Society (2023) 60:501–515
https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-023-00843-y

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

An Immunity to Authoritarianism? Bagehot, Bryce, and Ostrogorski on the Risk of Caesarism in America

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Accepted: 17 April 2023 / Published online: 12 May 2023
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Abstract
This paper considers the early lineage of assumptions, current in both the public sphere and the academy, that the United States was safe from capture by an authoritarian populist figure because of some combination of long-standing democratic institutions and a supportive civic culture. It analyzes the arguments of three influential European commentators—Walter Bagehot (1826–1877), James Bryce (1838–1922), and Moisei Ostrogorski (1854–1919)—who studied American democracy during the period in which a new species of one-man rule, generally known as "Caesarism" and originally associated with the regime of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, was thought to be an inherent threat to liberal democracy. For different reasons, all judged that the United States, through a confluence of fortuitous circumstances, distinctive institutions, and national character, was largely immune to Caesarism. After considering their arguments for this alleged immunity, and especially the nature of the connection between institutions and national character, the article concludes with a discussion of how these earlier analyses might inform how we think about fears of democratic reversal in the United States in the age of Trumpism.

Keywords Walter Bagehot · James Bryce · Moisei Ostrogorski · Max Weber · *Caesarism* · *Authoritarianism* · *Populism*

Introduction

Amidst a world-wide rise in authoritarian populism, the success of Donald Trump has disoriented liberal elites in the United States. They seem to have assumed that some combination of the country's long-standing institutions and civic culture would prevent the capture of the presidency by a populist demagogue. In this article, I excavate the lineage of such assumptions by analyzing an earlier period of intense concern about the subversion of democracy by a "modern Caesar." At first coterminous with Bonapartism, and thought to reflect distinctly French circumstances, the concept that came to be called Caesarism was generalized between 1870 and 1920 to designate an unsettling development within emerging democracies everywhere. In a Caesarist regime, a plebiscitary leader, either from the military or with its support, used a direct connection with the people or the nation to abrogate the representative institutions that claimed to mediate between individual and government.[1] The leader then cemented ties with a diffuse mass of followers by manipulating opinion through the new technologies of the industrial age.[2] During this long period of concern about personalistic plebiscitarian leadership in emerging democratic settings, however, the United States was thought to be impervious to the threat.

To understand this supposed immunity to Caesarism, I consider the arguments of three influential European commentators—Walter Bagehot, James Bryce, and Moisei Ostrogorski—who analyzed Anglo-American democracy during the period in which a new species of one-man rule was thought to be an inherent threat to the ideal of combining

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[1] On the various uses of the term in this period, see Melvin Richter, "*A Family of Political Concepts: Tyranny, Despotism, Bonapartism, Caesarism, Dictatorship, 1750–1917*," *European Journal of Political Theory* 4, no. 3 (2005): 238–243; Peter Baehr, "Accounting for Caesarism: Introduction to Gollwitzer," *Economy and Society* 16, no. 3 (August 1987): 341–356; Peter Baehr, *Caesarism, Charisma, and Fate: Historical Sources and Modern Resonances in the Work of Max Weber* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 11–58.

[2] George L. Mosse, "*Caesarism, Circuses, and Monuments*," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 6, no. 2 (1971): 167–182, examines political techniques "beyond the plebiscite" (p. 169) that attempted to fill the void between leader and people.

liberal institutions with electoral democracy. Walter Bagehot (1826–1877), the pre-eminent mid-Victorian analyst of parliamentary government, initially helped to popularize the concept of Caesarism through his tireless focus on the regime of Napoleon III. He also commented extensively on American politics during and after the Civil War. In the next generation, the English Bryce (1838–1922) and the Russian Ostrogorski (1854–1919) became canonical guides to the ways in which the United States was adapting to mass democracy.[3] All judged that the United States, through a confluence of fortuitous circumstances and national character, was largely inoculated against the virus of Caesarism. After considering their arguments for this alleged immunity, I conclude with a brief discussion of how these earlier analyses might inform how we think about contemporary fears of democratic reversal in the United States.

I: Good Stock: Walter Bagehot and James Bryce on National Character

Like Alexis de Tocqueville, by then famous for his analysis of the United States and its significance for the future of democracy, the young and unknown Walter Bagehot was in Paris in December of 1851 when Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte staged a coup abrogating the French Republic.[4] Both Tocqueville and Bagehot wrote letters to the English press to explain what had happened. Unlike Tocqueville, however, whose smuggled letter to the *Times of London* depicted the coup as a catastrophe precipitated by elite failures, the brash young English observer did not view the subversion of the French Second Republic as either avoidable or a political tragedy.[5] In a series of letters published in the *Inquirer*, which deliberately set out to puncture such liberal angst, Bagehot blithely defended the use of force and began to popularize the notion that any French political resistance would likely lead to further chaos, cursed as they were by a national character that was not “a fit basis for national freedom.”[6]

