Modern Intellectual History (2026), **23**, 790–804
doi:10.1017/S1479244326100766

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

FORUM

The Caesarist City

Jan-Werner Müller

Princeton University, USA
Email: jmueller@princeton.edu

(Received 27 April 2026 UTC; revised 27 April 2026 UTC; accepted 25 May 2026 UTC)

The article investigates whether specific characteristics are associated with urbanist policies under Caesarism. It offers a brief account of Caesarism as such before mainly focusing on nineteenth-century France. The article asks whether Caesarism finds expression in urban planning and particular forms of architecture. It then proceeds to answer the question, focusing mostly on Paris under Napoleon III.

> Il y avait un tyran, mais il y avait peu d'arbitraire.
>
> Stendhal

> [L]'Empereur était pressé de me montrer une carte de Paris, sur laquelle on voyait tracées par Lui-Même, en bleu, en rouge, en jaune et en vert, suivant leur degré d'urgence, les différentes voies nouvelles qu'il se proposait de faire exécuter.
>
> Haussmann

What is Caesarism? It would not go too far to claim that Caesarism is an essentially contested, though hardly basic, concept of modern politics.[1] Its precise contours are subject to dispute: is Caesarism necessarily connected to military conquest? Does Caesarist legitimacy require at least some distinct grounding in verifiable popular support? (After all, virtually all modern regimes, including outright dictatorships,

[1]It seems to me indisputable that Caesarism is not a basic concept; it is hardly unavoidable when trying to make sense of modern politics and its various languages. Recall Koselleck observing that "basic concepts combine manifold experiences and expectations in such a way that they become indispensable to any formulation of the most urgent issues of a given time … they are always both controversial and contested." Reinhard Koselleck, "A Response to Comments on the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*," in Hartmut Lehmann and Melvin Richter, eds., *The Meaning of Historical Terms and Concepts* (Washington, DC, 1996), 59–70, at 64. See also Melvin Richter, "A family of Political Concepts: Tyranny, Despotism, Bonapartism, Caesarism, Dictatorship, 1750–1917," *European Journal of Political Theory* 4 (2005), 221–48.

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244326100766 Published online by Cambridge University Press

claim such grounding, and even the remaining monarchies have to make sure they keep up sufficient popularity.) Is charisma indispensable to Caesarism—which immediately raises the question of how Napoleon III, a grotesque mediocrity, according to Marx (and not just Marx), could somehow become the paradigmatic example of Caesarism for much of the nineteenth century?[2]

Echoing some of the remarks by Francesca Antonini in the introduction, this article will take a stance on these questions and extend the analysis of Caesarist rule to an aspect that is hardly unknown, but rarely examined comprehensively: the built environment. "The Caesar must build," Pliny the Younger had remarked,[3] and those claiming a Caesarist status of one form or another have indeed invested massively in architecture, urbanism, and planning—if, that is, they were afforded the time and the resources. Their focus has been the city, rather than the countryside, even if the latter was also the site of various attempts to address what we call, for shorthand, the social question (think of the idea of state farms under the Second Empire).[4] Hence I want to sketch here an ideal-typical account of the Caesarist city; that account is partly based on texts and partly based on observing actual building and planning practices (not all of which were verbalized in a language of political ideals).

Of course, one can take issue with the use of ideal types in intellectual history, in particular when they are simply deployed to justify a deeply ahistorical short-circuiting of ancient and modern periods. But recall that ideal types are of course not meant to be fully contextualized analyses of individual phenomena, but heuristic devices. If something like a concept of the Caesarist city helps us in understanding particular patterns—of justifications and practices—in different contexts, then the goal of this short intervention will have been attained.

The difficulty, however, is that Caesarism in general, and Caesarist building projects and forms of urban planning in particular, can seem very similar, perhaps identical with, related phenomena, from royal absolutism to contemporary attempts by autocratic regimes to acquire legitimacy on the basis of spectacular city designs. Hence I do want to start with a brief, no doubt contestable, account of Caesarism as a distinct constellation of political ideas. After briefly touching on Julius Caesar and his attempts to reconfigure republican Rome, I shall concentrate on the two most consequential Napoleons, before, in a second step, analyzing the ways in which these ideas shaped

[2]Lassalle called him "personifizierte Leerheit"—"personified emptiness."

[3]Quoted in Heinrich Wefing, *Kulisse der Macht: Das Berliner Kanzleramt* (Stuttgart, 2001), 127.

[4]Spengler observed, "Napoleon hat dem bourbonischen Paris und Bismarck dem kleinstaatlichen Berlin eine andere Miene gegeben. Das Bauerntum aber steht unbewegt, mürrisch und zornig daneben" ("Napoleon gave the Paris of the Bourbons and the small-state-oriented Berlin a different expression. The peasants, however, are standing apart from the process, sullen and angry"). Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (1923) (Munich, 1999), 666. He added, "Die großen Parteien in allen Ländern aller späten Kulturen, die Revolutionen, der Cäsarismus, die Demokratie, das Parlament sind die Form, in welcher der hauptstädtische Geist dem Lande mitteilt, was es zu wollen und wofür es unter Umständen zu sterben hat. Das antike Forum, die abendländische Presse sind durchaus geistige Machtmittel der herrschenden Stadt" ("The great parties in all countries of late cultures, the revolutions, Caesarism, democracy, parliamentarism are the form in which the spirit of the capitral city ommunicates to the rest of the country what it should want and for which it might have to die. The ancient forum and the occidental press are the means of power employed by the ruling city"). Ibid., 667–8.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244326100766 Published online by Cambridge University Press

architecture and urban planning. In a third part, I shall briefly discuss whether there are any echoes of Caesarist city making in the present.

