

Caesarism in Ancient Rome?

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Abstract: This paper offers a reconsideration of the concept of ‘Caesarism’, charts its presence and development in the modern historiography on ancient Rome, and argues for its validity to the understanding of the history of the late Roman Republic and the early Principate.

Keywords: Caesarism; Julius Caesar; Augustus; Late Roman Republic; Roman Principate; Roman political culture; history of classical scholarship.

alla cara memoria di Leandro Polverini (1935-2023)

1. There are at least two explanations for the question mark in the title of this paper. The word ‘Caesarism’ has no equivalents in Greek or Latin: it is a modern invention, first devised in German and French, and then readily taken up in other European languages. That does not necessarily invalidate it as an analytic category, but it is worth bearing in mind that its use entails resorting to an etic category, rather than an emic one: it exists in the eyes of the observer, but does not belong in the cultural and intellectual landscape of the culture it aspires to discuss. The terms of its application, then, require especially careful definition. The debate on how to carry out this operation has had a complex development, and our question mark also reflects that. Arnaldo Momigliano forcefully argued that Caesarism is an important theme of the history of political thought in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but has no value to the understanding of Roman history.¹ The concept of ‘illegitimate monarchy, built on a twofold military and political basis’ (to use Momigliano’s working definition), is alien to Graeco-Roman political thought.² Bluntly put, there is no such thing as ancient Caesarism.

This influential view is based on some interpretative assumptions, and warrants close reconsideration, not least because the debate on the political culture of the Roman Republic has known significant developments over the last half century or so. Revisiting the dossier is also relevant to the appreciation of Caesarism in a broad diachronic perspective: in order to make sense of how Romieu, Proudhon or Weber understood Caesarism, it might be useful to get a clearer account of what the basic terms of the strategy of Caesar, or indeed of the Caesars, were. ‘Caesarism’ (whether ancient or modern) sits on the cusp between practice and ideology, and stands out as a powerful example of their fundamental integration. It is surely far-fetched to regard it as a political doctrine, not unlike Marxism or liberalism, although the argument has been made in some important discussions, such as those by Jean-

¹ Momigliano 1956 (= 1960, 273-282). On Caesarism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries see Baehr 1998; Cervelli 2004; Prutsch 2020.

² Momigliano 1956, 220 (= 1960, 273): ‘una monarchia non legittima, a duplice base militare e popolare’.

Baptiste-Victor Coquille in the 1870s and by Yann Le Bohec in the 1990s.³ However, the closer one starts looking at how the realities of power operate and play out, the more necessary it becomes to tease out the conceptual assumptions that underlie them, the expectations that are set upon those in power, the values and discourses to which those who seek and hold power make appeal to, and indeed even the arguments of those who oppose them. A further complication should be considered in this connection. In turning to the Roman case as a blueprint of Caesarism, it is important not to lose sight of the longevity of the imperial model, and of the complex set of changes that it underwent. Otherwise put, it is important to differentiate between Roman imperial practice and ideology at the time when the regime was well established, and in the phase that leads up to its formation and its early history: between what may be termed imperatorial ideology and what may be defined imperial ideology.⁴

When we speak of Roman emperors we are of course taking a degree of terminological liberty: the *imperator* is the victorious commander, while the emperor is typically referred to as *princeps*, or indeed as *Caesar*. The link with Julius Caesar and Caesar Augustus is unfailingly stated even by the emperors who have no direct kinship ties with them – it is a form of asserting legitimacy by a claim to continuity; the way in which the Roman adoption system operates facilitates the task. There is in fact a margin of ambiguity on which Caesar should be seen as the Caesar to which reference is made when we speak about Caesarism: whether the consul and dictator who was killed on the Ides of March of 44 BCE, or his adoptive son, C. Caesar Octavianus, who held on to power for over four decades, and whose name Augustus, which he took up in 27 BCE, also became a standard feature of imperial nomenclature until Late Antiquity.⁵ We shall need to come back to some key distinctions and tensions between Caesar and Augustus, and their relevance to a discussion of Caesarism.

