Economy and Society
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/reso20

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Published online: 24 May 2006.

To cite this article: Peter Baehr (1987) Accounting or Caesarism: Introduction to Gollwitzer, Economy and Society, 16:3, 341-356, DOI: 10.1080/03085148700000018

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03085148700000018

Accounting for Caesarism: Introduction to Gollwitzer

Peter Baehr

Heinz Gollwitzer's pioneering essay on 'The Caesarism of Napoleon III' is at once a contribution to the theory of modern dictatorship and a substantial review of how one dictatorial regime – the French Second Empire – was perceived by its German contemporaries.

Certainly, not all of its judgements will be accepted. Some historians will find too cavalier the assimilation of Bismarck to 'Bonapartist' politics (p. 389)[1]; the opaque contention that 'Caesarist-totalitarian forms of state and society may appear not as symptoms of a sickness, but as strength' (p. 395) can also be expected to attract criticism. Yet these and other problems notwithstanding, Gollwitzer's article illuminates a hitherto obscure area. Of particular merit is its refusal to treat Caesarism as a monolithic concept. Instead, we are shown how the inflections and charge 'Caesarism' carried were conditioned by the conservative, liberal or socialist stances of those who attempted to fathom Napoleon III's regime, and how these stances themselves admitted of much internal variation.

Gollwitzer's argument is straightforward and requires no rehearsal here. Instead this Introduction can seek more productive employment by examining a dimension of cultural analysis which Gollwitzer either ignored or marginalised but which is, arguably, central to the overall debate he sought to understand and depict: the dimension that concerns the kind of political language used by contestants in the ideological struggles of the period. This language was neither peripheral nor decorative. Rather the lexicon of Caesarism and other kindred terms (particularly 'Bonapartism' and 'Imperialism') provided key co-ordinates of interpretation for those attempting to make sense of their time. The point can be put negatively: Gollwitzer, omitting to probe the linguistic representation of the Second Empire, treats Caesarism, Bonapartism and Napoleonism as mere synonyms of convenience which unproblematically served to address the phenomenon that was Napoleon III and his regime. But this is not only misleading, since the words had different lineages ('Bonapartism', for example, was coined

Economy and Society Volume 16 Number 3 August 1987
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around 1816, 'Caesarism' around 1845) and did different, if overlapping, work; it also underestimates the significance of the terms themselves as linguistic documents which, if interpreted with care, enrich our understanding of the anxieties and hopes the Bonapartes – uncle and nephew – provoked.

Focusing on the cardinal term of Gollwitzer's essay – 'Caesarism' – I shall proceed in two stages. In the first place, and seeking merely to supplement Gollwitzer's argument, I shall briefly comment on the origins of 'Caesarism' and give some indication of its currency in and outside of Germany between approximately 1850 and 1880. My second concern will then be to try and answer questions that derive from the former exercise: Why was 'Caesarism' chosen as a semantic vehicle of disputation, and what issues was it felt peculiarly adapted to express? If Gollwitzer himself did not attend to such problems, later discussions, as we shall see, have offered notable compensation. One word of caution. My primary interest in what follows is with the usage of Caesarism as a *vernacular* term of the educated political public, as distinct from its later academic, or technical employment (e.g. in the work of Roscher, Schäffle, Weber etc; or, in a different tradition, Gramsci and neo-Gramscians like Hall and Schwarz). The academic, technical formulations of Caesarism are worth considering in their own right, and will be examined in another place.

Origins and currency of 'Caesarism'

A dramatic change has overtaken the status of 'Caesarism' in the years since first it was coined. To modern ears, lay or academic, 'Caesarism' will appear quaint and esoteric, in no sense a fundamental or familiar concept. But there was a time in some European countries, roughly between 1850–1880, when the word would have been instantly recognised by most educated people who took an active interest in state affairs, and when one might have expected these same individuals to have entertained a strong opinion about the phenomenon it purported to denote; a time when Caesarism was a keyword – that is, a word of both polemic and analysis – employed with great frequency among journalists, men of letters, publicists, propagandists and politicians. In short, if 'Caesarism' has now fallen into disuse, there was a period by contrast in which it mattered.

