

# European Journal of Sociology

<http://journals.cambridge.org/EUR>

Additional services for ***European Journal of Sociology***:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)

EUROPEAN  
*Archives Européennes de Sociologie*  
JOURNAL  
*Europäisches Archiv für Soziologie*  
OF SOCIOLOGY

VOL 55  
2014 NO 1

Modes of Violence

CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

---

## Max Weber as a critic of Bismarck

Peter Baehr

European Journal of Sociology / Volume 29 / Issue 01 / May 1988, pp 149 - 164

DOI: 10.1017/S0003975600005622, Published online: 28 July 2009

**Link to this article:** [http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S0003975600005622](http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0003975600005622)

### How to cite this article:

Peter Baehr (1988). Max Weber as a critic of Bismarck. *European Journal of Sociology*, 29, pp 149-164 doi:10.1017/S0003975600005622

**Request Permissions :** [Click here](#)

THIS ARTICLE examines Max Weber's appraisal of Bismarck as a 'Caesarist' figure. An analysis of Weber's opinion of Bismarck serves, I submit, not only as a contribution to the history of a concept (Caesarism) whose importance in German political discourse between 1850-1917 has been admirably documented by Groh (1972) and Gollwitzer (1987). It also helps to shed light on an area of Weber's thought of which we know comparatively little: his idea of *illegitimacy*. Moreover, insofar as Weber's advocacy of constitutional reform in Germany was framed against the backdrop of a negative estimation of Bismarck's legacy, it seems pertinent to subject that evaluation to close textual scrutiny\*.

In what follows I will not attempt to provide a comprehensive account of 'Caesarism' in Weber's work. Hence I shall say nothing of substance on Weber's theory of Caesarism as it relates to charisma, as it appears in his writings on British parliamentarism and the American presidential system, or as it emerges in his reflections on the military. Space does not permit such license, and my focus must hence squarely be on Weber's perception of Bismarck. Nor will I claim that 'Caesarism' is to be envisaged as the 'central' concept of Weber's political sociology, a spatial metaphor which, though fashionable, seems to me disastrous as applied to theory(1). I believe only that Caesarism is an important and

\* M. A. ROMIEU, *L'ère des Césars* (Paris, Ledoyen, 1850); D. GROH, *Cäsarismus*, etc., in O. BRUNNER et al. (eds), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (Stuttgart, Ernst Klett, 1972), I, pp. 726-71; H. GOLLWITZER, The Caesarism of Napoleon III as seen by public opinion in Germany, *Economy and Society*, XVI, 3: 357-404.

Max WEBER, *Gesammelte Politische Schriften*<sup>2</sup> (Tübingen, Mohr, 1958).

(1) Competition to find Weber's central concept (not just in his political sociology but, even more grandiosely, *tout court*) has been fierce and a variety of pretenders have been thrust on the sociological public. From these accounts Weber is so centripetal he is implosive. For a sample, see a. Stark (1967: 261): 'Weber's thought is thoroughly consistent. It is really and truly dominated by one pattern, the heterogony of purposes understood in a negative sense. Weber's key to the interpretation of world history is this pattern and nothing else', emphasis in original; b. Tenbruck (1980: 343-4): the issue of rationalization is 'the vital centre of Weber's thinking'; c. Mueller (1982: 165): the 'polar opposites' of capitalism and socialism are 'the sole (*sic*) centre of Weber's thought';

d. Hennis (1983: 157): Weber's "'central' interest was the specificity of modern *Menschenheit*"; and e. Scaff (1984). Scaff asks rhetorically: 'Is there a central concept, nodal point or idea [...] around which Weber's thought develops' (199), and concludes that there is, that of '*Arbeitsverfassung*, the key theoretical term in Weber's major writings from 1892-1894' (200). It should be noted that, according to Scaff, 'The later texts are a reflection of the formative ideas' (193). It goes without saying that many of the individual observations made by these authors are valuable and stand on their own merit. It is just that the extravagant dress in which the propositions are clothed vitiates, rather than enhances, their plausibility. The spatial metaphor is 'disastrous' because the-

understudied idea from which we can learn something of significance about a complex and subtle thinker who continues to tax our understanding, challenge our prejudices and test our intellectual honesty.

# I

A. J. P. Taylor (1967: 22) has observed nicely that people 'live after their own deaths in the minds of others'. He might have added that there are some people whose spiritual longevity is assured through more than human recollection or the documentary evidence that testifies to their existence: these individuals live on in the institutions they have helped fashion, their influence evident long after they have been removed from office or have exhaled their last breath.

Such a person was Otto von Bismarck. As diplomatic wizard and consummate political strategist, as prime and directing author of the Second Empire's constitution, Bismarck and his supporters engaged themselves in that most formative and momentous of political endeavours, the act of shaping 'the lives of citizens by designing the structure or "dwelling" which they and their posterity will inhabit' (Wolin, 1981: 401)(2). It was a founding act whose significance was not lost on Max Weber, at any rate as he later reflected on it. For Weber the nationalist, who did not expect the historical realisation of an ideal to be wholesome or edifying, the achievement of German unification was a demonstrably necessary geo-political task to pursue, and Bismarck's role in that process cause for profound national gratitude. What appalled Weber from his late teens onwards, however, was Bismarck's management of the subsequent 'peace'(3), the grievous injuries inflicted on the fledgeling Reich in both domestic and foreign arenas by a regime Weber construed to be so self-serving and short-sighted as to mistake the interests of a world power with the survival of a totally anachronistic and irresponsible system of governance. Worse still, that system proved eminently capable of enduring in the absence of its original architect, thus underscoring the need for its institutional transformation.

Where Weber refers to Bismarck the charge of 'Caesarism' is never far away and the word is invariably inflected with animus. One can identify

ories are composed of relations between concepts, not structured as centre is to periphery; and because the notion of a central concept implies an unhistorical and overintegrated view of a person's life and work. In short, the metaphor reproduces the 'mythology of coherence' so ably criticised by Skinner (1969: 16-22).