Caesarism: a very rough sketch

As with virtually any "-ism"—in the sense of political ideologies—one can disentangle two questions. On the other hand, what is the morphology of the ideology, and which terms and claims for legitimacy are central to it? On the other hand, put crudely but not inaccurately, under which historical conditions does a particular ideology gain traction?[5] In this article, I leave aside the second question and concentrate on the first, and the consequences of answering it for the built environment.

One peculiarity of Caesarism is that it is, to some degree, a series of ideological self-descriptions, but also an analytical category to make sense of a very particular form of political rule.[6] As far as the latter is concerned: Caesarism is a form of personal, but not necessarily personalist, let alone sultanistic, rule, based on—literally—popularity (note also the discussion of the relationship between Caesarism and populism in Francesca Antonini's introduction).[7] A Caesar must ground his (it is hard to imagine a female Caesar, though maybe not impossible) legitimacy on something like popular consent, classically affirmed in more or less manipulated plebiscites that prove what Emerson, for instance, ended up calling "this identity between Napoleon and the mass of the people."[8] Napoleon III famously asserted,

> Today, the reign of castes is over: one can govern only with the masses; they must therefore be organized so that they can formulate their wishes, and be disciplined

[5]Bonapartism is, then, a subcategory of Caesarism; it can also be read more analytically or, more narrowly, as "a political doctrine and movement which sought to restore the Empire (or some form of Napoleonic government) in France after 1815." See Sudhir Hazareesingh, *The Legend of Napoleon* (London, 2004), 5. Finally, Napoleonism was clearly a form of personality cult.

[6]Dieter Groh, "Cäsarismus: Napoleonismus, Bonapartismus, Führer, Chef, Imperialismus," in Werner Conze, Otto Brunner, and Reinhart Koselleck, eds., *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, vol. 1 (Stuttgart, 1972), 726–71.

[7]Leonhard points to what he calls "progressive popularity strategies." See Jörn Leonhard, "Das Präsens der Revolution: Der Bonapartismus in der europäischen Geschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts," in Werner Daum, Kathrin S. Hartmann, Simon Palaoro, and Bärbel Sunderbrink, eds., *Kommunikation und Konfliktaustragung: Verfassungskultur als Faktor politischer und gesellschaftlicher Machtverhältnisse* (Berlin, 2010), 293–317.

[8]Emerson also praised Napoleon as a "giant of the middle class" and an "agent or attorney of the middle class of modern society." Heine enthused in August 1832, "Der Bonapartismus ist für diese nicht eine Überlieferung der Macht durch Zeugung und Erstgeburt; nein, ihr Bonapartismus ist gleichsam von aller tierischen Beimischung gereinigt, er ist ihnen die Idee einer Alleinherrschaft der höchsten Kraft, angewendet zum Besten des Volks, und wer diese Kraft hat und sie so anwendet, den nennen sie Napoleon II. Wie Cäsar der bloßen Herrschergewalt seinen Namen gab, so gibt Napoleon seinen Namen einem neuen Cäsarentum, wozu nur derjenige berechtigt ist, der die höchste Fähigkeit und den besten Willen besitzt" ("For these people, Bonapartism is not a transmission of power through procreation and birthright; no, their Bonapartism is, as it were, purified of all animalistic admixture—it is for them the idea of a sole rule with maximum force, applied for the good of the people, and whoever possesses that force and applies it thus, him they call Napoleon II. Just as Caesar gave his name to mere ruling power, so Napoleon gives his name to a new form of Caesardom, to which only he is entitled who possesses the highest capability and the best will"). See Heinrich Heine, *Französische Zustände* (Düsseldorf, 1980), 217.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244326100766 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> so that they can be guided and enlightened about their own interests. To govern is no longer to dominate the people by force and violence; it is to lead them to a better future, by appealing to their reason and to their heart.[9]

More controversially, a Caesar must be "charismatic" in the sense of offering something extraordinary and spectacular (a Caesar is never just a technocrat or skilled parliamentarian);[10] this also points to what one might conceptualize as a particular Caesaristic kind of political time: it points to past glory, in particular military glory, but also needs to be punctuated ever so often with some kind of spectacular surprise: unprecedented forms of glory—what Goethe called Napoleon Bonaparte's "productivity of deeds," but also, for that matter, buildings designed to awe people (and immortalize the particular productivity of deeds). As Napoleon Bonaparte himself put it, "a new-born government like ours needs to amaze and astonish people, in order to consolidate itself, or it will go under."

Evidently, no single historical figure perfectly fits this picture; again, one only need think of Napoleon III's "routinization" of a charisma which, in any case, was borrowed, so to speak, from his uncle. Still, the constellation of elements is recognizable as a distinct form of rule (it is, one should add, not a particular type of formal constitution, only an informal constitution as a de facto persistent political condition, as theorized by Carl Schmitt).[11] Yet the built environment is rarely seen as a crucial part of Caesarism, though "Haussmannization" (a term coined in 1892) is unlikely to be missing from accounts of the Second Empire.[12]

My contention is that there is a distinctly Caesaristic approach to city building. The latter is supposed to enable spectacular displays of glory, but also affirm the ruler's commitment to bettering the lot of the people (which is indeed echoed in persistent attempts to link Caesarism and something termed "populism"). There is no Caesarism without constant propaganda—Napoleon Bonaparte ruled not just with the police, but, above all, with the press, sometimes even as something like an editor in chief of news and opinion items about himself: after all, he edited the famous *Bulletins de la grande armée* himself.[13] Think also of the constant production of biographies, engraved portraits, even the special news sheet entitled *Journal of Bonaparte and Virtuous Men*, a

[9]Quoted in Markus Prutsch, *Caesarism in the Post-revolutionary Age: Crisis, Populace and Leadership* (New York, 2019), 70–71. Originally in Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, *L'extinction du paupérisme* (Paris, 1844), 11.