It is impossible to be certain about the provenance of the term. The German conservative thinker J. F. Böhmer used it in passing as early as 1845, (Janssen, 1868, pp. 277–9)[2] but it was in 1850 that A. Romieu, a Frenchman, subjected 'Caesarism' to its first extended and systematic treatment.[3] Writing from a virulently

anti-liberal stance, but convinced that monarchical legitimism was beyond resuscitation, Romieu conceived Caesarism as the rule of force (Romieu, 1850, pp. 194 ff.) which would succeed the interregnum of parliamentarism. The principles of heredity and liberalism, he predicted, will find themselves replaced by the naked power of military warlords. The latter will attempt in vain to establish a durable, legitimate dynasty. Civil war will rage, until a new stage in the historical cycle is reached.

While there is no doubt in Romieu's mind that Napoleon I performed deeds that were similar to those of the Caesars and was a harbinger of Caesar*ism* as well, it is interesting to see Louis Napoleon assigned a much more humble place in Romieu's schema. Louis' personal courage and integrity are acknowledged; the power of his name understood. But Romieu is convinced that Louis can only ever be a 'temporary leader' and that the *coups d'état* 'of which so much has been spoken, would have no serious result . . . In one way or another one would arrive at a brief interim, followed soon by unavoidable uprisings' (Romieu, 1850, p. 133). What is significant here of course is not Romieu's limited powers of prophecy – how could he have known, composing his book before the coup of 2 December, that the 'interim' would extend to two decades? – but rather the fact that, in its first sustained formulation, 'Caesarism' did not apply to the man later writers would take to be its archetypal representative. This is a clear sign of the mutations that the term/concept would undergo in its curious evolution. Just as evidently, the word proved sufficiently elastic to accomodate issues and events which transcended Romieu's original preoccupations.

Soon after 1851, 'Caesarism' became a modish word. Proudhon employed it expansively in his *Césarisme et christianisme* (1852–4), a work which as one interpreter puts it, expressed the author's disquiet at the rule of a despot Napoleon-Caesar 'who maintained his hegemony through corruption, cunning and terror' and who simultaneously reduced the 'multitude of people . . . to an ignorant and miserable mass' (Mosse, 1971, p. 169). Dieter Groh estimates (1972, pp. 756–7) that, in Germany, 'Caesarism', together with the closely related concepts of 'Napoleonism', 'Bonapartism' and 'Imperialism', were in common use by 1859. More tardy, on the other hand, were Britain and Italy: our own O.E.D. records the first English use in Brownson's (1857) equation of 'Caesarism' with 'monarchical absolutism' (1971, p. 315) while in Italy it appears not to have been taken up before 1865 (Momigliano, 1956, p. 231).

It was a parlance greeted by conflicting judgements on its worth. Some believed it to be plain confusing – witness Gerlach's letter

of 5 June 1857 to Bismarck (Bismarck, 1898, Vol. I, p. 206) insisting on the distinction between absolutism, Bonapartism and Caesarism – or, in the case of Theodor Mommsen, also writing in 1857, bordering on the libellous and historically absurd (Mommsen, 1901, pp. 324–7). The abuse of the word also irritated a contributor to the October 1858 edition of Britain's *Westminster Review* who complained indignantly about 'Clumsy eulogies of Caesarism as incarnate in the dynasty of Bonaparte' (O. E. D., 1971, p. 315).

But admonition has rarely been of itself an effective sanction against fashion and 'Caesarism' at this stage in its metamorphosis showed no sign of becoming passé. 'Everybody is now talking of Caesarism', Bamberger remarked in 1866 (cited in Ladendorf, 1906, p. 41), and the great Swiss historian J. Burckhardt was evidently just one such person: to students attending his November 1869 lectures on the French Revolutionary epoch, delivered at the University of Basel, he declared confidently that Napoleon Bonaparte's 'is the most instructive type of Caesarism. He is, at the same time, the saviour of the new French society and a world conqueror' (1958, p. 212). And if in the same year Marx was sniping famously at 'the current German scholastic phrase which refers to a so-called *Caesarism*' (1973, p. 144, emphasis in original), good Englishmen, it transpired, could be scholastic too. Hence one of Britain's foremost nineteenth century constitutional theorists and political commentators found the word admirably suited to convey the nature of Napoleon III's regime, a regime which at the time Bagehot wrote his piece for *The Economist* in August 1870, though still to suffer the final ignominy of Sedan, was tottering on the brink of that debacle.[4]

By the late 1870s, if the testimony of F. W. Rüstow is accepted (1879, p. 3), 'Caesarism' was still showing no signs of obsolescence. And from the 1880s to the end of the First World War the term was employed by a host of people, but then in a more self-consciously academic manner. As a vernacular term, conversely, Caesarism was on the wane.

