

Research Design

Markus J. Prutsch

P.O. Box 24 (Unioninkatu 40)
00014 University of Helsinki, Finland
E-Mail: markus.prutsch@helsinki.fi
Telephone: +358 (0)9 191 40526
Mobile: +43 (0)650 73 90 837
Fax: +358 (0)9 191 23107

Plebiscitary Monocracy

Reflections on the Foundations, Nature, and Long Term Implications
of ‘Modern Caesarism’

1. SUBJECT OF RESEARCH

The idea that ‘Europe’ is founded on specific, inalienable values, arising from a linear development towards liberal democracy, is commonplace in European political rhetoric and public debates, and is furthermore deeply rooted in Western philosophy. Such a teleological view, however, tends to be one sided and underestimates the complexity of historical developments and at the same time neglects the manifold obstacles Europe had and still has to face in the course of time. Rather than a simple ‘creation’ and ‘preservation of values’, European history has to be seen as a continual ‘clash of values’, which has given rise to a wide range of theoretical and institutional compromises bringing about tentative stability, but at the same time, long-term fragility. That goes particularly for the ‘long’ 19th century, an age in which such clashes of value systems became manifest in concrete intellectual and political action, thus prefiguring contemporary Europe.

In 19th century Europe, two lines of value discourse were inextricably intertwined: a national and an international. Whereas the latter was concerned with defining Europe’s place in the world, focusing on the notions of culture and civilisation, the former basically aimed at building and/or strengthening the notion of ‘nation’, dealing with questions of ‘statehood’, ‘legitimacy’, ‘sovereignty’ and ‘representation’. A decisive moment within this discourse arose with the question of how to organise political rule adequately, which was often responded to by recourse to the notion of ‘constitution’ as well as the corresponding concept of ‘constitutionalism’.

In the decades after Napoleon’s fall, a constitutional wave swept across Europe, leading to constitutionalisation processes and the setting up of concrete constitutional orders in various parts of the continent. That was due in the main to the fact that the French Revolution, perceived as a European phenomenon, continued to have a latent effect on basically all European states even after the revolutionary energy seemed to have burnt itself out. European states now had to face the challenges of the legacy of the Revolution after the collapse of the Napoleonic order, albeit in different forms and measures. Perhaps the most demanding question of the time was whether and how to reconcile the European monarchs’ claims to preserve their sovereignty and

political power with post-revolutionary societies' expectations of both a constitutional state and the safeguarding of the political and legal innovations produced by the Revolution and the Napoleonic Regime; i.e. to bring in line monarchical and popular aspirations.

In view of the power political situation one might expect that after 1814 rigid neo-absolutism became the European standard. But this extreme, like that of radical democratisation, was more the exception than the rule in post-Napoleonic Europe: while democratic-revolutionary forces lacked the power and – after the excesses of the Revolution – also public support to turn the existing order upside down, traditional political elites had the actual power, but came to understand that a restoration of pre-revolutionary polity and society was against the spirit of the times and certainly not a suitable solution in a longer-term perspective.¹ They realised that the end of the Napoleonic wars symbolised a victory over revolutionary principles, but that negating the heritage of the Revolutionary Age, and putting the clock back was virtually impossible. Consequently, in most cases more or less sophisticated concepts of constitutional government had to be developed, which guaranteed a symbiosis or at least compromise between 'autocracy' and 'democracy', 'tradition' and 'progress' as the conflicting principles of the time. Perhaps the most influential of them was the concept of 'monarchical constitutionalism', which put monarchical rule on new foundations by 'purloining' some of the revolutionary principles: However, while 'constitutional government' seemed to give the notion and practice of monarchy a new vigour, the era after 1814 provided immense challenges and dangers for monarchical-constitutional forms of rule at the same time.