From the 1850s to 1870, Walter Bagehot helped to popularize the meaning of the term Caesarism through his initial letters on the French president’s coup and subsequent articles for the *Economist*.[7] He credited Napoleon III with creating a new type of regime characterized by “the absence of all intermediate links of moral responsibility and co-operation” between leader and people.[8] Louis-Napoléon tried “to win directly from a plebiscite, i.e., the vote of the people, a power for the throne to override the popular will as expressed in regular representative assemblies, and to place in the monarch an indefinite ‘responsibility’ to the nation, by virtue of which he may hold in severe check the intellectual criticism of the more educated classes and even the votes of the people’s own delegates.”[9] While such a regime could

[3] Bryce’s classic *The American Commonwealth*, originally published in 1888, was the most influential work on American politics since Tocqueville. It has been called the central work of a new kind of empirical and present-oriented political science in America. See Robert Adcock, *Liberalism and the Emergence of American Political Science: A Transatlantic Tale* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 235–267. Bryce also wrote a two-volume comparative study, *Modern Democracies* (1921) that reiterated and generalized the lessons of *The American Commonwealth.* Bryce visited the United States frequently and became British ambassador to the United States and the fourth president of the American Political Science Association. Ostrogorski’s *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties* (1902), aided by Bryce’s sponsorship, rapidly became an indispensable reference for many social scientists, including Weber, Michels, Pareto, Schumpeter, and Duverger. Perhaps more influential in Europe than America, his work was nevertheless promoted by W. G. Runciman and Seymour Martin Lipset, who called him “one of the most important originators of the sociology of organizations and of political sociology,” “Introduction to M. Ostrogorski, *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties* (Chicago, 1964), 1:xi.

[4] Space precludes a fuller discussion of Tocqueville’s seminal analysis in *Democracy in America* of why a Caesar-like figure was unlikely in the United States, but Tocqueville was an obvious touchstone for both Bryce and Ostrogorski and brief comparisons emerge below. For a rich conceptual history of references to Caesar in the American founding era, see Baer, *Caesarism, Charisma, and Fate,* pp. 187–209. Federalist arguments that wise constitutional organization of power and leadership would preclude presidential demagogy largely won the day and were adopted and adapted in Tocqueville’s discussion in *Democracy in America*.

[5] The French text of Tocqueville’s letter has been lost, but a retranslation appears in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Œuvres Complètes*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1951–2021) 6:1, 119–29. Hereafter cited as OC with volume and page.

[6] “On the New Constitution of France and the Aptitude of the French Character for National Freedom” (1852), in *The Collected Works of Walter Bagehot*, 15 vols., ed. Norman St. John-Stevas (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965–1986) 4:51. Hereafter cited as *Works* with volume and page. Whatever his private speculations, Tocqueville resolutely resisted relying on national character as a causal factor in political analyses, a reliance that would have challenged both his comparative method and his underlying commitment to create liberty. On this point, see James Schleifer, *The Making of Tocqueville’s Democracy in America*, 2nd edition (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000), 82–96.

[7] The central role of France and Napoleon III in stimulating more general discussions of what came to be called Caesarism was widely recognized in the late nineteenth century and is confirmed by modern scholarship. According to William Lecky, governments learned from this example “how easily a plebiscite vote could be secured and directed by a strong executive and how useful it might become to screen or to justify usurpation.” *Democracy and Liberty*, 2 vols. (Liberty Fund: Indianapolis, 2012, originally published 1896), 1:14, Project MUSE. Iain McDaniel’s recent work on Constantin Frantz in Germany has shown how Frantz’s original reflections on Louis Napoleon led to more general thoughts “on the ways in which liberal-democratic politics might spawn their own forms of plebiscitary Caesarism.” Iain McDaniel, “*Constantin Frantz and the Intellectual History of Bonapartism and Caesarism: A Reassessment*,” *Intellectual History Review* 28, no. 2 (2018): 317.

[8] Bagehot, “The Collapse of Caesarism” (1870) *Works*, 4:156.