(2) Wolin is here constructing an anal-

ogy between the founders of states and the founders of sciences.

(3) According to Giddens (1972: 10), Weber's ambivalent attitude towards Bismarck 'lies at the origin of the whole of his political writings'. Giddens' statement is exaggerated, though its stress on Weber's ambivalence is useful.

three features about Bismarck's statecraft which Weber found simultaneously Caesarist and reprehensible.

In the first place, there was Bismarck's own variety of populism, particularly his initiative in introducing, or, to be exact, re-introducing universal manhood suffrage (4), though now extended to encompass the whole of the Reich. Reflecting on the implications for the German polity of the 1884 Reichstag election, the young Weber penned an intriguing letter to his uncle and confidant Hermann Baumgarten. Of course, what with the National Liberals' rightward shift under Johannes Miquel at the eleventh hour of the campaign and the failure of a union with the German Free Thought party to materialise 'the pathetic result', for the forces of liberalism 'was predictable'. 'Interesting', on the other hand, was the success of the Social Democrats in increasing their proportion of the votes cast from 6.1 (1881) to 9.7 per cent and as a consequence doubling their seats in the National Parliament from twelve to twenty-four (5): evidently Bismarck's anti-socialist legislation had failed to turn the tide of their support. After then remarking that a case could conceivably be constructed to support the anti-socialist laws on the grounds that Social Democratic agitation threatened to bring about a general curtailment of civil liberties by the state—better the few repressed than the many (6)—, Weber delivered his indictment of Bismarck in the following somewhat confusing, somewhat laboured metaphor: 'The capital mistake seems to be the Greek gift of Bismarckian Caesarism, universal suffrage, which is sheer murder of equal rights for all in the true sense of the word' (Weber, 1936: 143) (7).

Marianne Weber interprets this statement to constitute not so much an objection to the institution of universal manhood suffrage *per se* than evidence of Weber's distrust of the motives behind its implementation and timing: her husband-to-be, she tells us, 'disapproved of the symbol [as *opposed to the existence?*] of political equality of rights—apparently because it was Bismarck's original plan to use universal suffrage in the Reich to keep liberalism in check' (1975: 118).

There is probably something in this explanation, though exactly how much it is hard to determine with confidence. Certainly the twenty-year-old Weber, already remarkably politically astute, would have recognised

(4) Universal manhood suffrage had suffered a chequered career in Prussia. Established in April 1848 only to be superseded in May 1849 by the notorious three class system, itself a product of reaction, Bismarck had made the institution a central plank of the North German Confederation constitution, ratified in April 1867.

(5) The figures are derived from Table 4 of Koch (1984: 384-5).

(6) The context suggests that this would not be a case to which Weber himself would

subscribe, though his remarks here are very dense and reveal uncharacteristic uncertainty.

(7) Letter to H. Baumgarten, dated 8 November 1884. Weber reaffirmed the link in his own mind between universal suffrage and Caesarism in 'Parliament and Government in a Reconstructed Germany' (1918), a revised and extended version of articles published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in May and June 1917. (See Weber 1978a: 1452 = 1958: 382).

that Bismarck's endorsement of universal manhood suffrage had above all a partisan objective: to outflank liberalism by creating a mass constituency for conservatism, so confident was the Junker that 'In moments of decision the masses will always stand by the King' (quoted in Eyck, 1968: 116). Quite possibly too, Weber would not have shared, in 1884, his uncle's uncompromising repudiation of mass suffrage in principle: Baumgarten was convinced that the institution would eventuate in socialism and the hegemony of a Catholic clergy. (He had declaimed to a distinguished fellow liberal, a little over three and a half years before the Weber letter referred to above, that Bismarck 'has [...] bestowed on us the curse of universal manhood suffrage, which admittedly he knows how to manipulate as a truly Caesarian demagogue but which must cause the greatest disaster in the hands of his successors') (8).

But even if it could be demonstrated that Weber in the mid-1880s agreed with Baumgarten's total opposition, it could also be shown that such an agreement must have been exceedingly short lived. In 1892, writing for *Die Christliche Welt*, Weber's contempt for what he construed to be the ill-informed paranoia of those who nursed the 'superstition that dark and secret powers are at work in the labouring class' is symptomatic of his own less alarmist attitude towards the consequences of mass suffrage; while by the time of the Freiburg Inaugural lecture (May 1895) Weber's acceptance of the electoral presence of the proletariat is clear (it is their political 'immaturity' and 'philistinism' that he decries, not their electoral position and rights in the Reich) as, again, is his scorn for those who continue to be obsessed with the red peril (9). And, of course, during the Great War Weber is robust in demanding that all remaining impediments to the suffrage in Prussia be removed, outraged that the men who had fought for the fatherland might otherwise return to find themselves in the lowest of the Prussian three-class system (10). In fact it

(8) Hermann Baumgarten to Heinrich von Sybel, 29 March 1881, in Bramsted and Melhuish, eds. (1978: 561-2, at 561), editors' transl.

W. Mommsen, commenting on Baumgarten's influence on Weber, points to the 'astounding similarity in direction, temperament, and critical focus' of the former's views 'with Weber's later comments about Bismarck, William II, and the political immaturity of the nation', and Mommsen also notes that Weber 'came to share Baumgarten's opinion of the Caesaristic-demagogic character of Bismarck's policies' (Mommsen 1984: 6, n. 22 and 7 respectively). Cf. Weber's letter to Baumgarten of 30 April 1888 (1936: 292-302, at 300).

Baumgarten's prophecy of doom was,

from the liberal standpoint, partially realised by 1912: in the election of that year one in every three Germans who cast their ballot voted socialist, and though the SPD were denied an overall parliamentary majority they had become nonetheless the single largest party in the Reichstag. See Carr (1979: 191).