Against the background of the 'democratic imperative' of the 19th century and the increasingly functional understanding of political rule as well as its growing 'mediatisation', the long-term vulnerability of the concept of monarchical constitutionalism soon became obvious. While the monarchical constitutional systems established in various parts of Europe after 1814 were not doomed to failure *a priori*, adaptability and reformability of all these systems were subject to distinct limits. The more politics developed into a mass phenomenon and the more pervasive public wishes for political participation were formulated, the more anachronistic the concept of unrestricted monarchical sovereignty and authority became. The more tradition lost its role as cohesive element of monarchical rule, the more unstable its legitimate basis and the more exposed the position of the monarch were likely to be. The dilemma was, basically, that in order to equip monarchical constitutional systems to meet and surmount the challenges of the time by reform and evolution, the only reasonable way to go about it was by withdrawing the monarch from the political frontline. If consistently applied, however, this required monarchs to

¹ Talleyrand, for example, in his final report on the Congress of Vienna, gave an account of the unanimous disappointment felt by the European powers in the way Ferdinand VII made his return as king to Spain in 1814: "Je n'ai vu aucun Souverain, aucun ministre, qui, effrayé des suites que doit avoir en Espagne le système de gouvernement suivi par Ferdinand VII, ne regrettât amèrement qu'il ait pu remonter sur son trône, sans que l'Europe lui eût imposé la condition de donner à ces États des institutions qui fussent en harmonie avec les idées du temps." *Rapport fait au Roi pendant son voyage de Gand à Paris* (June 1815). In: Pallain, Georges (Hg.). ³1881. *Correspondance inédite du Prince de Talleyrand et du Roi Louis XVIII. Pendant le Congrès de Vienne. Publiée sur les manuscrits conservés au dépôt des Affaires étrangères, avec préface, éclaircissements et notes par M. G. Pallain*. Paris [etc.]: E. Plon et cie [etc.], pp. 436-484, citation p. 474. Indeed, this critical opinion was soon to be confirmed, for only six years after the advocates of the 1812-Cadiz-Constitution had been forced into exile, the revolution started in Spain.

give up their prevalent position so typical of monarchical constitutionalism. Or to put it in an exaggerated way: the only way to reform monarchical constitutionalism in the long term was by means of a regime change, which inevitably deprived the system of its very soul.

In this respect, monarchical constitutionalism was almost forced to be a transitional phenomenon in the sense of an 'independent' constitutional type,² but one with a clear 'expiry date' – a role actually corroborated by historical reality. A clear perspective of development for monarchical constitutional systems was increasing parliamentarisation and democratisation, and in many cases monarchical constitutional systems indeed paved the way for parliamentary democracy, provided that emphasis was put on the democratic and rational principle, and the functionalisation of the monarchy. In these systems there might still be place for princes, as demonstrated by the existing monarchies in Europe, but only in the role as head of state with a representative function, as a symbol of national unity, as moral instance, or a moment of stability. They were, in any case, no longer an 'efficient part' of the constitution.³

The outlook of an ever-more democratic parliamentary state and monarchical constitutionalism obviously fits perfectly well into the teleology of continuous 'European progress'. However, the idealised path of development from absolutism to parliamentary democracy, with monarchical constitutionalism being only a stepping-stone between the two, neglects the fact that there were other possible alternatives to transmute the common European heritage of 'Revolution' and 'Reaction', namely in the direction of autocratic leadership. That was if parliamentary and democratic control mechanisms were negated while the monocratic element was pushed to the extreme, namely by (re)gaining full initiative and power in the political system. This was likely to happen not only, but perhaps particularly in moments of an actual or perceived 'crisis', when the susceptibility to radical political 'solutions' was increased.

While traditional monarchical elites in Europe were unlikely to play a decisive political role in the longer term, the monarchical element as such had by no means lost all of its significance. Somewhat paradoxically, the increasing complexity of social and political life in the 19th century generated a desire for new forms of 'monarchical rule' and 'personalised leadership', which differed considerably from the pre-revolutionary period. Particularly appealing were regimes that re-interpreted the 'monarchical principle' in ways that were in line with the spirit of the time: regimes which managed to make the 'rule of the one' fit with the demands of the 'modern age', namely with claims for political 'participation' of the people, progress, innovation and national power. The concept that actually seemed to meet these demands was that of charismatic-plebiscitary forms of autocratic leadership.

