself as embodying both roles *in persona* was again a Bonaparte: Louis-Napoléon. It was not just the aura of his legendary uncle which helped him win the presidential elections in late 1848, but

also the fact that he was hard to pin down ideologically, claiming for himself both reformism and conservatism, republican and democratic values as much as stability and order. Meanwhile, in view of a perceived “red menace”, the conservatory element of modern political rule perceptibly gained importance in political thought in France and beyond. Fervent calls were made for a “new Caesar” as the only means to prevent ochlocracy and tame the mob by writers like Donoso Cortés and François-Auguste Romieu. Romieu in particular was instrumental in establishing “Caesarism” as an integral part of political debate, describing *Césarisme* as a modern rule of force indispensable in view of impending civil war. Napoleon’s *coup d’état* of December 1851 and the Second Empire emerging from it were almost instantly labelled with this new terminology, which hence became swiftly prominent throughout Europe.

Louis-Napoléon’s seizure and consolidation of power—resulting in a regime that, following the lead of the first Napoleon, was essentially a plebiscitary monarchy, characterized by a concentration of power in the executive branch monopolized by the Emperor and a largely marginalized parliament—found eager reception in Europe, above all in Germany: there, the events in the neighboring country found particularly strong reception not least due to Germany’s unresolved national and constitutional question, which made debate about Caesarism in France a proxy arena for debate about the future of Germany. Similar to France, in Germany, too, strong polemics was distinctive of the contemporary discourse on Caesarism, ranging from strict opposition to a model which some saw as the epitome of “Romanism” opposed to “Germanism” (Gustav Diezel), to favorable endorsement (Constantin Frantz) or even depiction as *the* future model for all of Europe (Philipp Anton von Segesser). At the same time, while there continued to be assessments of Bonapartism and Caesarism as the result of specific, yet non-recurring historical settings, a more “structural”—and accordingly more universal—interpretation clearly gained ground; one acknowledging Caesarism to be the expression of a new socio-economic and political reality characterized by a growing importance of the masses and the proletariat, respectively. Consideration of the phenomenon in these terms, most famously done so by Karl Marx, did its part to further detach Bonapartism⁷ and Caesarism from individual figures.

Aside from the sphere of political thought, the constitutional practice of the Second Empire demonstrated the challenges inherent in Caesaristic rule in general, and its institutionalization in particular. A central requirement was to secure democratic legitimacy for the Caesar on a permanent basis: not just on the occasions of national plebiscites being applied to authorize the takeover of power or constitutional revision (1851, 1852 and 1870), but also in regular (parliamentary) elections. In times of universal (male) suffrage either being or at least becoming the norm, and society and economy concurrently undergoing radical change, this was a most delicate endeavor, as demonstrated in France in the 1860s, when even the massive “steering” of elections was no longer a sufficient means to guarantee complacent majorities in parliament. Accordingly, losing electoral support had to be compensated for by a cautious liberalization of the political system, culminating in the constitutional change of early 1870. Yet even a few months later, putative steadiness turned out to be an illusion. Within a remarkably short time, the regime became delegitimized and was swept away by its defeat in the Franco-Prussian War; a war into which Napoleon had not least been

forced by the *vox populi* with which his regime identified itself—the very same voice that shortly thereafter did not show any mercy with the Emperor once he had proved unable to embody success and guarantee stability.

Overall, the debate on Caesarism reached a new degree of differentiation and intensity with Napoleon III, also marking increasing difficulty to clearly locate the phenomenon in ideological terms. Diversity was the distinctive element in the assessment of the Second Empire; yet also the political practice of the regime, which did not pursue any clear-cut leftist or rightist policies, but rather a mixture of both, could be characterized in terms of heterogeneity. Nevertheless, there was a clear element of conformity as well both in political thought and practice, manifest in the central role played by the issue of “political legitimacy” and its link both with the “social question” and the “masses” more generally. Clearer perhaps than the reign of Napoleon I, it was that of Napoleon III which threw advantages and disadvantages of Caesaristic government into sharp relief: identifiability of political action and responsibility, swift decision-making processes, relative programmatic flexibility appealing to a fairly broad social basis, and the aura of “heroism” and exceptionality being among the “selling arguments”; transience of personal charisma and stark—eventually often fatal—dependency on public opinion, requiring elaborate mechanisms of propaganda, coercion or corruption, as immanent deficits. In the end, the fate of Louis-Napoléon equally epitomized the potential and dilemma of a new form of authoritarian-monocratic rule relying on and deriving its legitimacy from the masses.