(9) The remark in *Christian World* is quoted in Mommsen (1984: 20). On the Freiburg lecture see Weber's comment: 'The danger does *not* lie with the masses, as is believed by people who stare as if hypnotised at the depths of society' (1980: 446-7 = 1958: 23).

(10) See, for example, Weber, 1958: 235 and the parallel discussion in Weber, 1978a: 1382-3 = 1958: 296).

is in one of his wartime articles ('Suffrage and Democracy in Germany', originally published in December 1917) that Weber provides us with the best clue of his thinking about Bismarck's reintroduction and geographical extension of universal manhood suffrage (though naturally one cannot be sure that this was Weber's position at the time of his letter to Baumgarten). What Weber questions here is not the wisdom or necessity of affording the mass of the male population the right to vote, but rather the rapidity with which the process was inaugurated. Weber seems to have thought that the ideals of national parliamentary co-operation and responsibility would have been better served through a gradualist, evolutionary approach to political democratization, say, on British lines; specifically, through a process which would have first embraced the economically and socially privileged and the politically educated, only later ushering in the masses onto the political stage (11). However, this was not to be, the interests of the nation, as Weber perceived them, sacrificed to Bismarck's populist-Cesarism.

Historically speaking, Bismarck's attempt at electoral manipulation formed only one part of his populist strategy and any full analysis of his career would want to consider among other things: his habit of dissolving the Reichstag when it refused to do his bidding, and appealing instead over its head directly to the voters (as in 1878, when the assassination attempt on the Emperor gave him the god-given opportunity to put the National Liberals in their place and come down like an avalanche on the growing socialist movement; or, as in 1887, when he determined to bully parliament into accepting his Appropriations Bill); his management of anti-Catholic feeling in the early-to-mid 1870s; and his part in the introduction of the famous social insurance legislation enacted throughout virtually the whole period of his chancellorship. Weber actually refers to some of these events, and to others I have not mentioned here, in 'Parliament and Government' (1978a: 1388-90 = 1958: 303-6). But they largely fall under the wider rubric of Bismarck's 'demagogy', whereas the term 'Caesarism' is reserved more narrowly to capture one feature of the populist package—Bismarck's role in the foundation of universal male suffrage—and this is why I have accorded it the lion's share of my comments so far.

## II

The second aspect of Bismarck's 'Caesarism' to earn Max Weber's rebuke is quite closely related to the first. It concerns the great man's towering stature and the shadow it casts over the *Kaiserreich*, enthralling

(11) Weber, 1958: 233-4; cf. Weber, 1978a: 1442 = 1958: 370-1.

supporters, intimidating opponents and, subsequently, awing the epigones. Writing just over two decades after Bismarck's death, Weber put the matter thus:

The present condition of our parliamentary life is a legacy of Prince Bismarck's long domination and of the nation's attitude toward him since the last decade of his chancellorship. This attitude has no parallel in the reaction of any other great people toward a statesman of such stature. Nowhere else in the world has even the most unrestrained adulation of a politician made a proud nation sacrifice its substantive convictions so completely (1978a: 1385 = 1958: 299).

These comments are at first bound to strike us as just so much hyperbole, permissible no doubt in the context of a polemic but surely straining the credulity of the social scientist trained to be dubious of heroic conceptions of culture and society. Yet outright dismissal would be premature. For there is solid evidence to show that from the inception of his first Reich chancellorship onwards Bismarck came to be the object of an extraordinarily resilient and pervasive personality cult, the effects of which were as profound as they were to prove ultimately damaging. Bismarck's deeds only partially explain the elevation he enjoyed. Just as important was the context in which the man became hero, namely a Reich newly-forged and vigorously particularist in its social structure and in its political and cultural temperament: discounting Prussia, twenty-four governments composed the Empire, many of which remained hostile to Prussia's hegemony and extremely jealous of traditions (including confessional ones) and prerogatives they were determined to preserve. The new Empire, bereft of its own organic identity and lacking the collective symbols through which its unity might be affirmed (12), found in Bismarck its personalised surrogate—this is the plausible thesis advanced by Gordon Craig. And Craig shows how across the whole spectrum of German culture of the 1870s and 1880s and beyond—for instance, in the history of Treitschke, in the painting of Böcklin, Lenbach and Feuerbach, in the stories of Heyse, and, at the beginning of the twentieth century, in the sculpture of Begas, Lederer and Schaudt—the Bismarck myth grew, compensatory apotheosis of an uncertain Empire seeking social and emotional coherence (13).

Max Weber's own attitude towards Bismarck the person and Bismarck the legend are best treated separately. The Bismarck legend he quite simply detested. Bismarck the icon, '*Bismarck sans phrase*' (Marianne Weber, 1975: 118), he denounced not just as an intellectual

(12) Craig, 1981: 58: Germany had no national flag until 1892, and no national hymn until after the First World War; and the choice of the day of the victory at Sedan as the national holiday was widely opposed. Even in the matter of national monuments, the Germans had their troubles. The Teutoburger Wald monument (1875) and the Niederwald 'Germania' monument (1885) celebrated events so remote in time as to

have little sentimental importance for the new Reich.

The controversy that surrounded the 1913 centenary 'celebrations' is another indication of the absence of agreed-upon national symbols: on the controversy, see Eley, 1976: 284-285.

(13) Craig, 1981: 58-60.

capitulation but a distortion of Bismarck's achievement by men who, in seeking to emulate his example, simultaneously misrepresented it through concentrating exclusively on 'the admixture of violence and cunning, the seeming or actual brutality of his political approach' (1978a: 1385 = 1958: 299) (14).