[9] “The Collapse of Caesarism,” *Works*, 4:156.

wield administrative power swiftly and efficiently, Bagehot conceded that there was little protection from incompetence or negligence by the executive, and great risk of corruption. Nevertheless, he refrained from moral condemnation and argued that Louis-Napoléon's *coup d'état* was the least bad political choice. Moreover, Bonaparte's subsequent regime was much better than the available alternatives: revolution and riot. While not the highest goods in political life, "order and tranquility" were nevertheless the *sine qua non* of any civilized political life, and the French were unable to achieve these fundamental goods on their own.[10]

The most important circumstance that caused this new form of unmediated democracy to emerge in France, in Bagehot's running commentary, was the French national character. The English demonstrated "good judgment, forbearance, [and] a rational and compromising habit to the management of free institutions."[11] They also were both patient and blessed with "much stupidity"—here Bagehot is only partly ironical.[12] Thus, the English were able to make parliamentary government work. "With a well-balanced national character... liberty is a stable thing."[13] The essence of the French character, in contrast, was mobility: an excessive sensibility to present impressions, an exaggerated sense of existing evils, and a lack of the patience to tolerate them. When combined with their cleverness, willingness to entertain new ideas, and passion for logical deduction, a deadly cocktail emerged that inebriated the nation and incapacitated them for the sober practice of self-government. Thus, France's installation of a Caesaristic "Benthamite despot" who claimed to incarnate knowledge of "the greatest happiness of the greatest number," according to Bagehot, was both understandable and almost inevitable.[14]

Bagehot recognized that Caesarism created a vicious circle: the regime clamped down on the avenues for shaping public opinion (the press, free association, and meaningful parliamentary discussion) because these rivals called into question the Caesar's claim to represent public opinion in his person. But only through these rival mechanisms, on Bagehot's view, could progressive and free government emerge and persist. And only progressive and free government was equipped to master changing social circumstances without riot and revolution. Bagehot argued that democratic Caesarism short circuited a two-way educative process in which the people came to understand the virtues of political restraint by observing their representatives debate complicated issues and the government eventually modified its agenda by heeding what was valuable in changing public opinion.[15] Thus, Caesarism, however defensible and even desirable in the short run, made a free form of representative government even less likely in the long run.

What is unclear from Bagehot's account is whether and how a country cursed with an inauspicious national character might become capable of profiting from this educative process, since national character, in his view, was "the least changeable thing in this ever-varying and changeful world."[16] Bagehot never quite solved to his satisfaction the question of how national characters came to be formed and changed.[17] While he acknowledged that adaptation and development were inherent in all communities, some of his formulations suggested that national character was bred in the bone.

> There are breeds in the animal man just as in the animal dog. When you hunt with greyhounds and course with beagles, then and not till then may you expect the inbred habits of a thousand years to pass away, that Hindoos can be free, or that Englishmen will be slaves.[18]

Throughout the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this vaguely racialized view that a combination of ancient inheritance and a unique English history had created a persistent Anglo-Saxon political character was widespread and seemed to come in infinite varieties. Derived originally from Teutonic ancestors but reinforced by a singular history of incremental and gradual change, the English had developed political capacities that stood the best chance of weathering the rising storms of democracy.[19] How did this belief in Anglo-Saxon good stock fare in the new world of America, already well-launched on a democratic experiment?

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[10] "Letter VII on the French Coup d'état of 1851" (February 19, 1852), *Works*, 4:77.

[11] "On the New Constitution of France, and the Aptitude of the French Character for National Freedom," (January 20, 1852), *Works,* 4:49.

[12] *Works,* 4:51.

[13] *Works*, 4:49.

[14] "Caesareanism as it now exists" (March 4, 1865), *Works*, 4:111.

[15] On the centrality to Bagehot of the notion of government by discussion and deliberation, see William Selinger & Greg Conti, "Reappraising Walter Bagehot's Liberalism: Discussion, Public Opinion, and the Meaning of Parliamentary Government," *History of European Ideas* 4:2 (2015), 264–291.

[16] "On the New Constitution of France, and the Aptitude of the French Character for National Freedom" (January 20, 1852), *Works,* 4: 50.

[17] He later tackled it explicitly in *Physics and Politics* (1872). On this point and on Bagehot and national character in general, see Georgios Varouxakis, *Victorian Political Thought on France and the French* (London: Palgrave, 2002), 103–122.

[18] "On the New Constitution of France, and the Aptitude of the French Character for National Freedom" (January 20, 1852), *Works,* 4: 50.

[19] On this current in English political thought, see Stefan Collini, Donald Winch, and John Burrow, *That Noble Science of Politics: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 207-246 and Sandra M. Den Otter, "The Origins of a Historical Political Science in Late Victorian and Edwardian Britain," in *Modern Political Science: Anglo-American Exchanges since 1880*, eds. Robert Adcock, Mark Bevir, and Shannon C. Stimson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 40-48.

Many English commentators on the United States began with the notion that the Anglo-Saxon origins of the Americans in some way predisposed them to create and sustain political liberty. The questions they considered were whether the challenges of settlement in a new world and the innovative constitutional doctrines launched by the founders of the United States made the transition to a stable democratic form of freedom more or less probable. If less probable, would the shaky political democracy be more vulnerable to the threat of one-man rule? On balance, Bagehot thought American Caesarism unlikely. He wrote extensively about American politics during the Civil War and repeated many of these discussions in *The English Constitution* (1867), sounding themes about the resilient American character that would echo far into the twentieth century.