2. Our more immediate concern, though, is to identify whether it may be possible to identify a *modus operandi* that is distinctly Caesarist, or may credibly be applied to sole rulership in Roman political culture. While there is no word conveying the concept of Caesarism in Greek or Latin, a passage of Cassius Dio – epitomised by Xiphilinus – shows that the behaviour of a Caesar was defined with sufficient clarity, and that a single term could effectively capture it. The story is worth relating in some detail. During his stay at Alexandria, in 70 CE, Vespasian imposed a tax of six obols on the local residents; a crowd protested that decision vehemently, angering the emperor; Titus intervened, and persuaded his father to show forgiveness. The response of the crowd, though, was even more provocative (65.9.1):

ἐκεῖνοι δ' αὐτοῦ οὐκ ἀπέσχοντο ἀλλὰ μέγα πάνυ ἄθροοι ἐν συνόδῳ τινὶ κοινῇ πρὸς τὸν Τίτον ἐξεβόησαν, εἰπόντες αὐτὸ τοῦτο 'συγγινώσκομεν αὐτῷ· οὐ γὰρ οἶδε καισαρεύειν.' καὶ οἱ μὲν οὕτω τότε ἔρριψοκινδύνουν, καὶ τῆς ἀσελγείας, ὅφ' ἥς αἰεὶ ποτε κακῶς ἀπαλλάσσουσιν, ἄδην ἐνεφοροῦντο, ἢ τοῦ αὐτοκράτορος ἐπιεικείᾳ ἀποχρώμενοι· ὁ δὲ ἐκείνους μὲν εἶα...

Titus, however, begged that they might be forgiven and Vespasian spared them. Yet they would not let him alone, but in a crowded assembly all loudly

³ Coquille 1872; Le Bohec 1999.

⁴ On 'imperatorial ideology' cf. Assenmaker 2012.

⁵ Cf. Krebs 2023, 49.

shouted in chorus at Titus these words: ‘We forgive him; for he knows not how to play the Caesar.’ So the Alexandrians at that time went on with these foolhardy demonstrations, took their fill without restraint of that impudent licence which is always working to their detriment, and abused the good nature of the emperor. But Vespasian soon ceased to notice them. (transl. E. Cary, LCL)

The crowd of Alexandria, then, appeared to have a clear idea of what sort of conduct could be expected of a Caesar, and even had a word for it: *kaisareuein*. In its role-assignment strategy, fiscal mildness was part of the package. This is a notable case, but an isolated one, and it is worth noting that it involves a provincial audience.⁶

Another Greek term – *apokaisarousthai* – captures the idea of a set definition of imperial behaviour. It is attested only once, and in an exceptional source like the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, which are both a work of great literary and conceptual sophistication and a text that was not intended for circulation during the author’s lifetime (6.30.1-5).

Ὅρα μὴ ἀποκαισαρωθῆς, μὴ βαφῆς· γίνεται γάρ. τήρησον οὖν σεαυτὸν ἀπλοῦν, ἀγαθόν, ἀκέραιον, σεμνόν, ἄκομψον, τοῦ δικαίου φίλον, θεοσεβῆ, εὐμενῆ, φιλόστοργον, ἐρρωμένον πρὸς τὰ πρόποντα ἔργα. ἀγώνισαι, ἵνα τοιοῦτος συμμείνης, οἷόν σε ἠθέλησε ποιῆσαι φιλοσοφία. αἰδοῦ θεούς, σῶζε ἄνθρώπους. βραχύς ὁ βίος· εἰς καρπὸς τῆς ἐπιγείου ζωῆς, διάθεσις ὅσα καὶ πράξεις κοινωνικαί. πάντα ὡς Ἀντωνίνου μαθητής· τὸ ὑπὲρ τῶν κατὰ λόγον πρασσομένων εὐτονον ἐκείνου καὶ τὸ ὁμαλὲς πανταχοῦ καὶ τὸ ὅσιον καὶ τὸ εὖδιον τοῦ προσώπου καὶ τὸ μειλίχιον καὶ τὸ ἀκενόδοξον καὶ τὸ περὶ τὴν κατάληψιν τῶν πραγμάτων φιλότιμον·

See thou be not Caesarified, nor take that dye, for there is the possibility. So keep thyself a simple and good man, uncorrupt, dignified, plain, a friend of justice, god-fearing, gracious, affectionate, manful in doing thy duty. Strive to be always such as Philosophy minded to make thee. Revere the Gods, save mankind. Life is short. This only is the harvest of earthly existence, a righteous disposition and social acts. Do all things as a disciple of Antoninus. Think of his constancy in every act rationally undertaken, his invariable equability, his piety, his serenity of countenance, his sweetness of disposition, his contempt for the bubble of fame, and his zeal for getting a true grip of affairs. (transl. A. S. L. Farquaharson)

Farquaharson’s translation ‘being Caesarified’ conveys the sense of a process of transformation; it does not quite capture the idea of full transformation that is conveyed by the prefix *apo*.⁷ In this passage Marcus is keen not to let himself be fully absorbed by the demands of his imperial role, and to retain a degree of human and intellectual authenticity.