The more the masses became a political factor to be reckoned with, the more Caesarism was likely to become an issue not to be dismissed in traditional monarchical systems either. Germany in the second half of the nineteenth century was a point in case, with debates on “Germanic Caesarism” mainly fuelled by the developments in France, and revolving around the person of Otto von Bismarck in particular.

Though deeply rooted in conservative thought, Bismarck was keenly aware that in view of traditional sources of political legitimacy—and especially the doctrine of divine right—forfeiting appeal and bonding strength in the modern age, the existing monarchical order had to be secured by other means. Against the background of this realization, Bismarck demonstrated a striking openness to pursue “new” and “unorthodox” forms of governance once in power, which placed him in clear opposition to traditional legitimist circles in Germany. Far-sightedly, Bismarck acknowledged the populace to be a political factor which to ignore was simply impossible and indeed dangerous. Yet accepting a political role for the masses did by no means imply their being perceived as an overwhelmingly positive, even less so rational force. Instead, Bismarck—like many others of his time—contended an intrinsic irrationality of the masses and their exertion of a destructive force on existing political systems. At the same time, however, he was deeply convinced that the unreasoning masses would keenly feel a need of order, too—something that for Bismarck was the key explanatory variable for people’s readiness to give up on liberties and succumb to Caesarism:

if they do not recognise this need [of order] *a priori*, they always realise it eventually after manifold arguments *ad hominem*; and to purchase order from a dictatorship and Caesarism they cheerfully sacrifice that justifiable amount of freedom which

ought to be maintained, and which the political society of Europe can endure without ill-health.⁸

Bismarck considered the appetites for dictatorship and Caesarism to be an integral part of a historical cycle: “desire” — “revolution and destruction of the existing order” — “desire for order” — “trading freedom for order”. While Bismarck regarded that cycle as most clearly represented by modern French history, he also acknowledged it to be essentially universal and accordingly recognized the risk for Germany if it entered such cycle as well. With a view to reinforcing the existing monarchy standing for order and stability, the “Iron Chancellor” therefore pursued proactive policies aimed at preventing revolution and mob rule by appealing to the masses and strengthening their allegiance to the crown; notably by making occasional concessions to public opinion and the revolutionary legacy, which earned him the title “white revolutionary”.⁹ While publicly distancing himself from French Bonapartism and not representing Caesarism in any traditional sense of the word, Bismarck nevertheless applied a Caesaristic toolkit that allows for a comparison with Napoleon III; a toolkit that was, among other things, characterized by authoritarian leadership, ideological flexibility mixing conservative and reformist paradigms, and an active social policy. In short: Bismarck actively applied Caesaristic methods without being—or even aiming to be—a Caesar proper.

Discourse on Caesarism, both in politics and political thought, reached its peak in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when the consolidation of industrial society and mass democracy became ever-more discernible. As Caesarism was widely seen as being related to or even synonymous with “mass politics”, debates at the time had a truly international dimension, even though the concept enjoyed different degrees of relevance and immediacy in different national contexts, and a broad range of meanings and values were attached to it. While negative connotations of Caesarism as an unwanted form of political rule or leadership continued to prevail overall, there was also widespread understanding of Caesarism being a natural and perhaps indispensable concomitant of democratization and universal suffrage. Even contemporaries beyond suspicion of adhering to dictatorship saw some need for a “democratic tyranny”,¹⁰ or at least political leaders and the demos establishing closer links with each other. In this vein, Georg Jellinek, for example, considered in his 1906 *Verfassungsänderung und Verfassungswandlung* the ongoing process “that beyond parliaments, beyond these artificial creations of recent times in so many states, the two only indestructible powers of the state begin to face each other directly: government and people” as one of the most crucial of modern history; notably because it was the perhaps most immediate expression of “direct democracy”, more of which Jellinek was clearly favorable to.¹¹

The two nations in which debates on Caesarism proved the most intense at the time were France and Germany; and it was also there that the most important contributions to the “scientification” of the concept originated. These attempts to incorporate Caesarism into the emerging (social) sciences took place against the background of and were largely informed by contemporary political developments in these two nations; in particular, the experiences of Boulangism in France and Wilhelminism in Germany, both of which expounded the actuality and the challenges of “Caesarism” in a specific way. The case of Georges Boulanger equally demonstrated the susceptibility

of the masses to popular *homines novi* and alleged heroes promising radical political change, but also the fragility of personal Caesaristic ambitions. In turn, the reign of Emperor Wilhelm II revealed the fundamental problems emerging from a political system essentially tailored for a Caesaristic leader if that system failed to provide the leader(ship) required by the existing institutional setting in an age of mass politics.