The purpose of this section has been merely to establish the currency of the term Caesarism in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Gollwitzer's own essay provides details of the German case; I have sought to show that the word enjoyed a wider purchase. With this task schematically completed it is necessary to explain why 'Caesarism' possessed the resonance it did.

Accounting for 'Caesarism'

At least three reasons may be adduced to explain the popularity

of 'Caesarism' as a term: the influence of the classical mental set; the recognition of Napoleon III's political system as a phenomenon which surpassed previous modes of domination; the issue of 'the masses' and how they might be contained.

A Napoleon, Caesar and the 'great parallel'

Few analogies can have proved more seductive than the one linking the political careers of Julius Caesar and Napoleon Bonaparte, an alleged historical resemblance that has exercised the imagination of scholars, journalists and propagandists for almost two centuries. True, Napoleon I was not the only person to find himself compared with ancient Rome's most famous dictator – Mirabeau had earlier claimed this mantle for Lafayette (Soboul, 1977, p. 55); nor was Julius Caesar the only model which commended itself to those with a penchant for heroic parallels: Alexander, Charlemagne, and Cromwell, to name but three, were all identified, at one time or another, as figures whose monumental deeds bore affinity with those of the Corsican. But if one name was to stick to Napoleon more than any other it was that of Caesar. There is evidence that he would not have been too downcast by the association.[5]

In a celebrated passage, Marx once observed that just when people

> appear to be engaged in the revolutionary transformation of themselves and their material surroundings, in the creation of something which does not yet exist, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they timidly conjure up the spirits of the past to help them; they borrow their names, slogans and costumes so as to stage the new world-historical scene in this venerable disguise and borrowed language. Luther put on the mask of the apostle Paul; the Revolution of 1789–1814 draped itself alternately as the Roman republic and the Roman empire (Marx, 1973, pp. 146–7)

Marx goes on to say that once bourgeois society had been established in France by a revolution acted out 'in Roman costume and with Roman slogans', the 'resurrected imitations of Rome – imitations of Brutus, Gracchus, Publicola, the tribunes, the senators, and Caesar himself' (p. 147) – disappeared, an assessment which was actually premature. But Marx's central point is tenable: when confronted by new situations, it is usual to respond through analogy with the past, through recourse to the conduit of tradition; if only because thought is a transformative practice working on pre-existent materials – which is to say on other concepts and

experiences already known to us, as the classical tradition was known to the people of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. (Our lack of such a widespread classical tradition today is one reason for supposing that Caesarism will never again be a popular catchword.)

Now the tendency to depict the modern era (as we now recognise it) in the language and forms of antiquity was a signal characteristic of nineteenth century thought. Dieter Groh (1972, p. 727), a distinguished contributor to the research on Caesarism, has aptly called this inclination 'the great parallel' and noted that its longevity actually extends from the Enlightenment to the 1880s and beyond. Patrick Brantlinger (1983, p. 17) makes a similar point when he documents the history, and muted persistence to this day, of 'positive' and 'negative' classicisms, responses to mass politics and 'mass culture' (one must be wary of anachronistic phrases) which mythologically either idealise a past golden age from which modernity has supposedly deviated and which it is enjoined to resurrect ('positive' classicism), or, alternatively, 'suggest that the present is a recreation or repetition of the past in a disastrous way: the modern world is said to have entered a stage of its history like that of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire' ('negative' classicism). Traces of the great parallel, basic to which was the decline of the Roman *Republic* and its aftermath, figure conspicuously in the political predictions of Diderot and Friedrich II. Their reading of the Republic's demise, together with their understanding of Cromwell as 'the first modern usurper of hereditary monarchy' (Groh, 1972, p. 732), did not persuade them to be sanguine about the future. And that kind of perspective was lent inexorable momentum by the French Revolution and Napoleon: for a century afterwards, major currents of political theory and polemic across the ideological spectrum would attempt to make sense of these events, their causes and consequences, with the example of Rome as paradigmatic. Recurring elements would include: the masses as the new barbarians; civil war; the Caesar figure as *bête noire* or saviour; a popularly based usurpatory militarism as the dominant type of modern state.