⁶ The wording of the Alexandrians’ quip is reported in identical terms in the excerpts from Petrus Patricius in the *excerpta Vaticana*: see Boissevain 1901, *ad loc.* For an account of the (fraudulent) imitation of a powerful man in Cassius Dio see 57.16.3–4 (about Clemens and Agrippa), with Christoforou 2023, 226–228.

⁷ In a forthcoming contribution Antonio Pistellato will analyse this text in greater detail: I am very grateful to him for sharing a draft. This passage is referenced, but not discussed in Momigliano 1956, 242 n. 24 (= 1960, 281 n. 24).

This does not amount to a renunciation of his role, nor to an indictment or a negative statement of the underpinning ideology. It is a warning against the pitfalls of power, a call to follow the positive model of his predecessor Antoninus Pius, and a summary of the opposition between the Caesar and the man. In no way should it be seen as the statement of an anti-Cesarist vision.

We do not find other compound words involving Caesar or Augustus, whether in Greek or Latin. However, a precedent shows that the behaviour of a political figure could be clearly identified as a recognisable type, and could even prompt the creation of a neologism. When Cicero mused in a letter to Atticus on the behaviour of Pompey in the early stages of the civil war (April 49 BCE), he said that his mind was ‘Sullanising’, *sullaturit animus eius* (9.10.6): he was showing patterns of behaviour that were closely comparable to those of Sulla three decades earlier, and was threatening violence and proscriptions. The use of that verb (a hapax, yet again) has a strong ironic streak, but is no mere wordplay: it is an attempt to capture a distinctive, and potentially subversive mode of using and deploying power. Precisely because it was possible to explicitly articulate that possibility, it is all the more remarkable that such linguistic play does not appear to have occurred more often. Another comparable, if less neatly relevant case may also be invoked. In February 50 BCE, Cicero wrote a long letter to Ap. Claudius Pulcher, his predecessor in the governorship of Cilicia, with whom organising a handover meeting had proved surprisingly difficult. In a vaguely polemical aside, he stressed that both Claudius and another former governor of the province, P. Cornelius Lentulus, belonged to distinguished families (unlike him). He captured their status with the terms *Appietas* and *Lentulitas*: two words that have clear descriptive value, but may also be regarded as hinting more generally to a certain patrician haughtiness.⁸

Such a meagre harvest should not lead to the conclusion that no attempts were made in antiquity to construct a definition of what the power of Caesar and the Caesars was about. A number of ancient sources present us with influential reflections on this count: the *Panegyric* of Pliny the Younger is a central reference point, in which the celebration of Trajan’s outstanding qualities is also a carefully hedged attempt to define his duties and contain his power;⁹ Philo’s *Legatio ad Gaium* offers an insight into a provincial response to imperial power and ideology in the Julio-Claudian period.¹⁰ The balance of the surviving evidence, though, is slanted towards accounts of imperial power after its consolidation. What remains relatively less clearly defined is the tension between the process that leads one to seize power – the Caesarian mode, so to speak – and the dynamics that enable one to retain it – the Augustan one.

3. It is crucial to put these general coordinates to the test of the specific historical experience, and to attempt a summary of what is distinctive about the cases of Julius Caesar and Augustus, and the strategies through which they secured supremacy. Inevitably, much of it will rehearse familiar – if not always uncontroversial – ground. Caesar achieved power at the end of a civil war: the basic condition that enabled his victory was the ability to lead his army to prevail in a conflict against an army of fellow-citizens. The civil war with Pompey and the majority of the senatorial order was the outcome of a long-drawn process of political tension

⁸ Cic. *Fam.* 3.7.5: *ullam Appietatem aut Lentulitatem ualere apud me plus quam ornamenta uirtutis existimas?* For this reading see e.g. Syme 1939, 45.

⁹ See Morford 1992; Wilkinson 2012, 21–30.

¹⁰ Christoforou 2021.

and instability, which brought to its extreme consequences the heavily competitive setup through which the Roman nobility had been operating for generations. Caesar had gained control of his army under a provincial command that was entrusted to him on the basis of a piece of legislation: due process had been followed, although the duration of his provincial term was at odds with the well-established constitutional practice.¹¹ This tension between tradition and exception is productive and problematic in equal measure, and is an especially distinctive feature of Caesar's strategy. When Caesar articulated the case for civil war, in January 49 BCE, he based it on two eminently traditional principles: the defence of his own standing, his *dignitas*, which his enemies were determined to undermine; and the protection of the prerogatives of the tribunes of the plebs, after the decision of the Senate to declare his allies Scribonius Curio and Mark Antony public enemies.