[10]George L. Mosse, "Caesarism, Circuses, and Monuments," *Journal of Contemporary History* 6 (1971), 167–82.

[11]Ibid. This is a more controversial point; after all, Napoleon Bonaparte was also regularly idolized as Moses, a great lawgiver; called *den grossen Staatsrechtslehrer in Paris*. The fact remains, though, that there is no distinct Casaristic constitution type, and, on a very basic level, no regular procedural form of regulating the succession in a Caesaristic regime: Caesars fall; they do not pass on power (even if some of them were of course obsessed with the issue of producing an heir).

[12]Min Kyung Lee, *The Tyranny of the Straight Line: Mapping Modern Paris* (New Haven, 2024), 11.

[13]Erich Pelzer, "Die 'Bulletins de la grande armée' als Werkzeuge napoleonischer Propaganda, Selbstdarstellung und Legendenbildung," in Rüdiger Schmidt and Hans Ulrich Thamer, eds., *Die Konstruktion von Tradition: Inszenierung und Propaganda napoleonischer Herrschaft (1799–1815)* (Münster, 2010), 209–34.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244326100766 Published online by Cambridge University Press

cottage industry started before his acquisition of direct political power and, arguably, continuing to this day.[14]

Now, the built environment is a prime means of propaganda: not just in the sense that it can highlight the extraordinary achievements of a ruler through spectacular edifices, but also because it is simply unavoidable: we are always surrounded by buildings and the more or less subtle political messages they send. Walter Benjamin famously observed that collectives relate to their architectural surroundings in a state of distraction,[15] but that is arguably one reason why the built environment can be such an effective propaganda tool: omnipresent, sometimes with directly political iconography, subtly structuring what one sees and one what one doesn't see, giving cues as to what appropriate behavior looks like, and, not least, directly coercing people in where and how they can move.[16]

Put differently, Caesaristic rulers are figures who crucially rely on what, in a more or less anachronistic way, one might call mass media; they are what Hans-Ulrich Thamer terms "media emperors."[17] And the built environment is, among other things, a mass medium. It can feature a distinct iconography affirming the legitimacy of the ruler, but its importance is not exhausted by directly political symbols (such as the bees, eagles, and versions of the letter N which Napoleon Bonaparte affixed in all kinds of places). It can also deploy buildings themselves as major symbols: one only need to think of triumphal arches and other allusions to Rome.

The Caesarist city

Julius Caesar was, by all accounts, a master of spectacles, be it triumphs, games, dinners, draping the entire Forum with silk awnings, or ostentatious gift giving.[18] But, according to Pliny the Younger, the Caesar must also build. In fact, though, the Caesar first has to destroy in order to acquire space to build according to his own program. Julius Caesar tore down houses and even temples, as he served as *pontifex maximus* (though he did follow correct procedures for achieving the demolitions). He had ambitious plans to change the entire cityscape; he "was continuously planning great new works for the embellishment of the city and for the empire's protection and enlargement," as Suetonius put it.[19] He even wanted to change the course of the Tiber and

[14]David Bell, *Men on Horseback: The Power of Charisma in the Age of Revolution* (New York, 2020), 116. Think also of Napoleon Bonaparte's observation that "three hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets."

[15]Walter Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit (Erste Fassung)," in Benjamin, *Abhandlungen* (*Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, Part 2), ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt, 1991), 431–69, at 465–6.

[16]See also Michael Minkenberg, *Macht und Architektur: Hauptstadtbau, Demokratie und die Politik des Raums* (Wiesbaden, 2020)

[17]Hans-Ulrich Thamer, "Napoleon: Ein Medienkaiser. Zur Repräsentation charismatischer Herrschaft," in Christine Vogel, Herbert Schneider, and Horst Carl, eds., *Medienereignisse im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 2009), 93–112.

[18]See the chapter "Looking at Caesar" in Andrew Bell, *Spectacular Power in the Greek and Roman City* (Oxford, 2004)

[19]Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. Robert Graves, revised by J. B. Rives (London, 2007), 21.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244326100766 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to create more theaters (inspired by Pompey's spectacular theater), and he had major plans for the Campus Martius (most of which were never realized).[20] What *was* realized was a new forum on the north side of the main Forum (which required moving the *rostra*, the stage for the speaker, and other significant interventions in the topography of republican Rome). Moving the *rostra* from the north to the east side of the Forum did not appear politically innocent—before, people could gather around the platform; now they looked at a kind of theater with the Temple of Concord and the Capitoline Hill as background.[21]

Probably most controversially, Caesar had a statue of Venus Genetrix created as his forum's focal point; he eventually also had a Temple of Venus Genetrix constructed, suggesting his own divine status as a descendant of the goddess.[22] More subtly, Caesar had the Curia as a whole relocated next to his new forum; this, according to the classicist Penelope Davies, created a new dynamic of how political actors could move, with major symbolic implications: "senators entered the Curia through a door from the Forum Romanum, where the people were sovereign, and exited not into the neutral space of the Argiletum as before, but into the east portico of Caesar's Forum, drenched with his presence."[23] Caesar restructured political spaces to suggest a direct encounter between himself and the people; at the same time, filling republican spaces with ever more objects, primarily statues, also made it more difficult for the people to assemble.