Like many later commentators, Bagehot thought that a federal constitution with balanced powers and fixed elections was less conducive to the successful operation of free government than a parliamentary system. The outbreak of civil war, of course, revealed one fundamental flaw: the ambiguity over whether states had a right to secede. But Bagehot also pointed to other difficulties. The American system, with its rigid terms of office, was inflexible and could lead to an impasse with no way to mediate a conflict between Congress and the President. Moreover, since Congress was a less powerful body than Parliament, the American system was also less capable of elevating public opinion by focusing citizens on debate and deliberation in a representative assembly.[20] Bagehot seemed to become more and more convinced, however, that although the American presidential system was far inferior to the English, its imperfections could be tolerated by Americans. Even in his earlier commentary on the Civil War, he pointed to Anglo-Saxon "virtues" in the American national character on both sides of the conflict. Although the ignorant and half-educated masses had unfortunately greatly increased their influence in the American republic, and although its leaders now came from among the "vulgarer and shallower men of the nation," the jury was out on how the qualities of the American people would manifest themselves in the crisis of civil war. "There is plenty of sterling stuff in them, we may be sure, for they come of a good stock; but, on the other hand, their career has not been of a nature to develop the virtues most needed on an occasion like the present....[21] Bagehot castigated the North for underestimating the costs of civil war; after all "they are fighting, not with savage Indians, nor with feeble Mexicans, but with Anglo-Saxons as fierce, as obstinate, and untameable as themselves."[22]

Defending his opinion that on balance it would be best to let the southern states secede and become an independent nation, he noted that "the politician who believes that 5 or 6 millions of resolute and virulent Anglo-Saxons can be forcibly retained as citizens of a Republic from which they are determined to separate, or that they would be desirable or comfortable fellow citizens if so retained, must have some standard for estimating values and probabilities which is utterly unintelligible to us."[23] Finally, he argued that the dissolution of the Union would not mean that North America would come to resemble the "feeble and anarchic provinces of the southern continent."

> We believe that Anglo-Saxon sense and Anglo-Saxon principles will preserve them from the fate of Mexican and Spanish impulsiveness and imbecility. We are confident that, as soon as the danger shall become apparent and imminent, measures will be taken to avert it; and that the very self-control, mutual forbearance, reciprocal consideration, and fair terms of arrangement and of compromise, which the perilous crisis will necessitate and call forth, will afford the best conceivable discipline for the American character. . ..[24]

That these political virtues were latent in the American character appeared to him obvious.

I turn now to the most important commentator on Anglo-American politics in the next generation of political theorists: James Bryce. Like Bagehot, Bryce saw a direct continuity between the English and American national characters. The qualities Americans exhibited in political life were due in part to democratic habits, but also to "the original English character as modified by physical and economic conditions in a new country, as well as (in a lesser degree) by admixture with other races."[25] Of Teutonic stock and practicing inherited freedoms, Americans were contrasted with democratic

[20] For an analysis of Bagehot's comparison of parliamentary and presidential regimes, see William Selinger: *Parliamentarism From Burke to Weber* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 175–181.

[21] "What *May* Be in America" (August 17, 1861), *Works*, 4: 273.

[22] "Is the Success of the North Possible?" (June 29, 1861), *Works*, 4: 262.

[23] *The Economist* 19 (June 8, 1861): 621, quoted in Michael Churchman, "Bagehot and the American Civil War," *Works*, 4:184.

[24] "English Feeling Towards America" (September 28, 1861), *Works* 4:328.

[25] *Modern Democracies*, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1921) 2:121. Hereafter cited as MD with volume and page. Thus Bryce specifically charged Tocqueville with failing to see the essential similarities between the English and Americans. "[M]uch which is merely English appears to Tocqueville to be American or democratic." "The Predictions of Hamilton and Tocqueville" (1887) in *The American Commonwealth,* 2 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund,1995, text of the 1910 third revised edition) 2: 1546. Hereafter cited as AC with volume and page. On the place of the comparative historical method and its "Anglo-Saxon" assumptions in Bryce's thought, see Hugh Tulloch, *James Bryce's American Commonwealth: The Anglo-American Background* (London: The Royal Historical Society, 1988), 34-53; Richard A. Cosgrove, *Our Lady the Common Law: The Anglo-American Legal Community, 1870-1930,* chap. 3: "One ancient root: James Bryce and the legal dimension of Anglo-Saxonism" (New York: New York University Press, 1987).

peoples like the French who struggled to instantiate more abstract notions of freedom.[26] Another frequent contrast set Americans against the citizens of "tropical America," who could not make democratic institutions work because they lacked "that common basis of mutual understandings, that reciprocal willingness to effect a compromise, that accepted standard of public honour, that wish to respect certain conventions and keep within certain limits, which long habit has formed in the minds of Englishmen or Americans or Switzers."[27]