Another key tenet of Caesar's strategy is his power of persuasion, which crucially supports his military leadership. On the one hand, there is his ability as a speaker, which rests on a talent for reading the moment: in 47 BCE, when a mutiny broke out among his soldiers, he famously addressed them as *Quirites*, 'Romans', fellow-citizens, rather than *commilitones*, 'fellow-soldiers', instantly marking a distance;¹² that deceptively simple gesture led to a marked change in the mood of the audience, and resolved the crisis. On the other, Caesar builds much of the consensus that supports him on a diffused use of wealth: first through gifts to the Roman plebs, dating back to the early stages of his political career, and then through donations to the soldiery and in a major building programme in the city of Rome, enabled by the accumulation of war booty during the Gallic campaign.¹³ His will provided for a substantial cash donation to each plebeian.¹⁴ Again, that was far from unparalleled: elections were very expensive affairs, and in the late Republic much of the Roman political elite was heavily indebted. Caesar, however, developed that connection between wealth and political strategy to an exceptional extent, and with an unprecedented degree of consistency.

Caesar's victory is followed by a comprehensive resettlement of the institutional setup of the Republic; however, that does not lead to the undoing of the established framework of elective magistracies. Caesar's prominence is starkly shown by his tenure of a number of consulships and dictatorships, but the other magistracies are kept in existence, and remain an important venue of competition for the political elite. Caesar turns the dictatorship (traditionally a magistracy to be used in emergencies) into an office without a set end point, just before his intended departure for a campaign against the Parthians: a choice that is best understood as a way of avoiding the need to renew it during his absence, but undoubtedly marked a clear departure from established practice.¹⁵ The scholarly debate on Caesar's aims is of relative importance here. For our purposes it suffices to note that a complex balance of new and traditional elements was devised, even though it was not fully established by the time Caesar was killed. There is a further level of complexity: the scale of the honours and distinctions that Caesar received during his lifetime, which included the creation of a cult in

¹¹ On the degree of senatorial oversight under the terms of the *lex Vatinia* see Morstein-Marx 2021, 176-177, 586-587.

¹² Sources and discussion in van der Blom 2016, 175.

¹³ Early gifts: Plut. *Caes.* 5.8. Purchase of land in Rome for major building projects: Cic. *Att.* 4.16.8; Plin. *Nat.* 36.103; Suet. *DJ* 26.2.

¹⁴ His adoptive son took charge of the implementation of that crucial clause: Aug. *RG* 15.1; Suet. *DJ* 83.2; Plut. *Ant.* 16.2, *Brut.* 20.3; App. *BC* 2.143, 3.88; Cass. Dio 43.21.3, 44.35.3.

¹⁵ Cf. the important recent discussion in Morstein-Marx 2021, 532-537.

his honour. Caesar is undoubtedly a foundational figure in the history of the so-called imperial cult; his strategy on this front, however, should be understood as the original development of a tradition of civic distinction and honours that was strongly embedded in Roman Republican culture, and was in turn complicated and diversified by the interaction with Greek contexts.

A new use of political violence; an effective and often obfuscating political language; a robust institutional vision; the accumulation and use of wealth; new ways of defining and celebrating achievement. These elements are central to the rise and success of Caesar, and are relevant to the understanding of the motives of those who brought about his demise.¹⁶ They are also central, in various ways, to any modern attempts to define Caesarism in different historical settings. It is less clear, though, whether they should be understood as aspects of a coherent ideology. From the outbreak of the civil war in January 49 BCE Caesar pursued a clear plan; it would not be at all prudent, though, to trace it back to the start of his political trajectory. Caesar lived at a time when unprecedented opportunities for political advancement presented themselves within the space of just over a decade; he was able to rethink aspects of his strategy in the light of those circumstances. There is much to be taken seriously about the aspects of the ancient tradition that emphasise the speed and effectiveness of Caesar's actions. Anecdotes such as those on his ability to lead the army from Rome to Geneva in eight days in March 58 BCE, or his reported skill in dictating up to seven letters at once further contribute to the construction of an exceptionally effective leadership.¹⁷ As Luca Grillo has noted, *celeritas* is a leading theme of Caesar's account of the civil war: not simply speed in itself, but competently managed speed.¹⁸ A further aspect must be borne in mind: Caesar was one of the most original and accomplished intellectuals of his time. He wrote historical works, tragedies, a political pamphlet against Cato, a treatise on astronomical matters;¹⁹ unlike Cicero, though, he did not engage directly in political theory.