Later aspiring Caesars also erected statues: Napoleon had initially wanted to move Trajan's column from Rome, but it proved too heavy.[24] Instead, he had a column created on the Place Vendôme (a space for power displays ever since Louis XIV; it had been the Place Louis Le Grand and was only named Vendôme in 1799); the builders used metal melted down from 1,200 Austrian cannons captured at Austerlitz. A statue of Napoleon, with a toga, but mostly naked, stood atop the column (the emperor would have preferred military dress).[25] The statue, officially the Colonne de la Grande Armée, encapsulated Napoleon's Caesarism: rule was based on both military glory and the continued support of the people, here in the form of the *soldats-citoyens*.[26] The statue was taken down in 1814, but for years Napoleon's supporters demanded that his remains be put into the base of the Colonne.[27]

Napoleon also sought to create a forum, between the Louvre (renamed Musée Napoléon in 1802) and the Tuileries. "Le Forum Napoléon" never materialized, but the Arc du Carrousel did, modeled on the arches of Septimius Severus and Constantine

[20]Paul Zanker, *Augustus und die Macht der Bilder* (Munich, 1987); and Zanker, *Die römische Stadt* (Munich, 2014).

[21]David Wiles, *A Short History of Western Performance Space* (Cambridge, 2003), 99.

[22]Penelope J. E. Davies, *Architecture and Politics in Republican Rome* (Cambridge, 2017), 247–57.

[23]Ibid., 271.

[24]In this article, I leave aside Napoleon's infamous plundering of artworks from all over Europe (and the Middle East) and the role of "Napoleon's eye," Dominique Vivant Denon.

[25]Ruth Scurr, *Napoleon: A Life Told in Gardens and Shadows* (New York, 2022), 194.

[26]Benjamin Marquart, *Held—Märtyrer—Usurpator: Der europäische Napoleonismus im Vergleich (1821–1869)* (Baden-Baden, 2019), 207.

[27]Ibid., 209. A statue of Napoleon as *petit caporal* was inaugurated in 1833; that in turn was taken down and replaced by a statue showing Napoleon as Roman emperor again in 1863; then the column was famously destroyed during the Commune, only to be re-created during the Third Republic.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244326100766 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in the Roman Forum; it was intended as yet another celebration of Austerlitz.[28] At one point the idea had also been to combine the Louvre and the Tuileries into one enormous palace, in fact the largest in the world (the idea came to nothing, but Louis-Napoleon eventually extended the Louvre to the west and had both his offices and his private apartments in the enlarged wing; they can still be visited today and, I would add, still continue to convey a curious combination of pomp and insecurity).[29]

The one distinctive project that was carried out in the area by Napoleon's architects Percier and Fontaine was the straight Rue de Rivoli, intended as a Napoleonic *via triumphalis* affording a view of the Tuileries on the one side and uniform buildings with arcades for shops on the other. Under the first emperor, it extended until the Place des Pyramides; it was eventually continued under the nephew, creating a seemingly endless view, in truly baroque fashion.

In 1809, Napoleon approved plans for the Arc de Triomphe, with the specific inscription "Emperor of the French." However, construction ceased in 1814, when the monument was a mere five meters tall.[30] The project was completed under the July monarchy, with a visual program encompassing military heroism during the French Revolution. A rival idea, a gigantic elephant, was eventually created in plaster on the Place de la Bastille, but destroyed in 1830.[31]

As his instructions for potential architects of the Madeleine—initially meant to be a temple for the Grande Armée, modelled on the Roman Maison Carrée in Nîmes—make clear, Napoleon was highly attuned to the issue of how a building would produce spectacular effects for the citizens. His *Observations sur le rapport du Ministre de l'intérieur au sujet du concours de la Madeleine* show, he was deeply preoccupied with issues of where and how the emperor, the empress, and what he called *toute la cour* would enter and be seated and how, at every stage of a ceremony, they would relate to the public (he also specifically wanted to know how many statues could be placed in the edifice, equestrian statues in particular).[32] Napoleon ended up choosing the design personally; Pierre Vignon started work in 1807, but the Madeleine was not finished until 1845.

Napoleon emphasized public display—like the French kings, he dined in front of spectators—but at the same time he carefully separated designed public performance from sheltered private royal spaces. He supposedly called St Mark's Square "le plus grand salon d'Europe,"[33] but this hardly meant that public and private had fused. After the conquest of Venice and the end of the Republic in 1797, Napoleon systematically

[28]Ibid., 200.

[29]Philip Mansel, *The Eagle in Splendour: Inside the Court of Napoleon* (London, 2015), 77.

[30]Scurr, *Napoleon*, 218.

[31]Daniel Schönpflug, "Ein Elefant aus Gips auf dem Bastilleplatz," *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte* 14 (2020), 51–64.

[32]"Observations sur le rapport du minister de l'interieur au sujet du concours de la Madeleine," in Loris Chavanette, *Napoléon: Entre l'éternité, l'océan et la nuit—Correspondance* (Paris, 2020), 629–32.

[33]Quoted in Wolfgang Braunfels, *Urban Design in Western Europe: Regime and Architecture, 900–1900*, trans. Kennth J. Northcott (Chicago, 1988), 92. A. E. Brickmann, in his classic *Platz und Monument: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte und Aesthetik der Stadtbaukunst in neuerer Zeit* (Berlin, 1908), 25, descibed the square as the "Festsaal der Stadt."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244326100766 Published online by Cambridge University Press

transformed spaces that had been crucial for the rituals affirming the Serenissima; he also prioritized the secular over the religious. Concretely, this meant the destruction of the church of San Geminiano on the west side of St Mark's square and the creation of the Ala Napoleonica as well as the refashioning of the Procuratie Nuove into a royal palace. The Gothic and the Byzantian were at least complemented by neoclassical facades, and St Mark's Square turned into a rectangular space resembling less a salon than an imperial court with a neoclassical imprint (or also a *place royale*). The molo was cleared of commercial activities and saw the creation of royal gardens; a Napoleon statue was also erected.[34] Spaces that had been central for republican rituals and vistas became recoded as imperial.[35] Meanwhile, the inside of the palaces Napoleon created became more hierarchical, with courtiers distinguishing themselves by the spaces they could enter, rather than the special times when they could be with the emperor.[36]