Bryce did note differences between the national characters of the English and the Americans. The latter modified English pre-democratic political traditions in a unique way and lodged those modifications in a written constitution, developing new practices and norms to apply this document over time. Moreover, Americans focused in a particularly intense way on historical events and exemplary founding figures to reinforce the habits of compromise and forbearance that made their system work. For example, Washington and Lincoln set standards of "unselfish patriotism, as well as of firmness and of faith in the power of freedom" that public figures in America internalized as measures of public conduct and neglected at their peril.[28] Nevertheless, continuities were strong between the two peoples. "The traditional love of liberty, the traditional sense of duty to the community, be it great or small, the traditional respect for law and wish to secure reforms by constitutional rather than by violent means" helped the English to develop free institutions over time. These same traditions "carried across the sea rendered the same service in America."[29]

Recall Bagehot's comment that the Civil War and its aftermath would test the mettle of the American version of the Anglo-Saxon national character. By the late 1860s, Bagehot himself was sure that the Americans could rise above the many defects in their constitutional apparatus because of their political virtues.[30] Many liberals in the next generation of Anglo-American thinkers, including James Bryce, echoed this notion. In 1914, Bryce noted that when the English reflected on the significance of the Civil War, their disdain for vulgar Americans evaporated. "The display of courage and high spirit on both sides had brought Europeans to respect the American people."[31] Indeed, Bryce thought that the "self-control, mutual forbearance, reciprocal consideration, and fair terms of arrangement and of compromise" that Bagehot had identified as central to a robust national character rendering the polity immune from political subversion were still practiced by Americans, despite a host of institutional failures.

The evidence Bryce repeatedly cites for the presence of these Anglo-Saxon political virtues—habits of legality, respect and tolerance for independence of mind, and "kindly and indulgent" political mores toward opponents—is revealing: the victorious Union's clemency toward the South, eventual abandonment of radical reconstruction, and reconciliation with southern elites.[32] At least since the publication of *Democracy in America*, Europeans had charged Americans with harboring the vices associated with majority tyranny: intolerant public opinion and the reckless use of law as a weapon. Bryce was happy to report that these vices, if they had ever existed, no longer prevailed, and that American practice rarely crossed the line into tyranny.[33] Ironically, Tocqueville's primary example of democratic disregard for fellow citizens and the subversion of the rule of law by majorities was the treatment of free Africans in the north, who had been made into political and social pariahs by custom and law.[34] Bryce's main example of tyranny of the majority was Republican policy during Reconstruction, which, he noted, had tried to deny to Southern whites the ordinary practices of self-government. "Such a Saturnalia of robbery and jobbery has seldom been seen in any civilized country, and certainly never under the forms of free self-government."[35] A joint decision by whites in the North and South that blacks should be excluded from the political community for the foreseeable future because of their putative inferiority and incompetence was proof that Americans

26 MD 1:37, 208.

27 MD 1:142. Throughout his work, Bryce uncritically assumes the crucial influence of climate on national character, especially in the case of Africans.

28 MD 1:139.

29 MD 1: 142.

30 In 1867, Bagehot wrote in *The English Constitution*: "The Americans now extol their institutions, and so defraud themselves of their due praise. But if they had not a genius for politics; if they had not a moderation in action singularly curious where superficial speech is so violent; if they had not a regard for law, such as no great people have yet evinced, and infinitely surpassing ours—the multiplicity of authorities in the American constitution would long ago have brought it to a bad end. Sensible shareholders, I have heard a shrewd attorney say, can work *any* deed of settlement; and so the men of Massachusetts could, I believe, work *any* constitution." *Works* 5: 349–50.

31 "Introduction" to William Dunning, *The British Empire and the United States: A Review of their Relations during the Century of Peace following the Treaty of Ghent* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), xxii-xxiiii. Bryce further noted that "the main factor working for peace [between England and the United States] has been the good sense and self-control inherent in the character of the two peoples" (xxxi).

32 See, for example, AC 2: 900–901, 939, 941; MD 1:140; MD 2: 121, 159.

33 AC 2: 988–993; MD 2:121.

34 Tocqueville. *Democracy in America:* historical-critical edition of *De la démocratie en Amérique*, 4 vols., ed. Eduardo Nolla and James T. Schleifer, trans. James T. Schleifer (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010) 2:414. Hereafter cited as DA Nolla/Schleifer with volume and page.

35 AC 2:1130; See also AC 2:987; AC 1:333.

had recovered the charitable political norms that made their institutions work.