The decline of tradition as legitimating basis for rule and growing public expectations towards politics actually increased the susceptibility to and need for charismatic leaders, those individuals who due to their personal magnetism and their exceptional attributes seemed to be born leaders,

² Cf. the controversy, particularly in the German *Staatsrechtslehre* ("Huber-Böckenförde-Kontroverse"), as to whether monarchical constitutionalism can be considered to be an independent constitutional type at all.

³ See also Walter Bagehot's, in parts cynical, judgement of the British monarch's limited political role in the second half of the 19th century: Bagehot, Walter. 1867. *The English Constitution*. London: Chapman and Hall, especially pp. 57-117. For Bagehot, the monarch was only at the head of the "dignified part of the constitution", while the prime minister was at the head of the efficient (*ibid.*, p. 13).

guarantors of progress and/or crisis managers. Charismatic-plebiscitary rule had the touch of being 'exceptional' and unmistakably had some potential advantages: while it incorporated the 'popular moment' and thus dissociated itself from pure tyranny, it promised higher and perhaps better decision-making capacity than either parliamentary democracy, which still had to struggle with the reproach of tending towards anarchy, or monarchical constitutionalism with its systemic dualism between monarch and parliament. Unlike for traditional rulers, for whom the growing importance of (mass) media was likely to weaken their political standing, the mediatisation of the political sphere was basically a prerequisite for charismatic leadership, since it was the media that served as main tool for the 'charmatisation' of the leader and connecting link between him and the 'people'. Charismatic-plebiscitary forms of rule also implied the possibility of transcending existing borders, legal and perhaps even ethical and moral ones, when the leader managed to argue reasonably that it was for the benefit of the 'nation' or 'whole'. To have the option of abandoning, at least temporarily, the rule of law, e.g. in order to justify a 'necessary' coup d'état or declare a state of emergency, was not least due to the fact that charismatic rule corresponded with the *Zeitgeist* insofar as it had a pseudo-religious component. Charismatic leaders somehow symbolised the 'prophets' of the new era, and their political ambitions and promises had in some respect more of a 'creed' than a simple 'program'. The cult of a charismatic leader, which by the means of propaganda could even nurture Messianistic traits, was a certain 'mundane' compensation for traditional religions, being growingly exposed to secularisation tendencies.

Already the personal rule of Napoleon I, its striking starting point being the 18th Brumaire, had impressively demonstrated how powerful 'charisma' in combination with a distinct will to power and (foreign) political success could be, and that a dialectic juxtaposition of democracy and dictatorship was actually possible. Still, the *système Napoleon* was mainly interpreted as a singular case and exceptional phenomenon by contemporary observers and political thinkers. However, this assessment considerably changed from 1851 onwards when history seemed to repeat itself in form of Napoleon's nephew's seizure of power: a major revolution after a monarchy (1848), overthrow by force of the rather short-lived successor republican government (December 1851), and the creation of an empire more repressive, but somehow also more progressive, than the monarchy prior to its republican predecessor.

After 1851 the interest of political theory and philosophy increased considerably, and many acute analysts of European politics concurred in the judgment that, taken together, these events constituted a qualitatively new phenomenon and a type of rule both growing out of the Revolution and representing a reaction against it. It could no longer be claimed that this historical phenomenon was just a 'singular case'. Elaborate theories were evolved to explain how powerful leaders could claim to be democratic at the same time that they interdicted parliamentary participation in the government by appealing to the 'masses' in the form of plebiscites, often by manipulating opinion and the use of censorship, and how these 'masses' were both guided and appealed by a state centralised and militarised at a level hardly attained before in human history.