Napoleon's ambition had been to make Paris into "the most beautiful city that could exist," as he had put it in 1797 (he had also insisted, echoing an essay on the "beautification" of Paris by Voltaire, that one had to destroy more than build); according to his private secretary, his "passion for monuments almost equaled his passion for war. The destruction of men and the construction of monuments were two things perfectly in unison in the mind of Bonaparte." And, to be sure, he left the city transformed, even if the majprity of the most spectacular projects remained unfinished (in particular, the enormous palace he had intended for his son, the king of Rome, to be built on the Chaillot Hill). Overall, his legacy as an urban designer was to pale in comparison with the impact of Napoleon le Petit.[37]

Writing in the 1920s, Friedrich Gundolf made the astute remark that Napoleon III felt more like a Caesarist than a Caesar, more like the head of a Caesarist political party than a ruler assured of his own historical necessity and, on that basis, his legitimacy.[38]

[34]Thomas F. Madden, *Venice: A New History* (London, 2013).

[35]For the republican coding of spaces see Sophia Psarra's excellent *Venice Variations: Tracing the Architectural imagination* (London, 2018); as well as Monique O'Connell, "Representative Spaces of Republicanism: Constitutional Thinking, Virtue Politics, and Venice's Great Council Hall in early Modern Europe," in Giovanni Florio and Alessandro Metlica, eds., *Contending Representations II: Entangled Republican Spaces in Early Modern Venice* (Turnhout, 2024), 66–77.

[36]As Mansel has pointed out, Versailles was structured all around the king's person; Napoleon, by contrast, established the throne room and a hierarchy of antechambers; as Mansell has put it nicely, "rank was now revealed by space not time." He also concludes that "the influence of Napoleon I was bringing the monarchies of Europe down from the clouds, and was making their palaces more visibly authoritarian and hierarchical." Mansel, *The Eagle in Splendour*, 69–70, 76. Napoleon held court in the Tuileries but controlled access carefully. Versailles had been surprisingly open, by contrast; it was simply assumed that nobody would just wander into the grounds, let alone the palace. See Stephen Gundle, *Glamour: A History* (Oxford, 2009).

[37]Some observers nevertheless emphasize the scale of the achievement; Peter Hall writes that "in his brief sixteen years of power, Napoleon I achieved more for Paris than the Bourbons had achieved in a century prior to the revolution." See Peter Hall, *Cities in Civilization* (New York, 1998), 713.

[38]Friedrich Gundolf, *Caesar im Neunzehnten Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 1926), 79. Gundolf writes, "er war mehr ein weicher Streber als ein harter Frevler, und weil er nicht aus cäsaristischem Drang zum Thron gelangte, brauchte er mehr als die echten Cäsaren eine schützende cäsaristische Theorie und Vorbilder deren Glanz ihn decken half…Wollte Louis Bonaparte für seine cäsaristische Lehre mit einem scheinbar überparteilichen, geschichtlich abgeklärten und entrückten Vorbild werben, so mußte er schon Julius Cäsar selber beschwören, und das hat er unternommen mit dem Eifer eines Parteimanns und dem zähen Fleiß eines Gelehrten." Sardonically, Gundolf continues, "Das Gegenteil von Napoleons Absicht geschah: nicht

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244326100766 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Not being a Caesar, he also required a theory of Caesarism—among other things, to justify a legitimate concentration of power in order to address social and political challenges; of course, this was, more or less, the theory that Auguste Romieu delivered with his *L'ère des césars* in 1850—even if the latter was mostly focused on Augustus, not Julius Caesar.[39]

Marx famously analyzed how Napoleon III relied on political support from peasants and the lumpenproletariat. And, to be sure, Napoleon, surrounded by Saint-Simonians, did have a social-policy agenda that, among other things, translated into changes in the urban environment (quite apart from the strategy of the *colonies agricoles*, in which the unemployed and indigent would have worked in highly disciplined fashion, under something like military supervision).[40] In his book on "Napoleonic ideas" Louis-Napoleon had already affirmed that

> the Napoleonic idea is hardly one of war, but rather a social, industrial, commercial, humanitarian idea. If to some it always appears surrounded by the thunder of combats, that is because it was in fact for too long veiled in cannon smoke and battle dust. But now the clouds have dispersed, and we can spy, through the glory of arms, a greater and more enduring glory.[41]

Like his uncle, Napoleon le Petit abolished the position of mayor of Paris, dividing authority between a prefect of the police and a prefect of the Seine. In January 1849 he created the Assistance publique de Paris, he sent a delegation to London to study low-income housing, and he had Henry Roberts's volume *The Dwelling of the Labouring Classes* translated into French (Roberts advocated mass housing, to be generated like an industrial product).[42] While still *prince-président*, Louis-Napoleon set aside ten million francs for workers' housing, using money from the confiscation of the wealth of the exiled Orléans; he also commissioned the architect Marie-Gabriel Veugny to create a model for working-class housing in Paris, with a *cité ouvrière* to be erected in each of the twelve arrondissements. The only thing that resulted was the Cité Napoléon (Figures 1, 2), houses three stories high with glass ceilings and internal *rues galeries* that connected shared spaces with footbridges to individual dwellings—something not

ihm wuchs Cäsars Glorie zu, sondern seine eignen Schwächen fielen auf das erhabene Urbild zurück" ("He was more a soft careerist than a tough transgressor, and because he did not attain the throne out of Caesarist drive, he needed, more than the genuine Caesars, a Caesarist theory which protected him and models whose splendor could help cover him … If Louis Bonaparte wanted to promote his Caesarist doctrine with a seemingly non-partisan, historically settled and distant model, he had to invoke Julius Caesar himself, and this he undertook with the zeal of a partisan and the tenacious diligence of a scholar"). Sardonically, Gundolf continues, "The opposite of what Napoleon had intended came to pass: Caesar's glory did not accrue to him; rather, his own weaknesses came to be associated with the sublime archetype."