This does not make him an unreflective political operator, not did late Republican politics unfold in an ideological vacuum. There were different, and indeed competing views on how the polity should be run, and much of the political struggles of the period can be traced to those disagreements of principle. However, the Roman political language tends to revolve around some key themes and principles, which are raised and pursued in closely comparable terms by figures on different sides of the argument. Ronald Syme influentially invoked the weight of 'political catchwords' in this period, and shed light on how they became the focus of competition between different factional agendas, and a valuable viewpoint on the tension between continuity and change.²⁰ Robert Morstein-Marx has spoken of the 'ideological monotony' that pervades the political debate of the period, and its tendency to revolve around some key themes: an appeal to the primacy of the people is not an indication of allegiance to the *populares*.²¹

¹⁶ On the role of violence in Caesar's political strategy in 59 BCE cf. Rafferty 2022, 645-650.

¹⁷ Geneva: Plut. *Caes.* 17.5. Seven letters: Pliny *Nat.* 7.91; cf. Plut. *Caes.* 17.4, 7. On the role of anecdotes in the construction of the imperial persona cf. Christoforou 2023, 24-28.

¹⁸ Grillo 2012, 14-36.

¹⁹ Suet. *DJ* 56.

²⁰ Syme 1939, 168-181. On this aspect of Syme's work see Santangelo 2020.

²¹ Morstein-Marx 2004, 230-240.

4. The case of Caesar Augustus, which is both closely related to that of Julius Caesar and hardly comparable to it, is further testimony to the value of this interpretative approach.²² We are presented with over four decades of political supremacy, rather less than a quinquennium, and with a much larger and more diverse body of evidence. Augustus is not as deeply engaged in intellectual work as Julius Caesar was, but the autobiographical text that he made public right after his death and was published in a number of epigraphical copies in Rome and across the empire did mark the emergence of a new kind of monumentalised historical writing.²³ The *Res Gestae* provide a crisp summary of how Augustus mapped out his rise to power, and are directly relevant to our discussion. The starting point of that account focuses on the initiative that Octavian took in a private capacity and at his own expense when he was barely nineteen, restoring liberty to the republic from the oppression of the dominance of a faction.²⁴ Two complementary aspects are brought into focus: on the one hand, the personal intervention that resolves a crisis; on the other, the stated commitment to going beyond and above factional politics. Violence is asserted as a factor of order; once its mission is accomplished, the Senate recognises its significance by inviting Octavian to join its ranks and granting him major honours. As has often been noted, the opening chapter of the *Res Gestae* is also a prime example of obfuscation.²⁵ It glosses over the clash between Octavian and the Senate, and his decision to march on Rome in August 43 BCE, after he was denied the right to put forward his candidacy to the consulship; it does not make any hint to the likely involvement of Octavian in the deaths of the consuls of that year; and does not acknowledge that the whole process leading to his rise to power was a patent violation of the established constitutional order. Augustus consistently sketches for himself the image of a reluctant first citizen, who turns down a number of magistracies, in spite of the explicit request of the Senate. The settlement of January 27 BCE, whereby C. Caesar Octavianus takes on the name Augustus and his position as *princeps* is formally defined by the Senate, is framed as an act of restraint and renunciation on his part, through which he handed back his powers to the Senate and the people, and was honoured in return.²⁶ This rhetoric of restraint and selfless service played out in a text whose main copy was inscribed on bronze tablets right outside the mausoleum that Augustus had built in the Campus Martius: a building that stood out in the monumental landscape of the city, and explicitly harked back to the architectural traditions of the Hellenistic monarchies. Contemporary viewers will have been acutely aware of that tension.

The establishment of the new regime is presented as the restoration of the republican order: not just of its spirit, but of its practice too. The honours, distinctions, and powers that Augustus receives are conferred upon him by the people and the Senate, in recognition of his merits and generosity. All the key principles that we saw at play in Caesar's strategy are discernible: the appeal to ancestral tradition; the use of wealth as a vector of political action and as a marker of moral qualities; the pointed claim of having been driven by necessity, rather than by personal ambition. Even the willingness to use clemency towards one's enemies is stressed, along with the commitment to following due process. Augustus stresses

²² On the survivals of Caesar in the Augustan period cf. Devillers - Sion-Jenkins 2012.

²³ Elsner 1996 remains a seminal contribution.

²⁴ RG 1.1: *annos undeuiginti natus exercitum priuato consilio et priuata impensa comparauī, per quem rem publicam a dominatione factionis oppressam in libertatem uindicaui* ('When I was nineteen years old, I got ready on my own initiative and at my own expense the army by means of which I set the state free from the slavery imposed by the conspirators', transl. A. Cooley).

²⁵ Hodgson 2014 is a valuable read on the 'Republican idiom' of the opening section of RG.

