

INTEREST IN CAESAR and Caesarism declined among all but a few specialists during the second half of the 20th century but resurfaced during the past decade largely in response to the perceived imperial characteristics of American power and the US Presidency. The cover of historian Harold James' book *The Roman Predicament* (2006), for example, featured an image of American President George W. Bush wearing a laurel wreath on his head and a Roman toga. Although Peter Baehr characterizes the ideas "that the United States is an imperialist power, that the presidency is abusing its executive authority, and that American administrations are pursuing a militarist agenda" as "hackneyed accusations" (p. 187), his book is perhaps *malgré lui* an important contribution to those very discussions of a new American Caesarism. Above all, this study of the history of the concept of Caesarism and its transformations by Max Weber is a welcome and timely addition to the burgeoning and increasingly sophisticated field of Weber studies. Readers interested in theories of authoritarian politics will also benefit from the author's nuanced and original interpretations.

The longer first part of the book is an updated version of an earlier book on Caesarism and Weber by the same author (Baehr 1998, *Caesar and the Fading of the Roman World: A Study in Republicanism and Caesarism*). The author's main goal in part one is to explain the ways Weber transformed inherited discourses on Caesarism in forging his signature concept of charisma, his typology of forms of legitimate domination, and his political critique of the German Kaiserreich and his contributions to the Weimar Constitution.

Chapter 2 begins by reconstructing in broad strokes the prehistory of the 19th century Caesarism debate. From the 16th to the 18th century Caesar figured in European and American republican "demonology" as a symbol of unrestrained demagogy. All republican writers "knew by heart the trinitarian theory" codified by Polybius, which distinguished between three basic types of polity: kingship, aristocracy, and democracy (p. 29). Political constitutions were seen as succeeding one another inevitably in a natural cycle, and figures like Caesar served as

* About Peter BAEHR, *Caesarism, Charisma, and Fate – Historical Sources and Modern Resonances in the Work of Max Weber* (New Brunswick, N.J., Transaction Publishers, 2008). All page references in the text are to Baehr unless otherwise noted.

“examples of syndromes to which all societies were prone” (*ibid.*). The fate of the Roman Republic was thus a cautionary tale for modern polities.

The word *Caesarism* was first popularized in the mid-19th century by Auguste Romieu, who defined it as the rule of military warlords, a system that was “about to be unleashed now that legitimism was dead” and being replaced by the reign of the secular, liberal bourgeoisie (p. 33). In response to the disorder caused by this transition, the army would seize power, Romieu argued. Caesarism was subsequently equated with monarchical absolutism and imperialism as well as militarism, and was specifically associated with Napoleon III, Louis Bonaparte, Bismarck, and other leaders whose power was based on plebiscitary acclamation. As a general model, Caesarism’s first defining feature was its reliance on the mass electorate, which had recently started to enter into political life. The mass was understood by most theorists of Caesarism as “an entity neither disposed nor able to rule” on its own but as “something to be shaped and controlled” (p. 41). Uneducated and ignorant, the mass was seen as “amenable to demagoguery, irresponsibility, and token participation” (p. 45). The Caesarist ruler, contemporaries believed, “both promotes and feeds off such a state of affairs” (p. 45). Caesarism’s second defining characteristic was the replacement of hereditary claims to royal rule by newly invented grounds of political legitimation (p. 36). This theme was to play a central role for Weber, whose question was “what kind of legitimacy, if any, was appropriate to the modern age?” (p. 51).

Chapter 3 focuses on Weber’s evolving use of the idiom of Caesarism. Baehr distinguishes between two broad sets of writings in Weber’s oeuvre, one of them openly political and the other self-consciously scientific and “value free”. In his political writings Weber initially reproduced the standard 19th century republican understanding of Caesarism as an entirely negative phenomenon. He referred to Bismarck as a Caesarist and castigated him for preventing Germany from modernizing its political institutions “along the parliamentary lines so successfully established in the Anglophone world” through electoral manipulations and the introduction of universal manhood suffrage (pp. 59-63). Weber lambasted Bismarck as illegitimate “in the constitutional sense” since his type of rule was “devoid of a hereditary, dynastic foundation”. It was “Bismarck himself, ostensible agent of the sovereign, who de facto rule[d] the Reich”, even as he exploited “monarchical sentiments as a cover for his power interests” (p. 67).