Much has been written about the racial bargain between northern and southern elites after Reconstruction—key founding moments for exclusionary political practice in the twentieth century, as well as for the disciplines of history and political science.[36] And it is well-known that an intensifying racism undergirded the celebration of an Anglo-American elite identity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in both politics and academics.[37] Less understood, perhaps, is the extent to which the "ingeniously contrived" exclusions on which reconciliation was based were seen as a triumphant renewal and continuation of earlier virtues. "Common sense regained its power, and the doctrine that every adult human being has a natural right to a vote, though never formally abandoned, has been silently ignored."[38] The decision to deny full citizenship to "inferior races," then, was seen as a sign of hope that the practical, compromising tenor of the American character could resist the lure of polarizing democratic abstractions and tolerate logical inconsistencies for the greater good. In Bryce's telling, southern men "quite above the suspicion of personal corruption" used "no more fraud than necessary" to, according to their lights, "save civilization."[39] Bryce believed that electoral fraud and constitutional manipulation were generally to be deplored, since they habituated citizens to lawlessness. At the same time, acquiescence in massive and patently illegal state schemes that disenfranchised southern blacks was in his view an exemplary exception: a case in which political experience, judgment, fairness, and a sense of what was possible in concrete circumstances not only trumped abstract notions of democratic right but also revealed the strength of the national character.

II: James Bryce on the Threat of a National American Caesar

James Bryce assumed that good stock predisposed certain political communities to create stable versions of self-government that did not require the unity of a Caesar. Nevertheless, their successful political practices required the blessings of a favorable geographic and social environment, a long history of political institution-building, and the persistence of local liberties. In this section, I consider his vision of the ways in which national character intertwined with social and political structures in the growing democratization of the Anglo-American world.

In the cases of both England and America, environment was important because it had provided isolation and thus a critical period free from exogenous shocks while traditions were forged. England, for example, "was never threatened from the Norman Conquest until the time that Bonaparte was encamped at Boulogne."[40] In the United States, isolation in the western hemisphere was an indispensable buffer that had allowed her to develop her institutions free from foreign interference, to experiment, and to make mistakes. In addition to a lack of enemies, America had a frontier—a valuable safety valve for the class tensions that arose with economic growth. Echoing Tocqueville, Bryce thought these contingent factors alone made the United States a highly unlikely candidate for a classic Caesaristic takeover: there was no standing army and were fewer class tensions for a would-be Caesar to exploit. Another important Tocquevillian preoccupation was the persistence of forms of local self-government. By the late nineteenth century, both England and the United States were subject to greater centralization. Yet Bryce insisted on the historical legacy and persistent effects of local liberties, which he—unlike Tocqueville—now tied directly to Teutonic traditions.[41] "No people except the choicest children of England, long trained by the practice of local self-government at home and in the colonies before their revolt could have succeeded half so well."[42] Local liberties practiced in New England town meetings and exported in somewhat modified form to the Western states were the proverbial schools of freedom.

In the United States, there was also the complicated matter of the federal structure of the Republic. As Bagehot had noted, federalism could and had led to a different democratic evil than democratic Caesarism, i.e., secession and fragmentation. But these dangers of disintegration were thought to have been eliminated by the finality of the post-Civil War constitutional settlement. On balance, Bryce was struck by the ways in which a variety of political communities provided

[36] The view that Black participation in Reconstruction had been a disaster was popularized by John Burgess and William Dunning at Columbia, who sparked an extraordinary efflorescence of scholarship on the period among their graduate students, joined by scholars at Johns Hopkins and the University of Chicago. With a few notable exceptions, the Dunning School dominated historical scholarship on the meaning of Reconstruction until the 1960s. See the essays in *The Dunning School: Historians, Race, and the Meaning of Reconstruction*, ed. John David Smith and J. Vincent Lowery (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2013).

[37] See, for example, Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 61-85 and Rogers M. Smith, "The Puzzling Place of Race in American Political Science," *Political Science and Politics*, 37:1 (2004): 41-45.

[38] MD 2:48.

[39] AC 2:901, 1136. Convinced of the need for and rightness of black political exclusion, Bryce was more troubled by some forms of social apartheid, since he assumed that the gradual advancement of the black race out of "barbarism" could only happen through association with whites. See AC 2:1143–1189.

[40] MD, 1:137.

[41] AC I:531.

[42] AC1:310–315.

laboratories for political experimentation and valuable practice in managing political affairs.[43] The “devices [of federalism] might prove unworkable among a people less patriotic and self-reliant, less law-loving and law-abiding, than are the English of America,” but Americans were capable of navigating this intricate structure and thereby gaining further experience in self-government.[44] Circumstances alone, then, made the United States infertile ground for the growth of Caesarism: “[i]n no country can a military despotism such as that has twice prevailed in France and once in England be deemed less likely to arise.”[45]

Bryce assumed, then, that exceptional circumstances and traditions of local government fortified Anglo-American peoples to resist the democratic danger of Caesarism. Nevertheless, England and America had very different national political institutions. This is not the place to go into debates over the relative merits of parliamentarism versus presidentialism, except to note that by the turn of the twentieth century, it was common to compare these systems to assess their success in meeting the challenges of democratization. Preeminent among potential problems was the growth in importance of national executives. Plebiscitary contests for leadership and the growing importance of a mass following were empowering both prime ministers and presidents, weakening assemblies, and putting in doubt a transition to democracy that remained “liberal.” If there was any consensus about which system could best meet this challenge, the nod went to parliamentarism. Parliamentary government appeared to offer both more flexible leadership and more potential resistance to executive tyranny, since the prime minister was a parliamentary figure first and foremost and was embedded in long-evolved norms of parliamentary cooperation.