²⁶ RG 34.

his loyalty to the memory of his adoptive father, and indeed identifies it as a motive of his actions: it is a moral quality that feeds into his devotion to traditional values. However, unlike Caesar, he steers clear from defining his power in terms that might be explicitly seen as monarchic. The emphasis is shifted from the holding and use of magisterial power to the assertion of his standing and authoritativeness. Augustus codifies his power more as a form of patronage than as a personal regime.

Much of the best modern scholarship has undermined and ultimately unmasked this account, which on close scrutiny emerges as tendentious as it appears factual and neutral. Augustus' power is rooted in a civil war: it is a military monarchy that rests on an unprecedented accumulation of financial resources. Far from owing its existence to the continuing consent of the people and the Senate, it is a personal regime that establishes a dynastic profile. However, the complex strategy through which Augustus articulates its construction is no mere superstructure. It is a hegemonic process that creates a distinctive balance between continuity and change, and brings about a fundamentally original outcome in the history of the polities in the ancient Mediterranean.²⁷ The longevity of the regime that Augustus established was crucially enabled by the compromise that it struck in codifying its self-representation along modes that were not exclusively, and indeed not predominantly monarchic.

In the foundational text of the history of Caesarism as a modern political concept, Auguste Romieu's *L'ère des Césars*, Augustus receives greater attention than Caesar – *et pour cause*.²⁸ There is indeed good reason to regard his strategy as a valid example of Caesarism, and not simply because the name Caesar was so central to his rise, and remained part of his official nomenclature throughout.

5. Assessing the applicability of the concept of Caesarism in Roman history also entails a discussion of its trajectory in modern historiography. The risk of undesirable intersections between Roman and contemporary politics was already apparent in the discussions of Caesarism that appeared in the years immediately following the early occurrences of the term. Theodor Mommsen produced a famously laudatory account of Julius Caesar, his personal qualities, and his role in the political history of the Roman Republic. In the second edition of his *Römische Geschichte* (1857) he felt the need to make clear that his admiration for Caesar did not entail a positive judgment on Caesarism as a modern political system: quite the contrary, the history of the late Roman Republic is an indictment of absolute monarchy.²⁹ The solution devised by Caesar was a lesser evil, but an evil nonetheless. The rule of the Julio-Claudians would go on to show that beyond doubt. Famously, and tellingly, Mommsen did not continue his history into the Principate.

Mommsen's Caesar is a statesman of exceptional skill and vision. This portrait had considerable influence, well beyond professional scholarship. Half a century later, another account of late Republican Rome had a comparable impact, although it was not written by a professional historian: Guglielmo Ferrero's *Grandezza e decadenza di Roma*. Caesar is singled out as the greatest demagogue in history: an exceptionally capable revolutionary leader, who mobilises the forces of trading groups against those of traditional agrarian society. He is no statesman, though, and it is paradoxical that emperors of much later periods, operating in

²⁷ For an attempt to apply the category of hegemony to the Augustan settlement cf. Smith 2021.

²⁸ Romieu 1850, 7, 34, 41.

²⁹ Mommsen 1857, 458-459. See the invaluable discussion in Polverini 2011.

altogether different contexts, took up his name.³⁰ Remarkably, Ferrero did not invoke the concept of Caesarism. In other works (notably *L'Europa giovane* and *Il militarismo*) he did discuss modern Caesarism at great length, and identified it as a key operating principle in modern politics.³¹ He found no room for it, though, in his history of the Roman world.

Ferrero's choice is all the more noteworthy since in a certain phase in the history of the modern historiography on the Roman world the term 'Caesarism' was used rather unproblematically, and its application could in fact be broadened to the whole of imperial history. That was the view that the political scientist Ernest Baker put forward in 1923 in his contribution to a collective volume entitled *The Legacy of Rome*. His assessment is worth quoting in full, not least because it provides another sharp working definition:³²

We may define Caesarism as a form of autocracy, backed by an army, which rests formally on some manner of plebiscite and actually – so long, at any rate, as it is successful – on a measure of popular support. So defined Caesarism is identical with Bonapartism. But there is a fundamental difference. Bonapartism showed itself personal and transitory, an ephemeral chase of flying glory: Caesarism became a permanent institution. Modified and veiled at first by the policy of Augustus, but showing itself clearly as it grew firmer and stronger, it controlled the Mediterranean world for centuries. The reasons for its permanence were partly negative, but largely positive. There was no nationalism abroad to oppose a non-national State: there were only dying City-States which had lost the instinct for autonomy, and tribal formations which had not learned to cherish political ambitions. There was no democratic spirit in the air to wither an absolute government: the temper of the times was one of acquiescence, and even of gratitude.