[39] M. A. Romieu, *L'ère des césars* (Paris, 1850). Romieu, of course, mostly emphasized the plainly authoritarian elements of Caesarism, with his clam that *la force* needed to dominate *la discussion*. Ibid., 39.

[40] Prutsch, *Caesarism*, 70. For an analysis of the "socialist" elements of Bonapartism specifically (and what was real in them and what was not), see also Frédéric Bluche, *Le bonapartisme: Aux origines de la drote autoritaire (1800–1850)* (Paris, 1980).

[41] Quoted in Prutsch, *Caesarism*, 70.

[42] Esther da Costa Meyer, *Dividing Paris: Urban Renewal and Social Inequality, 1852–1870* (Princeton, 2022), 292.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244326100766 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Figures 1, 2. Inside the Cité Napoléon, arguably Louis-Napoleon's least-known attempt to shore up legitimacy by addressing the social question. Photographs by the author.

that different from what Fourier and, especially, Victor Considerant had pioneered earlier in the century. The housing proved unpopular, though, because of very strict rules enforced by a relentless concierge, constant surveillance, and a rigid 10 p.m. curfew.[43] While not resembling barracks, the governance of the workers—always assumed to be potentially unruly—had a distinctly military flavor to it.[44]

The Cité Napoléon is the most prominent remnant of Napoleon III's social agenda in Paris. According to Tocqueville, the emperor "had a sort of abstract adoration for the people";[45] this came to be expressed symbolically in a project like the Cité, but, overall and practically, Haussmann just ended up driving workers and the poor to the east of the city or to the periphery altogether (the infamous *Zone*).[46] A gigantic project in real-estate speculation, with the more or less identical five-story houses made of dressed limestone, provided both profits for the bourgeoisie and, with the famous construction of anti-barricades boulevards, military security for the regime (Haussmann also put the city barracks in the heart of the Cité, in front of Notre Dame). As arch-reactionary Louis Veuillot put it, "on one hand, they wanted to favor the circulation of ideas, on the other to ensure the circulation of regiments."[47] Haussmann destroyed existing housing

[43]Stephane Kirkland, *Paris Reborn: Napoléon III, Baron Haussman, and the Quest to Build a Modern City* (New York, 2013), 41–2.

[44]Costa Meyer, *Dividing Paris*, 294.

[45]Quoted in ibid., 31.

[46]Justinien Tribillion, *The Zone: An Alternative History of Paris* (New York, 2024).

[47]Quoted in Costa Meyer, *Dividing Paris*, 60.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244326100766 Published online by Cambridge University Press

around monuments to make them more visible—in a sense creating a city of icons—and in general subordinated the housing question to the traffic question.[48]

Haussmann preferred engineers to architects, but he was highly sensitive to the aesthetic impacts of new vistas and spaces that his *percements* and *places-carrefours* had created. Under him, Paris became a *ville-spectacle*; boulevards were opened in ceremonies with the emperor cutting ribbons, and curtains suddenly drawn away to reveal brand-new views and endless vistas of a city transformed.[49] Spaces, monuments, and, not least, names associated with military glory would make the city an omnipresent medium for the production of Caesarist legitimacy. As Napoleon III put it, apropos the inauguration of the Boulevard Sebastopol in 1858, "When succeeding generations shall traverse our great city, not only will they acquire a taste for the beautiful, from the spectacle of these works of art, but, in reading the names inscribed upon our bridges and our streets, they will recall to themselves the glory of our armies—from Rivoli to Sebastopol."[50]

Evidently, places acquire special meaning also through events.[51] Both Napoleons stuck with the idea of political festivals which had first become prominent during the French Revolution.[52] More directly political celebrations were usually followed by *jeux-spectacles*; many events were also specifically devoted to celebrating the army. It is probably too much of an idealization to claim that festivals during the Revolution had been truly participatory, whereas, later on, citizens were condemned to be passive consumers of military parades and other demonstrations of state power.[53]

Or were they? The history of Caesarism is also the history of structural transformations of the public sphere. Picking up Habermas's classic account—still an important

[48]Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition* (1941) (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 770.

[49]Costa Meyer, *Paris Divided*, 39, 100.

[50]Ibid., 79.

[51]William H. Sewell Jr, "Historical Events as Transformations of Structures: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille," *Theory and Society* 25 (1996), 841–81.

[52]Pierre Milza, *Napoléon III* (Paris, 2004), 435–64.

[53]In his advice to the Poles on how to design a constitution for a freedom-loving people, Rousseau argued that they should institute festivities and "many public games where the good mother country delights in seeing her children at play"—in contrast with "shut-in halls" and "dissolute effeminate theaters" in which people would just passively consume entertainment. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Considerations on the Government of Poland," in Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings* (Cambridge, 1997), 177–260, at 182. Various *fêtes* of the French Revolution sought to make this aspiration a reality. They featured a dramaturgy of citizens moving through different parts of Paris, often so as to revisit, or even reenact, the crucial moments of the Revolution. With the later *fêtes*, citizens were specifically meant to observe each other being engaged in revolutionary self-affirmation. What was supposed to be made manifest was unity; hence also no space for discussion during which people might get different ideas what the whole thing was about. Rousseau had conceived of festivals as ideally a kind of male brotherhood, resembling a homogeneous regiment (by contrast, another problem he had with theaters was that men and women mixed freely). See Juliane Rebentisch, "Rousseau's Heterotopology of the Theatre," in Erika Fischer-Lichte and Benjamin Wihstutz, eds., *Performance and the Politics of Space: Theatre and Topology* (New York, 2012), 142–65. On revolutionary festival culture in general see Mona Ozouf, *La fête revolutionnaire* (Paris, 1976); and Rolf Reichardt, *Das Blut der Freiheit: Französische Revolution und demokratische Kultur* (Frankfurt am Main, 2002); on Bonapartist festival culture see Bernard Ménager, *Les Napoléon du peuple* (Paris, 1988), 150–57.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244326100766 Published online by Cambridge University Press