Weber's attitude to the man, however, was more complex. As I hinted at the beginning of Section I, Weber found much in Bismarck to admire. Weber appreciated the Chancellor's tactical adroitness and intellectual sophistication (his mental acuity, Weber would say, was often lost on admirers and detractors alike), perversely respected the sheer lack of humbug that accompanied his *Machtpolitik*. At the same time, Bismarck's ambition, his monomania and the political excesses it encouraged, had left the nation with the deepest scars. For Bismarck had bequeathed to his successors 'a nation without any political sophistication, far below the level which in this regard it had reached twenty years before (i.e. in 1870)'; 'a nation without any political will of its own, accustomed to the idea that the great statesman at the helm would make the necessary political decisions'; 'a nation accustomed to fatalistic sufferance of all decisions made in the name of "monarchic government", because he had misused monarchic sentiments as a cover for his power interests in the struggle of the parties'; 'a nation unprepared to look critically at the qualification of those who settled down in his empty chair'. Furthermore:

The great statesman did not leave behind any political tradition. He neither attracted nor even suffered independent political minds, not to speak of strong political personalities. On top of all this, it was the nation's misfortune that he harboured [...] intense mistrust toward all even vaguely possible successors [...] A completely powerless parliament was the purely negative result of his tremendous prestige. (1978a: 1392 = 1958: 307-8—I have omitted Weber's many emphases) (15).

Weber's censoriousness, deeply felt and powerful as it is, has to be treated with some care in a study part of whose aim is to clarify political nomenclature; we cannot simply assume that every article on the above list of condemnation amounts to a specifically 'Caesarist' attribute. Instead we must look to other statements to confirm what was, and what was not, distinctly Caesarist about Bismarck's rule. Undoubtedly one trait which was Caesarist was Bismarck's capacity to leave his nation

(14) Weber's rather nebulous target is a section of the 'political literati which entered public life from about 1878 on'. He tells us that from 1878 this group represented the dominant tendency in 'political literati' opinion.

(15) Weber also says here that the 'intellectual level' of the parliament Bismarck left behind him 'was greatly depressed', an opinion contested by Sheehan, 1968-9, esp. 527,

n. 47. On the other hand, Weber's point (1978a: 1388 = 1958: 303) that 'Bismarck did not tolerate any autonomous power—neither within the ministries nor within parliament' has received authoritative corroboration by Röhl. On the fascinating minutiae relating to how Bismarck attempted comprehensively to rule over his Prussian ministers and state [Reich] secretaries, see Röhl, 1967: 20-6.



'without any political will of its own, accustomed to the idea that the great statesman at the helm would make the necessary political decisions', because Weber mentions just this characteristic in the Freiburg Inaugural and invokes the image of Caesar to illustrate his point. In that famous lecture, which Ernst Nolte (1969: 558) once described as abounding 'in phrases which, in meaning and sometimes even formulation, could have appeared in *Mein Kampf*' (!) (16) and which Wolfgang Mommsen (1984: 137), in his first, great book on Weber depicted with perfect accuracy as a 'beacon of German imperialism', Weber ponders, among other things, the qualification of the middle class to govern Germany as the latter approaches a new and potentially dangerous century, and concludes that 'the bourgeois classes, as repositories of the power-interests of the nation, seem to be withering, and there is still no sign that the workers have begun to mature so that they can take their place' (1980: 446 = 1958: 23). Weber's fear was of an interregnum without end, a prospect which that self-proclaimed member and partisan of the bourgeoisie could not be expected to contemplate dispassionately. His diagnosis was in fact all the more gloomy in that the explanation he proffered for the political immaturity which inflicted his own class, just as he claimed it did the proletariat, cited causes which no amount of wishful thinking could reverse: 'The explanation lies in its unpolitical past, in the fact that one cannot make up in a decade for a missing century of political education, and that the domination of a great man is not always an appropriate instrument for such a process' (1980: 445 = 1958: 22; cf. 1978a: 1420 = 1958: 343).

Bismarck—the 'great man' to whom Weber is so obviously referring, 'that Caesar-like figure hewn out of quite other than bourgeois timber' (1980: 444 = 1958: 20-1), architect of German unification and *de facto* ruler of the German Empire until his 'departure' from office in 1890, 'the all-powerful physician to whom we have entrusted everything', as Weber's favourite uncle had once bleated (17)—was no longer in charge when Weber spoke these words, even if his scheming continued unabated. But his deeds and example had stamped their indelible imprint on an impressionable Reich to such a degree that the middle class (at least this is Weber's thesis) accustomed to a prostrate position before a Titan, had lost the will, perhaps even the ability, to get off its knees: 'One section of the *haute bourgeoisie* longs all too shamelessly for the coming of a new Caesar, who will protect them in two directions: from beneath against the rising masses of the people, from above against the socio-political impulses they suspect the German dynasties of harbouring' (1980: 445 = 1958: 21). There had been a time when Bismarck had been compelled to force 'his Caesarism' on a 'reluctant bourgeoisie'

(16) Nolte goes on to insist, however, that Weber is wrongly seen as an intellectual precursor of fascism.

(17) In another letter to Sybel, this one dated 21 July 1880: see Bramsted and Melhuish, 1978: 559.

(1958: 233); then, increasingly terrorised by their own insecurity, they had come to accept willingly their own subaltern status within the Reich, reconciled to a regime 'half "Caesarist", half "patriarchal"' (1971: 31) whose existence was severely detrimental to the nation's political education (18).