The insights of both Marx and Groh help to explain what Gollwitzer, understandably, ignored: why the term Caesarism emerged and flourished as a nineteenth century keyword. People were engaged in an attempt to understand radical social change; they resorted to the great parallel with Rome to aid them in this labour, which was natural for an age whose intellectuals had been suckled on a classical education. But why then did the word not emerge earlier, say immediately following Brumaire or after Bonaparte assumed the title of Emperor on 18 May 1804? This is a hard question

about timing which is difficult to answer with any confidence. Many conditions were ripe for the term's genesis. Aspects of the idea were certainly present during the first Napoleon's lifetime. One suspects[6] that although Romieu himself did not consider Napoleon's nephew as the embodiment of 'Caesarism' when he first wrote his essay, it took Louis' coup of 2 December 1851 to secure and galvanise another dimension of the word vital for its public dissemination: namely, whether conceived of as a parody of his illustrious relation, or as an authentic second coming, the arrival of Louis' regime suggested the establishment and consolidation of a state-society *pattern* of which Napoleon I had been the prototype. In other words, the alleged repetition of a Napoleonic type of rule seemed to reveal it as the crystallisation of a political principle, a phenomenon *sui generis* whose very recurrence showed it to be something transcending the idiosyncrasies of particular 'great' men – an idea that the suffix '– ism' is perfectly designed to convey.[7] 'Bonapartism', popularised after 1816, was also suited to serving this purpose and often did. But the influence of the great parallel, combined to the theoretical obsession with historical cycles, would naturally have been conducive to mention of Caesar.

B Caesarism and illegitimacy

Our attempt to explain the advent of 'Caesarism' as a term and concept receives a welcome fillip from the thought-provoking approach to the problem advanced by Melvin Richter, the American political theorist and historian of ideas. This approach is premised on a specific contention about method which, to do justice to his analysis, requires being stated at the outset.

Richter is convinced that we can learn much about such heavily loaded notions as 'legitimacy' and 'liberty' – about the significance attributed to them by historical actors, about their role in constructing conceptual frames of reference defining political common sense – by an investigation into their antinomies. Richter's test case, through which he seeks to demonstrate the relatedness of normative terms, is the pair 'legitimate regime' and 'illegitimate regime' as it evolved in France during the years of 'revolution, counter-revolution, restoration and imperial foundation' (1982, p. 187) that span the period 1789–1852, a time characterised by a fierce ideological assault prosecuted by the enemies of the (first) Bonapartist regime experience. The battle that ensued between, on the one hand, an alliance of Royalist and liberal critics of the Bonapartist regime and, on the other, Napoleonic partisans, was simultaneously cultural and political.

It was cultural in that an important role was taken by French intellectuals who, 'sensible that mankind is governed by names' (Gibbon, 1910, p. 71) determined to monopolise on behalf of their own chosen constituency that most coveted of political identities: the claim to *de jure* governance. Their theatre of war may have been labels, their battle-engines the pen, the printing press and the lecture; but the prize to be gained – the power to define what was rightful and to dignify interest with the mystique of authority – meant that theoretical argument automatically assumed a practical political significance. A claim by one party to be legitimate necessarily involved rubbishing the claims of its rivals as illegitimate. Conversely, a critique of a rival's legitimacy involved a justification of the putative ingredient that constituted one's own moral superiority. Both activities had implications for how part of the political public viewed, and judged, incumbents of the higher echelons of the state apparatuses, and how the latter, in turn, themselves construed the purpose of their rule and their place in society.[8]