Fifteen years later, in *The Roman Revolution*, Ronald Syme used the word only once, in touching upon the hostility of the senatorial nobility to Octavian, the 'young adventurer who had made his way by treachery', and who 'represented Caesarism and Revolution in all that was most brutal and odious'.³³ It is a single occurrence, but a revealing one, because it draws attention to the contentious nature of any Caesarist dynamic: it entails emphatic winners and aggrieved losers. The revolution that Syme envisaged was firmly focused on the political domain: if it had a social dimension, it was confined to the change of personnel in the Roman political elite that the emergence of the new regime enabled and fostered. Syme was not keen on heavily relying on theoretical coordinates – let alone spelling out those he did resort to. There is no doubt, though, that he regarded Caesarism as a valid analytic category. In the 1960s he started working on a book entitled *The Triumph of Caesarism*, whose coverage started in mid-first century BCE, with the emergence of Pompey the Great as a major political player, and continued until the end of Augustus' reign.³⁴ The envisaged final chapter of the volume was entitled 'The Apologia': the book was not brought to completion, but the final chapter of Syme's last major work, *The Augustan Aristocracy* (1986) is entitled 'The Apologia for the

³⁰ Ferrero 1904, 514-515.

³¹ See De Francesco 2006, 77-80.

³² Baker 1923, 57-58.

³³ Syme 1939, 222.

³⁴ Santangelo 2014.

Principate', and is a remarkable summary of the arguments that were invoked to make the case for the new regime and assert its desirability – 'a shabby chapter in the 'history of ideas''.³⁵

However, Syme's position is rather unusual in the context of the historiography of the second half of the twentieth century, in this as in so many other respects. Caesarism had reasonably wide currency in the scholarship of the second half of the 1800s and in the early 1900s;³⁶ it later faded from view as, on the one hand, scholars become more reluctant to draw neat analogies between ancient and modern politics and, on the other, the fascination with the political genius of Caesar and Augustus left room for the dry critical assessment of their agendas and language. Syme, with his uncompromising focus on the realities of power and the treacherousness of political language, played a major role in bringing about that shift. Shortly after the end of World War II, Lily Ross Taylor devoted a whole chapter of her study of *Party Politics in the Age of Caesar* to the ideological dimension of the political controversy of the period, and to the exploration of Caesarism and Catonism. For her, Caesarism is predicated on the identification between Caesar and the Roman people, through a somewhat contrived reading of a passage of the *De bello ciuili*.³⁷ Caesar aimed at a 'frank monarchy', and found its neat ideological opposite in Catonism, which upheld and promoted the Republican tradition; Augustus 'veiled it in republicanism, in Catonism, if you like'.³⁸ At its core it remained Caesarism, though. In recent work there are occasional occurrences of the term, in a rather narrow and factual sense. 'Caesarism' can indicate the political movement that Caesar led, the agenda that it pursued, and its short-term legacy: that is the use that two distinguished Oxford historians, Andrew Lintott and Barbara Levick, resort to in their contributions to a 2009 *Companion to Caesar*, and a similar choice is made in some important studies by Roberto Cristofoli.³⁹ It seems fair to say, though, that Caesarism has largely run its course as a category of historiographical analysis; or, at any rate, that it is hardly ever uttered in polite scholarly company. The potential for anachronism seems too strong for comfort.

6. However, the case for jettisoning Caesarism is not compelling. In what precedes it has come into focus as a useful morphological category: as the outcome of the convergence of different patterns of political behaviour, and possibly as a political method, in which personal ambition, violence, persuasion, wealth, speed, vision, all play a central and necessary role. Julius Caesar embodies it effectively, and there is a considerable body of evidence for his actions. There is no intrinsic reason, though, why he should be regarded as the inventor of that pathway to power, or Caesarism should be viewed as a distinctively, or indeed exclusively Roman development. In principle it would be quite legitimate to read

³⁵ Syme 1986, 441.

³⁶ Yavetz 1971 and 1983, 10-57 remain essential reading.

³⁷ Caes. BC 1.22.3: *ut se et populum Romanum factione paucorum oppressum in libertatem vindicaret*, 'to assert the freedom of himself and the Roman people who had been oppressed by a small faction'.

³⁸ Taylor 1949, 180. Cf. the stern criticism in Momigliano 1956, 241 (= 1960, 280): 'termini non intelligibili a un antico e non esatti per un moderno'.

³⁹ Lintott 2009, 79; Levick 2009, 211; Cristofoli 2008, 123 and 2022, 18. Luciano Canfora's longstanding and highly original engagement with Caesarism (ancient and modern) would warrant a separate discussion: its latest instalment is Canfora 2023, 15-19.