It was with these political experiences in mind that Gustave Le Bon and Max Weber developed their “mass sociology” and “sociology of domination” respectively, in both of which crowds and their leaders featured as essential elements of modern political life. Weber did not content himself with describing Caesarism as naturally belonging to modern societies and went one step further, moving Caesarism to the center of a universal theory of (mass) democracy, the ideal of which was a plebiscitary leadership democracy (*Führerdemokratie*): “above parliament there stands [...] the [...] plebiscitary dictator, who rallies the masses behind him by means of the ‘machine’ [...]”.¹² Considering the conditions of modern society as he understood it, and especially the emotionality of the masses as demonstrated by Le Bon and others, democracy to Weber was simply inconceivable without Caesaristic elements. This allowed for a much broader application of the concept of Caesarism to political figures not usually associated with the term, such as US Presidents or William Gladstone. Weber’s political theory also was innovative in that Caesarism was not portrayed in traditional terms as an antithesis of parliamentary government, but rather as something that could function well within a parliamentary system. Ultimately, the envisaged “leader democracy” even asked for no less than a balanced equilibrium of Caesarism and parliamentarism. Such a reinterpretation required Weber to imagine Caesarism quite differently from its Napoleonic or Bismarckian and Wilhelmine manifestations, which to him were examples of ill-conceived Caesarism.

Aware of how historically charged and disputed the term was, however, Weber abstained from vindicating Caesarism, and had the concept rather being wrapped up in his master concept of “charisma” that did not evoke the same emotions and suggested novelty and scholarly objectivity instead. Weber’s largely successful efforts to universalize the concept thus also marked the beginning of the end of Caesarism as a vibrant and widespread notion of political discourse, which from the early 1920s onwards increasingly diminished in importance.

Notwithstanding its forfeiting significance as a term and concept, the legacy of Caesarism has been palpable far beyond the early twentieth century, since the fundamental issues fuelling the Caesarism discourse have anything but vanished.

As far as the interwar period and the political debates on Fascism and National Socialism are concerned, a strong tie with the previous Caesarism discourse was still discernible, even if one must be vigilant against deriving any simplistic “from Caesarism to totalitarianism” assumptions from that fact. Totalitarianism is after all a phenomenon distinct from Caesarism, but not only are the intellectual continuities between the two noteworthy, as represented by figures such as Carl Schmitt and Robert Michels; also the compatibility of much of their substance, especially the *topos* of “people” and “leader(ship)” entering a sort of new democratic *unio mystica*, cannot be neglected and proves evidence that Fascism and National Socialism belong to the same set of political responses to Western modernity.

Even after 1945, the explicit use of Caesarism did not entirely vanish: there have been attempts to revitalize Caesarism as an analytical tool within the emerging political science, particularly in attempts to generate typologies of different forms of government, an element of a meta-philosophy of history, and a reference point for historical comparison. The latter has been prominent in and with regard to France. There, the disaster of 1940 and the ensuing Vichy regime, but especially the crisis of the Fourth Republic in its seeming to prove the inability of parliamentarism to guarantee national survival and being eventually overturned by Charles de Gaulle, prompted comparisons with nineteenth century experiences of Bonapartism.¹³ Overall more significant than its explicit legacy, however, is Caesarism's implicit legacy: be it as an undercurrent of debates on dictatorship and different manifestations thereof, or the nature of modern politics more generally.

Today, Caesarism together with the earlier Bonapartism has been largely superseded by alternative terminologies. Yet what all of them have in common is their revolving around what might be termed the "post-revolutionary dilemma of the political";¹⁴ that is, how to organize and legitimize stable political rule in modern mass societies penetrated by the all-pervasive premise of "popular sovereignty". Caesarism is a pointed expression of and reaction to that dilemma, offering a potential way to reconcile the claim of political participation of the many with that for decisive political leadership, especially in times of crisis. Caesarism can be condensed to the formula: "synthesis of democracy and autocracy".¹⁵ As such, it is an expression of a timeless endeavor in the realm of politics to make the apparently incompatible compatible, and a phenomenon pertinent not only to nascent or young democracies, in which reminiscences of monarchical rule or entrenched authoritarian sentiments might persist, but also to long-standing democratic systems.