It is against this backdrop of affirmation and imprecation over the politics of (il)legitimacy that Richter's comments about Caesarism are best appreciated. He invites us to consider 'Caesarism' as part of a 'negative model' (1981, p. 63) or, alternatively, as one of a 'family of concepts' (1981, p. 71) – encompassing 'tyranny', 'despotism', 'absolute monarchy', 'usurpation' and 'totalitarianism' – which political thinkers have employed from antiquity onwards to 'designate a relationship between rulers and ruled strictly analogous to that of master over slave' (1981, p. 72). These concepts, envisaged historically, were attempts to convey a dominant or prominent mode of illegitimacy then flourishing – for instance, the tyrannies of the ancient Greek *polis*, the absolutist rule of eighteenth century European monarchs – and, in the process of describing the situation obtaining, they also secreted criteria for evaluating that situation, which in effect meant condemning it as heinous. 'Bonapartism' or 'Caesarism' or 'plebiscitary dictatorship' (1982, pp. 186, 191, 202) – there is a tendency for Richter to treat these notions as equivalents – were the nineteenth century counterparts of earlier (and later) categories of illegitimate rule, typifying regimes thought to represent 'the most dangerous potentialities of politics in the modern age' (1981, p. 63). 'Bonapartism', first used in France around 1816, '(f)or a time . . . could mean either supporters of Napoleon or the regime he created'; 'Caesarism', on the other hand, 'came into general use to refer to a regime type only after 1851, when Louis Napoleon repeated the sequence of taking over, by military *coup d'etat*, a republic established by revolution' (1982, p. 186).[9] Then, after Louis'

coup, 'Bonapartism' and 'Caesarism' tended progressively to merge with one another, coming to be treated as virtually synonymous.

Given that a vocabulary of negative terms already existed (tyranny, despotism, absolutism, usurpation) through which the odious character of a regime might be communicated, what was it exactly about nineteenth-century France that prompted the creation and dissemination of 'Bonapartism' and 'Caesarism'? Richter's reply – echoing the advice of Vico (Pompa, ed., 1982, p. 180) to see the order of ideas proceeding according to the order of things – is nicely materialist in its attempt to link thought to experience, for what he suggests is that the previous discourse carried associations which political thinkers increasingly sensed to be inadequate to express the new social reality. Recognising a gap between the language they had inherited and the situation they currently faced, glimmering that words lose their fluency as they lose their relevance, a group of thinkers in the first half of the nineteeneth century sought new terminological bearings: the result, eventually, was the birth of 'Bonapartism' and, later, 'Caesarism'.

Unfortunately, Richter does not say much more than this specifically about 'Caesarism', though his brevity is explicable for a couple of reasons. First, Caesarism as a concept is of interest to him only insofar as it comprises one of the 'family' of notions that express illegitimate domination and whose role in political thought and action the author wishes to understand. Second, because he tends to concentrate on the sixty years prior to 1850 there is a sense in which Richter's analysis deals mostly with 'Caesarism''s pregnancy rather than its birth. The two anti-republican, anti-Bonapartist and, incidentally, anti-democratic strains of French though he examines – the camps of Royalism (Burke, Maistre, Chateaubriand, Bonald) and liberalism (Constant, Madame de Staël, Guizot) – were ones which certainly anticipated a number of central *ideas* that 'Caesarism' would later magnetise to itself. Such ideas included the theme 'that there is an inevitable slide from revolutionary governments based on popular sovereignty into military domination by a single commander' (1982, p. 192) (the view of Royalists) and the contention that where the people have politically abdicated, have renounced their rights as individual citizens and instead entrusted supreme legislative and executive power to a supposed representative of the general will, a lamentable condition of 'democratic despotism' (Guizot) ensues. However, as Richter shows, none of the theorists from either camp, used the *term* Caesarism: all were searching for a new word to express the new thing. It fell to later generations of thinkers, among them Marx, Bagehot, Tocqueville, Lorenz von

Stein and Max Weber to break new ground; it was they who, pondering on the significance of Louis Napoleon's reign for France and modern politics more generally, would use and develop (or consciously criticise and discount) such terms as 'Caesarism', 'Bonapartism' and 'plebiscitary dictatorship'.