When, many years later, Weber returned to the relationship between Bismarck and the bourgeoisie, his treatment is noticeably different, at least in emphasis. Musing in 'Parliament and Government' on what he called the 'Reichstag's prime period', by which he meant the prime period of German liberalism (19), the bourgeoisie's political *leadership* is dealt with sympathetically and respectfully, in sharp contrast to the hectoring the bourgeois *class* has received in the earlier Freiburg lecture. These leaders, predominantly National Liberal in affiliation, had been candid enough to admit Bismarck's 'tremendous intellectual superiority' without thereby abdicating their political responsibility. For while Weber recalled hearing liberal big-wig guests of his parents opining that 'they would consider Caesarism—government by a genius—the best political organisation for Germany, if there would always be a new Bismarck' (1978a: 1387 = 1958: 302) (20), the point of this reminiscence is to insist that these same people had no illusions about such a phenomenon occurring. They had therefore attempted to secure a strong parliamentary and party system capable of 'attracting great political talents', and capable of providing political stability and continuity; moreover, many of the most vibrant Reich institutions, such as the office of the Imperial Chancellor, the creation of the *Reichsbank* and the unification of the civil code, had been born of the liberal parliamentary initiatives (1978a: 1387-8 = 1958: 302-3). That they failed to wrest power from the Bismarck system, in which they were so enmeshed, was due to more than the anachronistic aspects of their economic and social policy: it was ultimately because Bismarck himself had successfully stymied every attempt to involve parliament in government. Evidently, then, Weber did not believe that the bourgeoisie's political immaturity was due to the puerility of that class' professed representatives (21). On

(18) Weber's unflattering description of the bourgeoisie has had a significant influence on the development of the theory of the German *Sonderweg*, a favourite theme among historians and sociologists of Germany. The *Sonderweg* (literally, 'special way') has a number of variants but revolves around the core idea that German history was exceptional in not experiencing an authentic bourgeois revolution, this supposed authenticity being measured against a British or French model. The theory is the subject of an interesting, possibly important, definitely repetitive critique by Eley, in Blackburn and Eley, 1984: 39-155.

(19) The National Liberals were unceremoniously ditched by Bismarck in 1879, by which date he had already begun the makings of a new political alignment of conservative parties and the (Catholic) Centre founded on the policy of economic protectionism.

(20) Roth's translation of 'Cäsarismus', 'cäsarisch', and 'cäsaristisch' renders all the English equivalents with a small 'c'. To conform to the practice I have adopted up to now, I propose to use, in all cases, the capital letter.

(21) Note, however, the telescoping of causality that occurs between the Freiburg

the contrary, history had vindicated the National Liberals' sense of political foreboding, a fact Weber sought to ram-home to those whom he saw as the far less percipient members of the contemporary middle class: 'a Caesarist figure like Bismarck' (1978a: 1452 = 1958: 382), and a 'Caesarist regime' like his (1978a: 1413 = 1958: 335) were rare occurrences—'At best, a genius appears once in several centuries' (1978a: 1387 = 1958: 301)—and it was time the nation grew up and threw off a state-system ripe not for a Bismarckian epiphany, but fertile only for posturing literati, for an histrionic Kaiser intoxicated on his own vanity and for an arthritic, token parliamentarism constitutionally destitute of the capacity to exercise real power and responsible leadership.

### III

I come now to the third reproach that Weber levelled against Bismarck's 'Caesarism'. This was the criticism that there was something improper about his rule, something illegitimate about it. Recall that this was another of the accusations on Bismarck's charge-sheet that Weber recited above when he declared that Bismarck 'misused monarchic sentiments as a cover for his power interests in the struggle of the parties'. Or, if that statement is not explicit enough in binding together the elements of Bismarckian governance, illegitimacy and Caesarism, then consider Weber's comment that 'one of the worst legacies of Bismarck's rule has been the fact that he considered it necessary to seek cover for his Caesarist regime behind the legitimacy of the monarch' (1978a: 1413 = 1958: 335, emphasis in German original omitted) (22), a remark which seems to make the affinity sufficiently transparent.

lecture and 'Parliament and Government'. In the former, Germany's travails are attributed to 'a missing century of political education'; in the latter they are adduced to the 'legacy of Prince Bismarck'. The ambivalence actually seems to have been present as early as 1894, on which see Mommsen, 1984: 86.

(22) Also, Weber, 1978a: 1452 = 1958: 382 ('The circumstances of Bismarck's departure from office demonstrate the manner in which hereditary legitimism reacts against [...] Caesarist powers') and Weber, 1978b: 986 = 1964: 726, where 'legitimate' and 'Caesarist' political power are presented as antinomies.

Weber had also implied a similar counterposition of Caesarism to legitimacy as early as January 1891 in the course of more correspondence (laced with irony and sarcasm) with Baumgarten (1936: 327-8):

By the way, I think that it is very important and essentially beneficial for the political formation of the young generation's judgement that they have experienced Bismarck not dying at the height of his power but disappearing from the scene. Immediately after the event [*Bismarck tendered his resignation on 20 March 1890, five days after a stormy confrontation with Wilhelm II over parliamentary and foreign-affairs*], one could make the most interesting observations on his previous admirers, from the opportunists (*Strebernaturen*) who had discovered shortly afterwards that Bismarck basically 'had not grasped his time', to some eager disciples of Treitschke, young historians, who declared that they would only very reluctantly tip their hats before the emperor after he had covered the tribe of the Hohenzollern with the 'ignominy of ungratefulness and petty ambition' like nobody before him. The latter were not able to contradict when we responded that now it would become clear that, as we have always claimed, their seemingly monarchistic loyalty had been nothing else than hidden Caesarism.

Cf. Stürmer, 1977: 115, who quotes Ran-

The observation that Caesarism involves an illegitimate form of rule was not of itself an original or isolated insight. Auguste Romieu (whom Weber never mentions), author of the first treatise on Caesarism, made a similar claim (Romieu, 1850: 130-1, 193-4, 200); so did Wilhelm Roscher (1892: 588-611). Brockhaus, too, is clear on this point (23), as is Tönnies (1917: 210): in the notes-cum-glossary appended to his book on the English and German states, he tells us that 'Caesarism' (after Julius Caesar) is a form of state in which a leader of the people (usually a leader of the army) sets himself up as a sole ruler (*Alleinherrscher*), adding immediately afterwards in parenthesis: 'Illegitimate or irregular monarchy' (24). However, while most sources, to the best of my knowledge, discuss the issue of illegitimacy primarily with an eye to the Napoleonic example, Weber is unusual in thinking out his idea in relation to the two Napoleons and *Bismarck also* (though not just them). What was the connection between these men and their regimes? We are given some clues in a tricky passage in 'Parliament and Government' which I will now quote and then do my best to interpret. Because of the importance of this passage, notable for the plethora of references to Caesarism it contains, I propose to quote it at some length.