But from where does the potentiality of "Caesarism" emerge even in long-standing democracies? One may be inclined to answer: perhaps from an unrealistic and overly idealistic understanding of democracy. While any in-depth scholarly discussion would go beyond the bounds of this study, a few general reflections may be allowed on this point.

Above all, it needs to be acknowledged that democracy comes with a degree of manipulation, too: some "art of seduction" needs to be cultivated by politicians of all leanings and ethical standards in order to gain the voters' support, especially since large parts of any given body politic tend to be what might be characterized as "politically passive", demonstrating only limited or selective interest in the actual business of politics. Against this background, emotions play a crucial role in gaining citizens' attention and eventually votes, since reasoning and rational arguments alone tend to be insufficient to attract the many; all the more so since education—political and otherwise—rarely comes up to the ideal of elevating citizens to feel "responsible" in an encompassing way, to be competent to emerge from nonage entirely, or to be able to take fully-informed decisions.

In as much as democratic politics is always about manipulation, it is also about power. Politics—including its democratic version—is hardly conceivable without any pursuit for at least a portion of power or influencing the division of power, as is politics without leadership and hence leaders. This also goes for liberal democracies. In the end,

as elsewhere too, it is sort, dosage and direction that are decisive for power and leadership to unfold either in a positive or negative manner. “Post-truth” politics today demonstrates the latter, more particularly the vulnerability of societies throughout the world to politicians who emotionalize and radicalize the political sphere, disguise their unrestrained craving for status and influence behind their self-staging as the true mouthpiece of “the people”, and thereby accidentally—or willingly—shatter the foundations of liberal democracy. What facilitates post-truth politics and the life of contemporary populists are symptoms of fatigue on the part of parliamentarism and representative democracy, which find themselves associated with what is condemned as “system” or “establishment”. After such desires had crumbled for some time in the wake of the Second World War, there now seems to be a new craving for personalized “trouble shooters”: heroes and saviours of the nation, or maybe just wreckers doing what is deemed necessary to dispose of political systems that are perceived as unjust or rotten. In times such as ours where crisis appears to be almost omnipresent, pinning hopes and expectations on individuals rather than collective bodies or institutions such as parliaments is particularly appealing; especially if those individuals do not shy away from making sparkling yet untenable promises, and staging themselves as “underdogs” and fighters against noxious “political correctness”.

Declaring today’s populism to be merely rehashed nineteenth-century Caesarism would clearly be too simplistic an equation, and would neglect the specific conditions under which contemporary populism flourishes: the economic and cultural repercussions of globalization that are fundamentally challenging long-grown socio-economic structures and identities; perceived inefficiencies especially in Western democracies, with long decision-making processes and difficulties to advance necessary reforms in a timely manner; and the capabilities offered by modern technology. Having said that, however, it would be short-sighted not to recognize the similarities between many populists today and nineteenth-century politicians applying Caesaristic methods: their being leaders presenting themselves as radical opponents of established institutions; their rhetorically stressing to be the executors of the popular will in its entirety; or their penchant for social policies.

To conclude: Caesarism may have lost the public presence it had enjoyed in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, when it was central to a general debate about dangers, opportunities and pathologies of a fundamentally changing political and social environment people had to make sense of. Nevertheless, Caesarism is more than just a political terminology and a social-scientific concept of the past hinging on the great parallel with antiquity; notably an incisive formula reminding of the very kernel and the resulting challenges of our post-Enlightenment and post-revolutionary world. A world, in which since the eighteenth century the claims to “self-determination”—politically and otherwise—and “democracy” in its literal Greek meaning have been radically pushed forward and materialized; yet a world in which there is still appetite for authority, indeed a “longing for the leader”.¹⁶

That longing—which determined political figures have always been more than willing to fulfill—thrives because the desire for, but in many cases also the ability to, self-define and self-determine is not always as developed as one might expect or wish. Instead, to this day and also in established democracies there continues to be

considerable willingness to give oneself up to the “pleasures of servitude”.¹⁷ One may find that deplorable and deem it unworthy of modern societies, but neglecting man’s falling for “irresponsibility” would be tantamount to self-deception. As long as humans are ready to put their destiny into the hands of others and yield decision-making power to them, there will always be the risk of the former being manipulated and instrumentalized, and the latter abusing the power they have been entrusted with. In other words: as long as there is a readiness to be ruled, there is a chance of Caesarism. Attempting to avoid any danger of democracy degenerating into Caesarism would require no less than relinquishing our common understanding and practice of democratic politics altogether: a prospect which is neither realistic nor necessarily desirable.