> Often it was argued that under such dictatorships (as Louis Napoleon's: P. B.), subjects were put under greater constraints than under tyranny, despotism, or absolute monarchy. The modern age was the first to use such effective psychological manipulation, mass mobilisation, the organisation of enthusiasm by nationalistic appeals, and effective all-encompassing bureaucratic controls. And a single man was the focus of such loyalties. (Richter, 1981, p. 73)

Richter's abbreviated analysis is not without its problems. It underplays the variety of meanings 'Caesarism' could adopt; the restriction of his analysis to France and his broad identification of 'Caesarism' with 'Bonapartism' compound this tendency to homogenise. More seriously, Richter actually exaggerates the extent to which 'Caesarism' was, indeed, a pejorative term. Without doubt it was such a word of disparagement in the majority of cases, particularly in Germany, as Gollwitzer's essay illustrates. But Gollwitzer points also to a range of people of diverse intellectual backgrounds and political persuasions who envisaged the 'Caesarism of Napoleon III' in ways quite different to what one might have expected from Richter's argument.

Consider only German conservative thought of the period: overwhelmingly antagonistic to the Napoleonic model it certainly was, but there remained plenty of scope for recusancy. Conservatives like Radowitz, Riehl, Manteuffel, Quehl, Bohmer and Segesser actually congratulated Napoleon III's Caesarism for confronting the red menace, checking revolution, reaffirming the sanctity of private property and for generally restoring 'order'. Moreover, even in the French case, uncomfortable facts exist to challenge sweeping generalisation. Romieu's usage of 'Caesarism' was not negative in quite Richter's sense. Resigned to a cyclical philosophy of history, Romieu positively welcomed the prospect of Caesarism: it would destroy the liberalism he so abhorred. Nor was the term employed in a derogatory manner by members of the Bonapartist party. And it is also pertinent that while the author of the entry on 'Césarisme' for Larousse's (1867) *Grand dictionnaire universal* does not hide his own personal animosity for the phenomenon it is his task to define, he retains sufficient detachment as a scholar to record that

> Caesarism implies *necessarily* the idea of a government *either good or bad* according to the person who will exercise it . . . It is one of the *progressive* forms of despotism, fitting to those peoples who cannot or do not know how to govern themselves. (1867, p. 812, my emphasis)

On the other hand, Richter's study moves the discussion of Caesarism beyond Gollwitzer. Richter takes seriously the language he studies. And after reading him 'Caesarism' (and 'Bonapartism' etc.) can be shown to possess three dimensions: it exists as word, as concept, and as a member of a family of concepts. The word's currency, we have established, is a product of the 1850s. The concept has a longer ancestry. Burke, Maistre and Bonald all warned that popular revolution would result in the hegemony of a general. Diderot and Friedrich II wrote uneasily about future post-royal forms of autocracy in terms that uncannily prefigure later thinking about Caesarism.[10] Finally, the family of concepts expressing illegitimate rule, of which Caesarism (in some renditions) is but one, is traceable to the ancient world. Richter's distinction lends 'Caesarism' a breadth lacking in other, more narrowly focused treatments; our understanding of the nature of political language is, in consequence, considerably enhanced.

C *Caesarism and the rise of 'the masses'*

A third candidate nominated to stand as an explanation for 'Caesarism's influence as a nineteenth-century political term/concept has been proposed by George Mosse. 'Caesarism', Mosse observes, 'became involved with the new importance given to the masses as a political force in the post revolutionary age':

> Caesarism as a concept is important in modern times because it became shorthand for a new political constellation arising during the nineteenth century. As a result of the French revolution, political theorists began to distinguish between two kinds of democracy: the rule of representatives, and the rule of the masses. . . A discussion of Caesarism leads necessarily to an analysis of the rise of mass democracy: if not yet within the reality of historical development, then, certainly, as either a fear or hope in the minds of men concerned with the trend of the politics of their time. (Mosse, 1971, pp. 167–8)

Mosse is wrong if he believes that the distinction between the two kinds of democracy was first mooted after the Great Revolution: in fact, it had already been implied by, among others, Spinoza, Hamilton (Williams, 1976, pp. 83–4) and Hume (Hendel, ed.,

1953, p. 13). But Mosse is right on the crucial issue: 'Caesarism' had an intrinsic relationship to the dramatic entry of 'the masses' onto the political stage after the French Revolution and their demand over the next century and a half, in all European countries, for political and social justice with all this suggests.