While the implications of this putatively new type of government for future politics, society and economy were to preoccupy politicians as well as theorists for the rest of the 19th century

and beyond, there was no agreement at all on the actual assessment, nor even the actual terminology of the phenomenon: whether it might best be characterised as ‘Napoleonism’, ‘Bonapartism’, simply ‘dictatorship’, or perhaps ‘(modern) Caesarism’, not least since one could actually argue that there were certain resemblances of the Bonapartist regimes generated out of the Revolutions of 1789 and 1848 to the regimes Julius Caesar and later Augustus had created out of the late Roman republic;⁴ whether it was foremost a national, particularly French, phenomenon, or rather a universal *signum* of the era, characteristic for all (Western) post-revolutionary societies; whether it was a temporary aberration on the path of history or more its *ultima ratio*; whether it was more about ‘progress’ than ‘regression’; and whether it was a rescue from anarchy and excessive revolution, and thus salvation of ‘reason’, or rather a hindering and misdirection of development.

One definitive point of agreement among contemporary observers, however, was that the phenomenon as such was significant in some way and worth paying close attention to. From an ex-post-perspective, that is even more the case, particularly since the experiences made with the ‘political religions’ of the 20th century almost automatically raise the question as to the potential ties between ‘modern Caesarism’ and totalitarianism.

2. FOCUS AND PROGRAMME OF RESEARCH

While in 20th century academic research various aspects of ‘modern Caesarism’ have been analysed more or less sufficiently within specific national frameworks, works focusing on broader (European) contexts and interconnections as well as theorising in-depth studies on the background of and impetus for the phenomenon and its repercussions remain a desideratum. This gap may seem astonishing in view of the interest among many 19th century observers, but it can be explained by the fact that modern Caesarism hardly fits into the European *topos* of long-term democratisation and parliamentarisation, and that the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century absorbed much of the attention in research Caesarism might otherwise have received.⁵ Only recently can a growing theoretical interest be observed,⁶ perhaps favoured by contemporary politics like the ‘Berlusconi-system’ in Italy and the ‘Putin-system’ in Russia, which pose the question anew of whether and in how far democracy and monocracy are indeed excluding concepts. Still, it would be misleading to talk yet about an intensive scholarly debate.

Against this background, this study deliberately refrains from being an individual case study; nor will it comprise an exhaustive comparative analysis of ‘modern Caesarism’ in its various national facets. Rather, my work sets out with the ambition of elaborating on overarching

⁴ For a careful conceptual history of these terms as political and/or social concepts see the entries for “Cäsarismus, Napoleonismus, Bonapartismus, Führer, Chef, Imperialismus” by Dieter Groh and “Diktatur” by Ernst Nolte in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*: Brunner, Otto; Conze, Werner; Koselleck, Reinhart (Hg.). 1972-1997. *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*. 8 [9] Vols. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, Vol. 1, pp. 726-771 and pp. 900-924.

⁵ See, among others, such influential works as Eric Voegelin’s *Die politischen Religionen* (1996 [1938], ed. by Peter J. Opitz. München: W. Fink), or that of Hannah Arendt on *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt, Hannah. 2004 [1951]. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Schocken).

⁶ See, e.g., Baehr, Peter; Richter, Melvin. 2004. *Dictatorship in History and Theory: Bonapartism, Caesarism and Totalitarianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (Publications of the German Historical Institute).

tendencies and perspectives of development and of painting a more general picture of charismatic-plebiscitary government in a European perspective. To that aim, the main approach is a politico-theoretical one.

By consciously choosing such a perspective, I intend to contribute to developing a universal research design for future studies dealing with concrete expressions of 'modern Caesarism'. It is assumed that 'modern Caesarism' can be perceived as 'political', 'social' or 'economical' phenomenon in the narrower sense, but indeed not exclusively; rather, this phenomenon is rooted in spiritual-intellectual currents which might be subsumed under the term 'modernity'. Thus, regardless of all more specific explanations of the phenomenon, the 'problem of modernity' remains evident. Against this background, what this study actually aims to do is delineate those 'deep structures' generating modern Caesarism and offer a meta-level of analysis. It is in this context that the innovative potential of my research can be seen, which might supplement existing lines of explaining 'Caesarism' on a more general level and go beyond their historico-philosophical simplifications.