The context of Weber's discussion is the issue of 'the relationship between democracy and parliamentarism':

Active mass democratization means that the political leader is no longer proclaimed a candidate because he has proved himself in a circle of *honoratiors*, then becoming a leader because of his parliamentary accomplishments, but that he gains the trust and the faith of the masses in him and his power with the means of *mass* demagogy. In substance, this means a shift toward the *Caesarist* mode of selection. Indeed, every democracy tends in this direction. After all, the specifically Caesarist technique is the plebiscite. It is not an ordinary vote or election, but a profession of faith in the calling of him who demands these acclamations. The Caesarist leader rises either in a military fashion, as a military dictator like Napoleon I, who had his position affirmed through a plebiscite; or he rises in the bourgeois fashion: through plebiscitary affirmation, acquiesced in by the army, of a claim to power on the part of a non-military politician, such as Napoleon III. Both avenues are as antagonistic to the parliamentary principle as they are (of course) to the legitimism of the hereditary monarchy. Every kind of direct *popular election* of the supreme ruler and, beyond that, every kind of

ke's crisp judgement of Bismarck: 'Indispensable for the state, but intolerable for the dynasties'.

(23) Brockhaus, 1883:

The term Caesarism [part of its long definition reads] has come into use mainly to characterize the Napoleonic system. In this sense it means a particular kind of monarchy, which is different from the absolute as well as the constitutional ones because of its democratic basis and lack of legitimacy. Its essence is, however, a personal autocratic regime which is based on the predominance of administration and the ruthless enforcement of state power. The constitutional authority of the legislative bodies is used for its

disguise and it tries to surround itself with the dubious glamour of a self-created aristocracy (13th ed.: 38).

(24) Most of Tönnies' discussion of Caesarism relates, however, not to a military leader but to the office of the British prime minister. Suffice it only to note here Tönnies' observation of the 'similarities between the British and ancient Roman empires', a parallel he discerns in both title ('the name Prime Minister reminds one of the Principate') and in the formidable extent of the Premier's powers to change laws, initiate taxation and generally harness state power to his own ends (1917: 50).

political power that rests on the confidence of the masses and not of parliament—this includes also the position of a popular military hero like Hindenburg—lies on the road to these 'pure' forms of Caesarist acclamation. In particular, this is true of the position of the President of the United States, whose superiority over parliament derives from his (formally) democratic nomination and election. The hopes that a Caesarist figure like Bismarck attached to universal suffrage and the manner of his antiparliamentary demagoguery also point in the same direction, although they were adapted, in formulation and phraseology, to the given legitimist conditions of his ministerial position. The circumstances of Bismarck's departure from office demonstrate the manner in which hereditary legitimism reacts against these Caesarist powers. Every parliamentary democracy eagerly seeks to eliminate, as dangerous to parliament's power, the plebiscitary methods of leadership selection (1978a: 1451-2 = 1958: 381-2, emphases in German original).

From this dissertation we learn at least something about the genus of Caesarism, modelled on the Napoleonic experience, and its Bismarckian species, but the level of abstraction at which the analysis is pitched is regrettably stratospheric. The genus of Caesarism that the account suggests might be represented thus: *a*. Mode of selection (i.e. leadership route): military or civil ('bourgeois'); *b*. Mode of acclamation: plebiscitary; *c*. Relation to parliament: antagonistic; *d*. Relation to hereditary legitimism: antagonistic; *e*. Conditions of existence: political democratization.

And what of Bismarck? Glossing somewhat, his mode of selection is 'civil' (he is called on by his monarch to become minister president, and though a strategist is not a general)(25); his mode of acclamation is plebiscitary (albeit in the most loose and unsatisfying of senses—historians will wince at Weber's procrustean tendencies): he is a 'demagogue' who leads from the front and who is willing and able to dissolve parliament and appeal directly to the people for support of his policies (26); his relation to parliament is antagonistic, particularly when it will not succumb to his commands and then Bismarck countenances *coups d'état* (27); his relation to the Hohenzollern dynasty is uneasy in that, despite constitutional authority ultimately residing in the Emperor, it is Bismarck himself, ostensible agent of the sovereign, who in fact rules the Reich (a situation Wilhelm II would eventually rudely correct)(28);

(25) In fact Bismarck is consistently having to assert the civil arm of government to restrain military enthusiasm and encroachment, as after the battles of Königgrätz and Sedan, and again during the Bulgarian crisis of 1887: details in Craig, 1981: 2-7, 31-3, 133-4.

(26) See my earlier discussion on Bismarck's populism.

(27) Bismarck's *Staatsstreichpläne* (*coup d'état* plans) were prosecuted in the early spring of 1890 when the old pugilist felt the parliamentary ground collapsing beneath him and as he also witnessed a new Kaiser attempt-

ing to assert his own personal rule. However, as later events were to show, *coup d'état* scheming was endemic to the whole Wilhelmine system and, thus, far transcended Bismarck's partisan designs: the plans were resurrected, for instance, by Eulenburg in the summer of 1894 and by Wilhelm II himself in the winter of 1896-7. On all this Röhl (1967: 50-5, 110-17, 217-22) is excellent.

(28) One of Bismarck's objectives in planning his coup against the Reichstag was actually to increase Wilhelm's dependency on him.

and, finally, all Bismarck's political orchestration takes place within a society which, though far from socially democratic, sanctions universal manhood suffrage.