heuristic, even if its details have rightly been disputed by many historians—one might say that Caesarism reinstituted a mode of representing a political figure before the people.[54] Except that this would seem a bit too simple: Caesarism was not just a throwback to the *Ancien Régime*; it sought to make use of new media—I have already flagged the many pamphlets, journals, and books that were crucial for Napoleonic propaganda—as well as the city as a space where people could participate in spectacles; the reality was more often passivity, but the notion of a direct connection to a leader—without estates or particular institutions coming in between—arguably was a core promise of Caesarism (and, going back to Francesca Antonini's introduction, it remains a core promise of populism today).[55]

Caesarist cities after the Napoleons?

Caesarism did not end with Napoleon III. Arguably, Mussolini best fits the template of a leader who claimed uniquely to represent the people (even if the presence of the Italian king created difficulties for this vision, and the Catholic Church also kept offering a rival source of legitimacy); he also aimed for military and "civil" glory and sought to reshape urban landscapes in line with a charismatic form of authority which was required to prove its usefulness to the people.[56] Like the other Caesaristic figures, Mussolini had to destroy, either to create space for building anew or to make visible what had been obscured by the wrong kind of building (he sometimes would end a grand speech with "ed ora la parola al piccone"):[57] think of the projects to uncover and make visible remnants of ancient Rome (including the creation of streets for fast cars from which—in line with Futurist ideas—the city was supposedly best appreciated). For that vision to materialize, many houses had to be destroyed. Other spectacular projects included the model cities south of Rome (Sabaudia and others); while often featuring excellent modernist designs, they also necessarily contained spaces for establishing a direct relationship between the Fascist leader and the people—usually assembled below a balcony. (After the end of Italian Fascism, Rome's Palazzo Venezia,

[54]Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Frankfurt am Main, 1990).

[55]Paul Kenny, *Why Populism?* (Cambridge, 2023).

[56]See, among many other works, Paolo Nicoloso, *Mussolini architetto: Propaganda e paesaggio urbano nell'Italia fascista* (Turin, 2011); Göran Therborn, *Cities of Power* (London, 2017), esp. the chapter "Apotheosis of Power: Fascism and Kindred Dictatorships"; Borden W. Painter Jr, *Mussolini's Rome: Rebuilding the Eternal City* (New York, 2005); Aristotle Kallis, "Fascism and the City: Architecture and Urban Eutopia," in Kallis, *The Third Rome: The Making of a Fascist Capital 1922–1943* (Basingstoke, 2014), 42–72; the chapter on Fascism in Eamonn Canniffe, *The Politics of the Piazza: The History and Meaning of the Italian Square* (Farnham, 2008); Diane Ghirardo, "Italian Architects and Fascist Politics: An Evaluation of the Rationalist's Role in Regime Building," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 39 (1980), 109–27; Paul Baxa, *Roads and Ruins: The Symbolic Landscape of Fascist Rome* (Toronto, 2010); Emily Braun, "Mario Sironi's Urban Landscapes: The Futurist/Fascist Nexus," in Matthew Affron and Mark Antliff, eds., *Fascist Visions: Art and Fascist Ideology in France and Italy* (Princeton, 1997), 101–27; Jobst Welge, "Fascism Triumphans: On the Architectural Translation of Rome," in Claudio Lazzaro and Roger J. Crum, eds., *Donatello among the Blackshirts: History and Modernity in the Visual Culture of Fascist Italy* (Ithaca, 2004), 83–94.

[57]Spiro Kostof, *The City Assembled: The Elements of Urban Form through History* (Boston, 1992), 270.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244326100766 Published online by Cambridge University Press

where Mussolini had had his office—and his balcony—featured a banner saying "Basta con i balconi!"[58]).

And today? If Caesarism is tied to military glory, it is hard to argue that we are seeing any genuinely Caesarist figures today, despite the general rise of autocracies in the early twenty-first century. True, Putin has launched a full-scale invasion of a neighboring country, but he is not seen as a military figure himself; a military-man-turned-politician like al-Sisi has created a spectacular city in the desert, the new Egyptian capital (as of now simply known as the "New Administrative Capital"), but he has no record of actual military accomplishment, and cannot borrow any such legitimacy from someone else either.[59]

Trump, in turn, has received support from intellectuals explicitly longing for a "red Caesar";[60] and he clearly has been invested in the idea of transforming the built environment: a number of executive orders sought to make classical-style quais-binding for federal buildings (while explicitly discouraging architecture inspired by deconstructionism). He is not the only right-wing populist who has sought to send a message about what he thinks of the true character of both the polity and the people ("the real people" to which Trump appealed during his speech to supporters at the Ellipse on 6 January 2021), but he has probably gone further than anyone in highlighting his own personal architectural choices (claiming legitimacy as a developer) and encouraging something like a personality cult within particular spaces.