Greek tyranny through the lenses of the Caesarist paradigm.⁴⁰ To probe that possibility further, we should turn to a 1940s debate between two distinguished political philosophers.

In his review of Leo Strauss' *On Tyranny* (1948) Eric Voegelin drew a distinction between a constitutional order and a post-constitutional one: while it is meaningful to differentiate between a king and a tyrant in a context in which there still is a constitutional order, it is no longer meaningful to do so after the 'breakdown of constitutional forms in the city-state'.⁴¹ When that occurs, Caesarism intervenes as a necessary development, which is thus fundamentally different from tyranny (necessity, as we have seen, does play an important role in the ideological underpinning of the Augustan settlement). In Voegelin's view, the theorist of rulership in a post-constitutional situation is Machiavelli; the concept does not exist in antiquity. In a riposte to the review Strauss took issue with that contention.⁴² The lack of an ancient theory on how post-constitutional regimes operate is partly the outcome of a focus on the best political system, and partly a conscious effort not to undermine the sacrality of the established political order. The distinction between Caesarism and tyranny – between necessary evil and intentional evil – was obvious even in antiquity. Caesarism was based on force, and could look after itself: it needed no theoretical underpinning.

There is an easy, even facile objection to this argument: so much of ancient literature has floundered that it is impossible to state with any confidence that no theoretical reflection ever took shape on a given topic. The isolated appearances of *kaisareuein* and *apokaisarousthai* are a strong warning against rushing to firm conclusions. As Pierre Manent has noted, building on an insight from Montesquieu's *Considérations*, Strauss' model has another limitation: it does not acknowledge that Caesarism is a monarchic regime which intervenes after a republican one, and is thus the outcome of a process of change, which bears the mark of the previous political setup.⁴³ It never occurs in a vacuum, nor does it neatly follow the emergence of a post-constitutional setup. Rather, Caesar's own case shows that a Caesarist strategy can emerge in a republican context, and play a decisive role in bringing down the republican edifice.

7. Some tentative conclusions may be drawn. The category of Caesarism (understood, in Momigliano's terms, as 'an illegitimate monarchy, built on a twofold military and political basis') has real descriptive value, and can be applied to ancient Rome to capture a distinctive political method, which revolves around the rise to sole power of an individual through a distinctive combination of violence, persuasion, wealth distribution, and institutional change; Julius Caesar is its best-attested example. Like any political programme, it is not devoid of an ideological dimension, but it is first and foremost about certain ways of achieving power and status. What makes Roman Caesarism distinctive is not so much that it marked a return to monarchy after a five century-long republican interlude, but that it occurred in a city-state which had become the centre of a Mediterranean empire. The

⁴⁰ For an early attempt in that vein cf. Schäffle 1896, 486, with the discussion in Baehr 2008, 82-83. Cf. also the explicit, if cursory analogy between some Greek tyrants (Pisistratus, Periander, Pittacus) and Cromwell and 'i due Napoleon' in De Sanctis 1970, 134 (perhaps tellingly, a diary entry, rather than a scholarly piece).

⁴¹ Voegelin 1949, 242. On this exchange see Manent 2010, 145-150.

⁴² Strauss 1963, 190-192.

⁴³ Manent 2010, 207-208. It is far-fetched to argue, though, that Caesarism occurs when a monarchy succeeds a republic that had in turn replaced a monarchy (Manent 2010, 143-144).

strategies devised by Julius Caesar and Octavian had to reckon with that degree of complexity.

Turning Caesarism into a byword for ‘imperial ideology’, or even for ‘Principate’, would be misleading. Applying it to ancient Rome, though, is a productive operation, because it does mark out a significant and distinctive historical pattern of political action. But let us end by flagging up a challenge. If Caesarism is a distinctly possible outcome in a city-state setting, one may wonder how it could be applied to ancient city-states beyond Rome, without necessarily confining the discussion to the ancient Mediterranean. It is a project that awaits to be undertaken. If we were to rid ourselves of the misplaced opposition between Caesarism and tyranny, we might be able to look forward to some new inroads into the understanding of ancient monarchies.⁴⁴

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⁴⁴ I have presented aspects of the argument of this paper at the ‘Conceptualising Political Leadership: Towards an Intellectual History of Caesarism’ conference in Göttingen and at a research seminar in Glasgow; I have greatly benefited from the reactions of the audiences on both occasions. I am very grateful to Francesca Antonini, Panayiotis Christoforou, and the *AHB* referees for their comments on earlier versions.

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