So it is that Bismarck can be reckoned, in Weber's account, the embodiment of Caesarism. Yet one ambiguity remains; it concerns this question of Caesarist illegitimacy. In *Economy and Society*, though not only there, Weber deals with the two Bonapartes under the rubric of charisma, also presenting the idea of Caesarism as a sociological sub-type of his famous leadership concept. Now, as we know, charisma happens to be one of Weber's trinity of *legitimate* domination, leading one to ask: how is it logically possible for Caesarism to be designated as illegitimate in one context (the discussion of the Bonapartes in 'Parliament and Government') and yet, tacitly related to charismatic legitimacy in another (29)? The answer is probably that Weber, quite simply, is using the concept of legitimacy to mean different things. Caesarism is *illegitimate* only in the *constitutional* sense that it is a type of rule devoid of a hereditary, dynastic foundation. Constitutionally speaking, then, a Bourbon, Habsburg or Hohenzollern monarch could never be labelled 'Caesarist' (30), nor could any other monarchy of venerable standing. By contrast Caesarism necessarily assumes the stamp of legitimacy if we look at it from a *sociological* angle (31): here it is legitimate to the extent that it elicits from a group of people, who believe in the moral authority of the Caesarist leader's mission, their voluntary compliance: Weber says as much in his remark that 'Active mass democratization means that the political leader [...] gains the trust and the faith of the masses in him', etc. Hence, once this dual meaning of 'legitimacy' is comprehended, the seeming incongruity of Weber's formulations evaporates.

#### IV

Since Weber's death in 1920, 'Caesarism' has gradually lost its familiarity and fluency as a political term; to the educated political public of today, the word is virtually meaningless, irrelevant. Nonetheless, as a *technical*, didactic term, 'Caesarism' has endured. Attempts to 'operationalise' it were evident, for instance, in the work of Gerth and Mills

(29) For instance, Weber, 1978b: 268-9, 1126 = 1964: 199-200, 846.

(30) Though polemically speaking he might be so called: Weber does refer to Wilhelm II as 'Bonapartist' (if one wishes to equate that charge with 'Caesarist', cf. Romieu 1850) and also calls him a 'Caesar', though in the latter comment Weber may well be punning on the German word 'Kaiser' (1936: 323, 328).

(31) Or, to be more precise, from the viewpoint of *Weber's* sociological understanding, thus recognizing the criticisms that have been levelled at Weber's concept of legitimacy. For an incisive critique see Parkin (1982: 77-8), and his helpful distinction, which he rightly claims Weber conflates, between 'legitimacy' and 'legitimations'.

(1954: 210) who envisioned Caesarism as a species of 'oriental despotism', or in that of Franz Neumann (1964 ed.: 233-56), for whom Caesarism was but one of a triad of dictatorships [the other two he called 'simple' and 'totalitarian'], notable for its mass base and quintessentially personal dimension. More recently, neo-Gramscians like Stuart Hall and Bill Schwarz have found employment for the term. For Hall (1983: 309-21) and Schwarz (1985: 33-62), Caesarism is to be equated with coalitionist, compromise governments born of a crisis of parliamentary representation in which no social class has been able to assert its political supremacy. (In addition, 'Caesarism' has also had its attractions for those predisposed towards philosophy of history: one thinks of Amaury de Riencourt's *The Coming Caesars* (1958), where Caesarism—the culmination of a long process of social evolution and cyclical development in which American 'Civilisation' has triumphed over European 'Culture'—is depicted as the organic accretion of power condensed in the American Presidential office).

This is not the occasion to review such contributions, nor comment on the controversy regarding how far the Bonapartist regimes (particularly that of Napoleon III) and that of Bismarck's were in fact comparable political formations (32). That would take me too far away from my immediate subject: Max Weber's view of Bismarck. To be sure, Bismarck was not the only person to be called 'Caesarist' by Weber—the two Bonapartes (as we saw in III above), Lloyd George, Gladstone, Pericles, Cleon and Lassalle were all to enjoy that dubious honour (33); but, in the end, it is the Iron Chancellor who supremely holds this title. No-one, not even the Bonapartes, is referred to as Caesarist more often than he. I have shown that through this designation Weber represented Bismarck as a populist, awesome and illegitimate figure. By studying Weber's use of language we can learn much about his own preoccupations (cf. Ste. Croix, 1972: 358). On the other hand, whether Caesarism is itself an empirically helpful term to represent Bismarck's governance (or any other, for that matter) is a very different question and one that will continue to provoke historical and sociological debate\*.

PETER BAEHR

\* My thanks to John Selby for his very helpful comments on this article.

(32) A superb analysis is Allan Mitchell, 1977. Eley (in Blackburn and Eley, 1984: 150-1) takes issue with Mitchell. Yet see Eley, 1980: 206 ff. Also, H.-U. Wehler, 1970, a convenient summary of his voluminous work in this area (insofar as it touches on our subject).

(33) Lloyd George: Weber, 1978a: 1452 = 1958: 383; Gladstone: Weber, 1970: 106 = 1958: 523-4; Pericles, Cleon and Lassalle: Weber, 1978b: 1130 = 1964: 849. Weber also likened Trotsky to a Caesar: Mommsen, 1984: 279, n. 333.