Virtually integral to 'Caesarism"s development as a vernacular term was a denigration of the capacity of ordinary people to engage rationally and reflectively in politics. 'Caesarism' had an emotion in it: contempt. Reference to the crazed, mad, blind, stupid or just plain ignorant 'masses' has been 'Caesarism"s leitmotif from its earliest articulation (see, for instance, Romieu, 1850, pp. 6, 77 on the 'inner barbarians'). In this it differs from such terms as dictatorship, usurpation, absolutism and totalitarianism which do not, I think, carry overtones of disdain for the vast bulk of humanity. Two variations on the theme of Caesarism's relationship to the unreasoning masses — a weak and a strong one — are apparent. In the first, it is a presumed popular nescience that helps explain Caesarism. As an illustration of this outlook, consider Bagehot, for whom Caesarism 'stops the effectual inculcation of important thought upon the mass of mankind' (1968, p. 113). Under the regime of Napoleon III, Bagehot insisted, high brow culture may thrive and respect still be afforded to the achievements of scholarship. But outside of cultivated circles a populace has been created which is totally unschooled politically — a consequence of the Second Empire's draconian censorship policy. As he puts it, for

> the crude mass of men . . . there are but two instruments penetrative enough to reach their opaque minds — the newspaper article and the popular speech, and both of these are forbidden. (1968, p. 113)

Whatever one might think about the patronising tone of these comments, Bagehot at least attempts a political explanation of the alleged mass vacuity, just as Tocqueville, with greater humanity, had earlier inferred a sociological one (Tocqueville, 1968, pp. 242–4). Writers who subscribe to the second variation of the mass irrationality theme, by contrast, seem to have accepted the deficient character of collective behaviour as a congenital datum. Bismarck, for example, was clear that, without the 'restraining influence of the propertied class', a state would be destroyed by 'the unreasoning masses'. But stability of a sort would seen reassert itself because it corresponds to a need the masses feel keenly:

> if they do not recognise this need *a priori*, they always realise it eventually after manifold arguments *ad hominem*; and in order 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'. (Bismarck, 1898, Vol. II, pp. 65–6)

Treitschke, one of the Iron Chancellor's greatest admirers, was similarly struck by the idiocy of the mass, warmly endorsing in his *Politik* Schiller's assertion that 'Majorities are folly and reason has always lodged among the few' (Treitschke, 1916, p. 277). Democratic government (i.e. the masses in power), Treitschke maintained, 'must totally lack certain finer attributes of political intelligence, and more especially the gift of foresight'; the common people are 'peculiarly responsive to direct and simple sensations, good or bad alike' and 'are easily roused by a skilful demagogue' (Treitschke, pp. 282, 289).[11]

Examples of authors from both camps could be multiplied, but what is more important for us to do is recognise why the term 'Caesarism' could function as shorthand for popular denigration, and what relationship this denigration had to the issues of direct and representative democracy mentioned earlier by Mosse. Probably, 'Caesarism' was a particularly useful term because of its *pleb*iscitarian associations. The term conjured up the Roman mob, manipulated by the *popularis* Caesar who destroyed the 'representative' organ of the commonwealth, the Senate. The spectre of the multitude, in a period of growing demands for electoral representation, was for most of the propertied class daunting and terrifying. For if the masses were essentially stupid (either as mass or because of their lack of education) but, through some social disaster, were in a position of political strength *vis-à-vis* other social classes; and if their influence when exerted, were not modified, mediated or guided by those best fitted to rule by virtue of their sagacity and property (the two were predictably conflated); then the masses would naturally, since they lacked the rational attribute of autonomy, succumb to some *other* person or group from outside society proper – the illegitimate usurper – whose talents for oratory, management and mobilisation (especially effective among the impressionable and those who crave discipline) would issue in a centralised, militarist, tyrannical dominion. Such a prospect of direct, popular influence and its terminus in Caesarism caused many people to see representative democracy as the only civilised alternative to tyranny. Yet one should not forget that there were others – Gollwitzer mentions some of them – for whom Caesarism was not completely negative; precisely as a *curb* on disorder and socialism its appearance might even be supported.

It goes without saying that there is an inevitable artificiality

about the social logic I have just presented. 'Caesarism', like every idea, has been subject to change and refinement in the course of its evolution. A word is a process, chameleon-like and nuanced, always conditioned by the class, generational, national, and ideological position of its bearer. One argument cannot do justice to all this, but the trait here identified— contempt for the common people — is amply attested to in the sources.