There is no doubt that such a global approach has to deal with a number of difficulties and problems. The most obvious of them is the need to generalise and to argue on a high level of abstraction, which is likely to obscure the individual case and goes in hand in hand with a reduction of 'historical complexity'. In particular, a focus on Caesarism as an 'ideological' problem tends to neglect power political moments and material interests – 'Machiavellian' components without which the phenomenon cannot be sufficiently grasped. In order to minimise this danger, the politico-theoretical focus will be 'contextualised' by referring to actually existing Caesaristic regimes and to (geo)political, social and economic framework conditions. 'Political ideas' and 'concepts' are hence not understood as universal entities, but as embedded in and biased by existing settings, and as part of an ongoing communicative process in concrete historical situations.

Taking into account what has been said so far, the objectives of this enquiry are essentially concerned with reaching a better understanding of prerequisites, genesis, structural elements and long term implications of 'modern Caesarism'. In order to grasp this phenomenon, it will be particularly fruitful to focus on:

- The somewhat ambivalent if not contradictory heritage of Revolution and Reaction, popular and monarchical sovereignty, processes of democratisation and radicalisation, change and preservation, and the resulting political legitimisation strategies and problems after 1814/1815;
- The changing concepts of political legitimacy and the shifts between traditional, rational and charismatic forms of rule, namely within the context of radically changing patterns of 'faith' and expectations of salvation characterised by an increasing desire to *Immanentize the Eschaton*,⁷ that is to create a sort of 'heaven on earth' within history.

⁷ For the term see especially Eric Voegelin's *The New Science of Politics*, published in 1952 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

- The growing importance of media in an increasingly intense public sphere for negotiating power, setting new frameworks for monarchical power and promoting the emergence of new styles of government;
- The repercussions of industrialisation and social change, nationalism and European imperialism on the organisation of domestic rule and the setting up of constitutional orders;

In more concrete terms, the actual research questions which this study seeks to answer can be formulated as follows:

- 1) To what extent can 'modern Caesarism' be characterised as a specific and 'new' post-revolutionary form of political rule?
- 2) What possible strengths and weaknesses were immanent in modern Caesaristic regimes, and how can the chances been assessed of 'institutionalising' this type of rule in the longer term?
- 3) Is it legitimate to characterise 19th century Caesarism as a 'logical prelude' to 20th century totalitarianism, and what actual parallels and differences can be determined?

Interlinked with these research questions are the following three working hypotheses, whose soundness will be verified as the work progresses:

- 1) Modern Caesarism incorporates classical elements of monocratic rule and dictatorship, but is in essence a new and highly 'modern' phenomenon, which represents a melting pot of 'revolutionary progressiveness' and 'divinisation of politics' on the one hand, and 'reactionary inertia' and pragmatic leadership as a guarantor of stability on the other.
- 2) Due to its specific legitimating basis, modern Caesarism represents a highly unstable type of government, which is inseparably chained to the category of 'continuous political success' and can hence hardly be transformed into institutionalised stability.
- 3) The concept of modern Caesarism is an immediate predecessor of the political religions of the 20th century, in which the *Führerprinzip* and the idea of a 'mundane gnosis' already immanent in Caesarism only had to be pushed to radical extremes.

These research interests pre-empt the general structure of my study, which will be organised as follows:

In a first step, the breeding ground and the prerequisites for as well as the very nature of Caesaristic forms of government will be explored: by analysing the challenges and cleavages of post-revolutionary political thought, by examining whether and how 'modern Caesarism' was to be seen rather as a tool to overcome or as a dangerous result of this cleavage structure, and by posing the question as to how 'new' the phenomenon actually was.

My second step will be to investigate the actual practice of Caesaristic government. Here, I will focus on the practical dimensions and resulting problems of plebiscitary-charismatic forms of monocratic rule, possible strengths and evident weaknesses with which such rule was confronted, and the question of how the stability of this type of government can be evaluated.

Finally, the 'totalistic potential' of modern Caesaristic regimes and the connecting links, but also differences, between Caesarism and totalitarianism will be taken into account.