The most famous account of the increasing importance of executive authority in democratizing nations was that of Max Weber, who argued that Caesarism was an inevitable accompaniment to the rise of mass democracy in both Europe and America. Weber, however, was virtually alone in appropriating “Caesarism” as a neutral term for the inevitable rise of plebiscitary executives. In several persuasive essays, Peter Baehr has demonstrated the ways in which Weber “redescribed [the commonplace notion of Caesarism] in sociological terms under the rubric of charisma, thus stabilizing, and to a degree erasing, a highly contestable idea that now largely disappeared beneath the imposing categories of legitimate *Herrschaft*.”[46] For a sense of how unusual this Weberian normalization of the concept of Caesarism was, one might compare the treatment of William Gladstone’s political career by Bagehot, Bryce, and Weber. They all describe much the same empirical phenomenon, but their interpretations differ markedly.

Gladstone’s famous speech at Greenwich, Bagehot noted, “marks the coming of the time when it will be one of the most important qualifications of a prime minister to exert a direct control over the masses-when the ability to reach them, not as his views may be filtered through an intermediate class of political teachers and writers, but directly by the vitality of his own mind, will give a vast advantage in the political race to any statesman.”[47] According to James Bryce, Gladstone was a figure “whose oratory was a main source of his power, both in Parliament and over the people.”[48] Despite these apparently Weberian descriptions of a new charismatic source of executive power in mass democracy, there are important differences. Weber emphasizes the subsidiary role of Parliament in controlling the prime minister’s legitimate charismatic power. Parliaments provide a way to recruit him, to preserve legal safeguards against him, and to eliminate him when he no longer holds the trust of the masses.[49] Bagehot and Bryce, on the other hand, never conceptualize Gladstone’s claim to legitimacy outside of Parliament, which, in their view, could make use of the leader both to form and to respond to public opinion.

Bagehot saw Gladstone as part of the British parliamentary tradition of innovation followed by consolidation, comparing him to great parliamentary leaders of the previous centuries in “pre-democratic” times who made politics “elevating and instructive” to the English people.[50] Gladstone, on this view, resigned not because he had lost the favor of the masses, but because he understood that parliament had new tasks and needed to develop new ideas into an agenda that the nation would accept. Rather than seeing Gladstone as a sign of the future, Bagehot wrote that “it will be many years before we see a ministry of so much power and so much mind again.” Though Bagehot pioneered the concept of Caesarism, he never used the term in connection with Gladstone. And in James Bryce’s long and admiring biographical sketch, Gladstone’s disposition to take part in the formation of parliamentary opinion, through give and take, looms much larger than

[43] AC 1:349.

[44] AC 1:358.

[45] AC 2:1244.

[46] “Max Weber and the Avatars of Caesarism” in *Dictatorship in History and Theory: Bonapartism, Caesarism, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Peter Baehr and Melvin Richter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 173.

[47] Bagehot, *Works*, 3:463. Cf. Weber’s similar judgment in “The Profession and Vocation of Politics,” in *Weber Political Writings*, ed. Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 342.

[48] James Bryce, “William Ewart Gladstone,” *Studies in Contemporary Biography* (London, Macmillan, 1903, accessed as Project Gutenberg eBook #31677), 153.

[49] Weber, “Parliament and Government in Germany under a New Order,“ in *Political Writings*, 222.

[50] Bagehot, *Works*, 3:479.

his sway over the populace. He even appears as a somewhat old-fashioned figure.[51] Finally, it should also be noted that although Weber normalized Caesarism and saw it everywhere, he nevertheless argued that Caesaristic elements could be "constrained" by Parliament (in the case of England) or by a series of unique structures and fortuitous exceptionalisms (in the case of America). In this latter case, Weber was influenced by both Bryce and Ostrogorski.