Conclusion

In this article I have sought to augment Gollwitzer's study and to locate it in contemporary discussions. The latter complement and build upon his achievements, rather than contradict or lessen them. It has been said recently by Gareth Stedman Jones that social historians (and, by extension, sociologists and political scientists too) could learn much by investigating 'languages of class'. As he observes,

> We need to map out (the) successive languages of radicalism, liberalism, socialism etc., both in relation to the political languages they replace and laterally in relation to rival political languages with which they are in conflict. Only then can we begin to assess their reasons for success or failure at specific points in time'. (Jones, 1983, p. 22)

This is surely right. But I think we also need to map out the successive languages of *domination* which though related to languages of class are not reducible to them. 'Caesarism' formed a key term in one such language, in some European countries, during the second half of the nineteenth century. We need to know more of the process it represented, and the issue is important. For behind the battle over words and meanings, today, just as much as in the nineteenth century, a serious contest is being decided: a contest for the minds, sensibilities and political behaviour of individual men and women.

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Notes

1 For instance Allan Mitchell (1977). Also, in the same number, Mitchell's exchange with M. Stürmer on the analytical utility (or lack of it) of the concept of Caesarism.

2 *Meyers Enzyklopädisches Lexikon* (1972, p. 364), defining 'Cäsarismus' as a description for 'a technique of rule, characterised by the uniting of

political power in the hands of one person, legitimation through plebiscite and sham-democratic institutions, as well as by the organising of support for the regime through armed force and through a staff of officials' claims the term emerged in Germany between 1800 and 1830. No evidence is offered for this periodisation, an omission which leads me to doubt its accuracy.

3 The *Grand Larousse* (1971, p. 652) is emphatic on this. *Robert* (1966, p. 689) is more cautious.

4 See the meandering formulation in Bagehot, 1968 pp. 155–6. Five and a half years previously, in an article also published in *The Economist*, entitled 'Caesareanism (sic) as it now exists', Bagehot compared Napoleons I and III to Julius Caesar 'the first instance of a democratic despot' who 'overthrew an aristocracy – by the help of the people, the unorganised people'. Moreover, whereas the old monarchies of feudal origin claimed obedience from the people on the grounds of duty, 'Louis Napoleon is a Benthamite despot. He is for the "greatest happiness of the greatest number". He says, "I am where I am, because I know better than any one else what is good for the French people, and they know that I know better". He is not the Lord's annointed; he is the people's agent' (Bagehot, 1968, pp. 111–16, at p. 111).

5 See the breathtakingly disingenuous comments of Napoleon, his *coup* immenent, to the Council of Ancients, as recorded in his own memoirs (ed. Chair, 1948, pp. 375–6). Compare with Josephine's recollections of an incident five years later (ed. Le Normand, 1895, p. 250) and with von Müller's notes on a conversation between Napoleon and Goethe of 2 October 1808 (eds Luke and Pick, 1966, p. 72). Some ambivalence, however, remained: see Napoleon's letter of 3 October 1809 to the Institute, a revealing document (ed. Thompson, 1954, p. 224).

6 My interpretation is derivative of Richter (1982, p. 186).

7 See Koebner and Schmidt (1965, p. xiv).

8 An important part of Richter's project is to show how political discourse has consequences for political behaviour. Compare his statement that 'In this unstable context, claims that a regime was legitimate or illegitimate could not be a matter of indifference to political actors, whether incumbents or contenders for power' (Richter, 1982, p. 187) with Quentin Skinner's comment (1978, p. xiii) that: '. . . in recovering the terms of the normative vocabulary available to any given agent for the description of his political behaviour, we are at the same time indicating one of the constraints upon his behaviour itself. This suggests that, in order to explain why such an agent acts as he does, we are bound to make some reference to this vocabulary, since it evidently figures as one of the determinants of his action'.

9 See my note 6 above.

10 On the 'intellectual foundations of Caesarism' one may also consult Bruun (1938, pp. 1–2). Sometimes the search for these foundations takes on an air of unreality, as when, for instance, Hofmann writes of 'the Caesarist model of Thomas Hobbes and his successors' (Hofmann, 1977, p. 93).

11 These remarks are not from his chapter on Caesarism but they do bear an indirect relationship to it since, for Treitschke, Caesarism is the quintessence of what he calls 'democratic tyranny'.

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