In October 2025, he had the East Wing torn down; at the time of writing, the plan is to create an enormous ballroom which would replicate the spatial dynamics of Trump's club-cum-residence in Florida—a location for celebrating the leader. It is not quite Napoleon's *Grand Couvert*, but there are parallels: lavishly adorned spaces become part of the visual strategy to convince audiences of a new "golden age" for America (with the White House becoming a nouveau riche fever fantasy of Versailles, or what one astute critic called "regional car dealership rococo").[61]

[58]Tom Avermaete, "Balcony," in Rem Koolhaas *et al*., eds., *Elements of Architecture* (Cologne, 2018), 1073–1258, at 1158.

[59]See Jan-Werner Müller, "Building Autocracy in the Twenty-First Century: Three Monumental Strategies," *Tocqueville Review* 45 (2024), 199–216.

[60]The theory of "Red Caesarism" is mostly associated with the Claremont Institute, one of three important strands of political thinking on what is now customarily called the New Right in the United States. One New Right intellectual, Kevin Slack, wrote in 2023, "The New Right now often discusses a Red Caesar, by which it means a leader whose post-constitutional rule will restore the strength of his people. Viewing the government as a series of industrial complexes, the ambitious man who desires glory need only figure out how to pull strings in a few of them, and he will have the keys to the Washington, D.C. castle. The kleptocrats have already set the precedent of purges in the bureaucracy and military. They use the state to arrest political dissidents even as they refuse to indict their own minions for federal crimes. What they do not truly consider is that the public arrests, trials, humiliations, subjugations, and terminations they have created may be reserved for them; the deportations and mass dislocations they promise for their own enemies may be used on themselves." Kevin Slack, "The Constitution, Citizenship, and the New Right," *American Mind*, 15 June 2023, at https://americanmind.org/features/the-constitution-citizenship-and-the-new-right. See also Laura K. Field, *Furious Minds: The Making of the MAGA New Right* (Princeton, 2025)

[61]The critic was Kate Wagner; see her brilliant "Mcmansionization of the White House, or: Regional Car Dealership Rococo: A Treatise," at www.patreon.com/posts/mcmansionization-126873692.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244326100766 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Trump obviously lacks personal miliary glory, and his regime has not acquired it either. But the overall constellation of ideas constitutive of Caesarism, as identified in this article, remains available: a charismatic figure, with a legacy of military glory (or borrowed—or, put even more bluntly, inherited—glory, as in the case of Napoleon III), who can ally with what Le Petit simply called "the masses"; in that model, visual strategies to commemorate glory and impress with the spectacular remain crucial for the establishment of legitimacy, and, even today, the city can serve as a prime locus for such propaganda.[62]

Conclusion

In the absence of traditional legitimacy, a Caesarist figure has to prove their charisma over and over again; they are forever haunted by the accusation of "usurpation," raised by Benjamin Constant against Napoleon I (before the famously inconstant Constant decided to collaborate with the emperor on a liberal constitution). In a sense, Caesars simply cannot rest, as they must provide ever newer spectacles of one sort or another.[63] One way of doing this was, of course, military triumphs. But a functional equivalent for military glory was what Napoleon III ended up calling "civil glory." City design formed a central part of this.

The Caesarist approach to the city was twofold: strengthen popularity by ensuring clearly visible improvements such as better traffic control in ancient Rome, a steady water supply under Napoleon I (the Canal de l'Ourcq project), or, modestly, the attempts to better workers' living conditions with the Cité Napoléon (plus the sewer projects still widely admired today). These social measures were always complemented by spectacular monuments and the creation of urban spaces that facilitated the staging of Caesaristic power; as Esther de Costa Meyer has put it, "urban space was part of the Second Empire's apparatus of power."[64] Sometimes, this power dimension was really directly about military force, or what Hazan called *embellissement stratégique*.[65] Sometimes, the spaces and the symbols were more subtle; it took work for Louis-Napoleon to explain that the eagle represented "the rights of the people which have been ignored and the principle of national glory."[66]

Spectacular interventions in city landscapes often required what looked like brutal acts of destruction. Kostof remarks that "Napoleon the Great was the first man of power who was willing to countenance radical destruction in the historic cores of cities

[62]Trump might seem a plausible contender to be included in a line of Caesaristic strategy, were it not for the absence of military glory and the fact that, so far, his evident autocratic tendencies have been kept in check. But his emphasis on "beauty" and the aim of making Washington, DC the most beautiful capital in the world, as well as *Geschichtspolitik* initiatives like the 1776 Commission and the executive order encouraging the creation of new federal buildings in classical style, suggest at least an elective affinity with Caesaristic city design. See also Jan-Werner Müller, "Populism's Building Complex; or: Is there such a thing as Populist Architecture?", *Journal of Populism Studies*, Aug. 2023, 1–15.

[63]Johannes Willms, *Napoleon: Eine Biographie* (Munich, 2005), 337–8.

[64]Costa Meyer, *Dividing Paris*, 4.

[65]Éric Hazan, *L'invention de Paris* (Paris, 2002), 140.

[66]Hazareesingh, *The Legend of Napoleon*, 206.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244326100766 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of his empire"; Haussmann came to be known as *artiste démolisseur*.[67] Moreover, for critics, Caesars can only ever be parvenus (perhaps just like the nouveaux riches, or bourgeoisie, for whom Bonapartism was, according to Engels's famous observation, the "real religion"); they constantly must impress and have no long-standing conventions to rely on in order to express legitimacy. Power and popularity must be perpetually affirmed, and since both are hard to measure, spectacles are likely to be over the top. This does not mean that cities shaped by Caesaristic figures are all aesthetically dubious or outright deficient, but it does explain some of their peculiarities.

Acknowledgments. I thank Francesca Antonini and two anonymous reviewers for very helpful comments on a draft of this article.

[67] Kostof, *City Assembled*, 270.

Cite this article: Jan-Werner Müller, "The Caesarist City," *Modern Intellectual History* **23** (2026), 790–804. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244326100766

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244326100766 Published online by Cambridge University Press