As Weber's political thinking evolved it became clear that he was not rejecting Caesarism per se. Indeed, Weber came to believe that Caesarism, "in the guise of modern plebiscitary leadership, situated within a vibrant parliamentary structure" (p. 59), was the key to the political success of Britain and the United States. When Weber was invited to join the committee drafting the Weimar Constitution, he argued that the Reich president should be elected not by Parliament "but by the people as a whole" (p. 74) in order to guarantee national unity, legitimacy, and effective leadership for the new regime. He sought to overcome the older polarization between Caesarism and parliamentarianism, arguing that Caesarism in fact "offered Germany an opportunity for its own parliamentary revitalization" (p. 69). Only an "effervescent parliament" would allow Germany to produce a "responsible Caesarist leader" while preventing that leader from basing his power "in the country at large" (pp. 72-73). Caesarism was not necessarily militaristic or abnormal for Weber. Since Caesarism was an inevitable "corollary of modern party politics" (p. 60), there was no choice other than trying to guide and balance it through a strong parliament.

In the tumult of the postwar conditions in Germany, Weber abandoned the anchoring of Caesarian leadership in a powerful parliament. Even if Weber took no interest in the notorious Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution, which allowed the German president to rule by decree without the prior consent of the Parliament in a state of emergency, his argument for a "Caesarist-plebiscitary leadership position" for the president "had a great deal of impact" on Carl Schmitt's thinking during the Weimar Republic (Mommsen 1984, *Max Weber and German politics, 1890-1920*, pp. 378-381). The ideas of dictatorship and demagoguery were now no longer used as warnings or polemical terms of abuse. Instead Weber described Caesarism as a price "worth paying to stave off bureaucratic stultification" (p. 78). And since the mass is ultimately irrational, Weber concluded that "all talk of popular sovereignty is an empty slogan" (p. 97). Masses lack all attributes that could make them autonomous, he wrote, and are "causally determined rather than meaningfully oriented" (p. 96). It follows that for Weber "self-governing liberty on an extended scale" (p. 96) is impossible: "the demos itself, in the sense of a shapeless mass, never 'governs' larger associations, but rather is governed" (Weber, edited by G. Roth and C. Wittich, 1978, *Economy and Society: an Outline of Interpretive Sociology* p. 985). Weber thus relativizes earlier Republican critiques of Caesarism and points forward ambiguously to

both antidemocratic thinkers like Schmitt and elitist theories of democracy.

Turning to Weber's more scientific writings, Baehr shows that Caesarism was drained of its polemical contents here and was retained as "a minor technical term" (p. 60) in the typology of legitimate rule, becoming synonymous with terms like plebiscitary leadership and plebiscitary "leader democracy" (*Führerdemokratie*). At the same time, Caesarism was absorbed into the wider category of *charisma*, a word Weber seemed to prefer to Caesarism because of its lack of "polemical overtones" (p. 103). Weber suggests a division of charisma into religious, military, and political dimensions; Caesarism is a component of the third (p. 90). In cases of pure charisma the bearer is endowed with "exceptional powers or qualities". Charisma's longevity depends on the moral demand of allegiance to the leader. In Caesarism and other types of plebiscitary rule, by contrast, *charisma* receives a "democratic" coloration to the extent that its legitimacy is "*formally* derived from the will of the following itself, whom the charismatic (political) leader professes to embody" (p. 91). By connecting religious and political forms of *charisma* to one another Weber erodes the distinctions among democratic elections, plebiscites, and the acclamation of charismatic leaders, where "the largest majority might be in error" and the small minority correct (Weber 1978, p. 1126). The antidemocratic implications of these views are unmistakable.

The shorter second half of the book consists of three main contributions. Chapter 4 is a compressed but insightful investigation of the category of *fate* (*Verhängnis* or *Schicksal*) and *Schicksalsgemeinschaft* (community of fate) in Weber's work. In chapter 5, Baehr develops his own concept of the "community of fate", based on Weber and Durkheim, and applies it to a case study of the SARS emergency in Hong Kong in 2003 (the author is Professor of Social Theory at Lingnan University). In a final "appendix" he reconstructs the discussion of Caesar and Caesarism in the United States at the time of the country's founding. This second part of the book is more fragmentary and disjointed than the first but still makes for some interesting reading.