# REFERENCES

- BLACKBOURN, D. and ELEY, G., 1984. *The Peculiarities of German History* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- BRAMSTED, E.K. and MELHUISE, K. J. (eds), 1978. *Western Liberalism. A history in documents from Locke to Croce* (London, Longman).
- BROCKHAUS, F.A., 1883. *Brockhaus' Conversations Lexikon* (Leipzig, Brockhaus).
- CARR, W., 1979. *A History of Germany, 1815-1945* (London, Edward Arnold).
- CRAIG, G.A., 1981. *Germany, 1866-1945* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- ELEY, G., 1976. Defining social imperialism: use and abuse of an idea. *Social History*, III: 265-90.
- ELEY, G., 1980. *Reshaping the German Right* (New Haven, Yale University Press).
- EYCK, E., 1968. *Bismarck and the German Empire*<sup>3</sup> (London, George Allen).
- GERTH, H.H. and MILLS, C. Wright., 1954. *Character and Social Structure* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul).
- GIDDENS, A., 1972. *Politics and Sociology in the Thought of Max Weber* (London, Macmillan).
- GOLLWITZER, H., 1987. The Caesarism of Napoleon III as seen by public opinion in Germany, *Economy and Society*, XVI, iii: 357-404; transl. Wells, G.
- GROH, D., 1972. Cäsarismus, etc., in BRUNNER, O. et al. (eds), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, I, pp. 726-71 (Stuttgart, Ernst Klett).
- HALL, S., 1983. The 'Little Caesars' of Social Democracy, in HALL, S., and JACQUES, M., *The Politics of Thatcherism* (London, Lawrence and Wishart), pp. 309-21.
- HENNIS, W., 1983. Max Weber's 'central question', *Economy and Society*, XII, ii: 135-80, transl. Tribe, K.
- KOCH, H.W., 1984. *A Constitutional History of Germany in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Harlow, Longman).
- MITCHELL, A., 1977. Bonapartism as a model for Bismarckian politics, *Journal of Modern History*, XLIX, ii, 181-99.
- MOMMSEN, W.J., 1984. *Max Weber and German Politics, 1890-1920*, transl. Steinberg, M.S. (Chicago, University of Chicago Press).
- MUELLER, G.H., 1982. Socialism and capitalism in the work of Max Weber, *British Journal of Sociology*, XXXIII, ii, 151-71.
- NEUMANN, F., 1964. Notes on the theory of dictatorship, in NEUMANN, F. (ed. MARCUSE, H.), *The Democratic and the Authoritarian State* (New York, Free Press).
- NOLTE, E., 1969. *Three Faces of Fascism*, transl. Vennewitz, L. (New York, Holt).
- PARKIN, F., 1982. *Max Weber* (Chichester, Ellis Horwood).
- RIENCOURT, A. de, 1958. *The Coming Caesars* (London, Jonathan Cape).
- RÖHL, J.C.G., 1967. *Germany without Bismarck: the crisis of government in the second Reich, 1890-1900* (Berkeley, University of California Press).
- ROMIEU, M.A., 1850. *L'ère des Césars* (Paris, Ledoyen).
- ROSCHER, W., 1892. *Politik: Geschichtliche Naturlehre der Monarchie, Aristokratie und Demokratie* (Stuttgart, Cotta).
- SCAFF, L., 1984. Weber before Weberian sociology, *British Journal of Sociology*, XXXV, ii, 190-215.
- SCHWARZ, B., 1985. Conservatism and 'caesarism', 1903-22, in LANGAN, M., and SCHWARZ, B. (eds), *Crises in the British State, 1880-1930* (London, Hutchinson), pp. 33-62.
- SHEEHAN, J.J., 1968/9. Political leadership in the German Reichstag, 1871-1918, *American Historical Review*, LXXIV, 511-28.
- SKINNER, Q., 1969. Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas, *History and Theory*, VIII, 5-53.
- STARK, W., 1967. Max Weber and the heterogony of purposes, *Social Research*, XXXIV, 249-64.
- STE. CROIX, G.E.M., 1972. *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* (New York, Cornell University Press).
- STÖRMER, M., 1977. Krise, Konflikt, Entscheidung. Die Suche nach dem neuen Cäsar als europäisches Verfassungsproblem, in HAMMER, K. and HARTMANN, P.C. (eds), *Der Bonapartismus. Historisches Phänomen und politischer Mythos* (Munich, Artemis), pp. 102-18.
- TAYLOR, A.J.P., 1967. Metternich, in the same author's *Europe: grandeur and decline* (Harmondsworth, Penguin), pp. 22-26.



TENBRUCK, F.H., 1980. The problem of thematic unity in the works of Max Weber, *British Journal of Sociology*, XXXI, iii: 316-51, transl. Whimster, M.S.

TÖNNIES, F., 1917. *Der englische Staat und der deutsche Staat* (Berlin, Karl Curtius).

WEBER, Marianne, 1975. *Max Weber: a biography*, transl. Zohn, H. (New York and London, Wiley).

WEBER, M., 1936. *Jugendbriefe* (Tübingen, Mohr).

WEBER, M., 1958, 1971. *Gesammelte Politische Schriften* (2nd and 3rd editions) (Tübingen, Mohr).

WEBER, M., 1964 (paperback edition, based on the 1956 4th edition). *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Vols. I and II (Cologne, Kiepenheuer and Witsch).

WEBER, M., 1970. *From Max Weber*, ed. and transl. by H. H. GERTH and C. WRIGHT MILLS (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul).

WEBER, M., 1971. Stellungnahme zur Flottenumfrage der Allgemeinen Zeitung, in WEBER 1971: 30-2.

WEBER, M., 1978a. Parliament and Government in a reconstructed Germany, in WEBER, 1978b: 1381-1469, transl. Roth, G.

WEBER, M., 1978b. *Economy and Society*, Vols. I and II, eds. ROTH, G. and WITTICH, C., transls. various (Berkeley, University of California Press).

WEBER, M., 1980. The national state and economic policy, *Economy and Society*, IX, iv, 428-49, transl. Fowkes, B.

WEHLER, H.-U., 1970. Bismarck's imperialism, 1862-1890, *Past and Present*, 48, 119-55, transl. Porter, N., Sheehan, J., and Mason, T.W.

WOLIN, S.S., 1981. Max Weber: legitimization, method and the politics of theory, *Political Theory*, IX, iii: 401-24.