Bryce's discussion of Gladstone assumed that the grip of parliamentary norms among the governing elite and deference to Parliament in the electorate would blunt the threat posed by the rise of powerful executives in England. He recognized, however, that the United States faced stiffer challenges. Presidential power was potentially more susceptible to the dangers of Caesarism because of the election of the national executive by the people, because public opinion governed through him, and because Congress had a smaller role than Parliament in setting national priorities. Moreover, Americans were an "unreverential" people freer from the constraints of tradition, less deferential to elites, and more susceptible to personal appeals.[52] In Bryce's words, "a vigorous personality [of a presidential candidate] attracts the multitude, and attracts it the more the huger it grows and the more the characteristic weaknesses of an assembly stand revealed."[53] Thus, Bryce explicitly recognized that the institutional circumstances that an earlier observer like Tocqueville had thought would blunt executive power (i.e., indirect election of the president and Congress's predominant role in representing public opinion and setting national priorities) had changed fundamentally. Yet he still judged the likelihood of a presidential Caesar to be small.

Bryce described the most successful presidential candidates as masters of intrigue (to navigate the party system) and compelling orators (to move the people).[54] A conjunction of deviousness and magnetism, however, did not often lead to democratic statesmanship. Fortunately, in ordinary times, the president was little more than a managing clerk whose chief function was to select subordinates. There was little temptation to, and little consequence from, abuse of his powers. But in extraordinary times—if foreign affairs became critical or a severe domestic crisis arose—the President could easily assume dictatorial powers. Abraham Lincoln, in Bryce's account, wielded more authority than any single Englishman since Oliver Cromwell.[55] In those moments, "everything may depend on [the president's] judgement, his courage, and his hearty loyalty to the principles of the constitution."[56] Constitutional checks and balances alone could do little to curb the power of the President. There was nothing in the Constitution, for example, that would prevent the President from packing the Supreme Court and the federal judiciary if his party controlled Congress and acquiesced in increasing presidential prerogatives.[57] What prevented this outcome?

There were only two factors that blocked presidents from abusing power: public opinion and presidential self-restraint.[58] Bryce noted that a current of opinion going back to the nation's founding warned against "the one man power" and customary expectations limited the President to two terms. Public opinion in the United States also had internalized a belief in constitutional norms guaranteeing rights and had an abiding faith in a non-partisan judiciary with the power to interpret the Constitution. Bryce thought that the longevity of the written constitution and devotion to its norms were potent restraints on the use of executive power in normal times and would ensure that that abnormal uses of power would subside after a crisis.[59] The American national character, pre-disposed to maintain political freedom, had been shaped in a particular way by the Constitution.

> It forms the mind and temper of the people. It trains them to habits of legality. It strengthens their conservative instincts, their sense of the value of stability and permanence in political arrangements. It makes them feel that to comprehend their supreme instrument of government is a personal duty, incumbent on each one of them. It familiarizes them with, it attaches them by ties of reverence to those fundamental truths on which the Constitution is based.[60]

Wariness of the judgment of the people among party leaders who vetted presidential candidates would assure that dangerous contenders would not rise to the top of the selection process.[61]

Even though the institutional bulwarks against a president becoming a tyrant "not against the masses, but with the

51 Bryce, "Gladstone," 142–160.

52 AC 2: 943–944.

53 AC 2:1502.

54 AC 2: 893.

55 AC 1:58. Despite or because of the way he assumed emergency powers, Lincoln was more often contrasted with than likened to a Caesarist leader. See Helena Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism: from Ancient Rome to the 21st Century* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2018), chap. 5: "Caesarism and Liberal Democracy: Napoleon III, Lincoln, Gladstone, and Bismarck," 136–193.

56 AC 1:59.

57 AC 1:245.

58 AC 1:40: "... the responsibility of a great office and the feeling that he represents the whole nation tend to sober and control the president."

59 He compared the phenomenon of quasi-dictatorial presidential power to dictatorship in the early days of the Roman Republic, safely conferred because of the virtue of the citizens. "Opinion is in the United States so sure of its strength that it does not hesitate to let the President exceed his constitutional rights in critical times. It was the same with the dictatorship in the earlier days of the Roman Republic and for a like reason" (MD 2:162). See also AC 2:1269.

60 AC I:362.

61 MD 2:72–73.

masses" were weak, then, Bryce judged fears of Caesarism in America to be groundless.[62] Presidents, both mediocre and outstanding, had internalized self-restraints. "Not many Presidents have been brilliant, some have not risen to the full moral height of the position. But none has been base or unfaithful to his trust, none has tarnished the honor of the nation." And even should they lack such an internal compass, they would censor themselves because of fear of "a storm of disapproval."[63] A voter in the United States, though excitable and competitive, was "shrewd and keen, his passion seldom obscures reason, he keeps his head when a French, Italian, or even German would lose it."[64] In the end Bryce put his faith in the virtues of the electorate: "[t]o the people we come sooner or later: it is upon their wisdom and self-restraint that the stability of the most cunningly devised scheme of government will in the last resort depend."[65] In support of this faith, he cited a group of reformers who were working to fix the worst abuses of the party system and who were followed by an increasing number of independent voters.[66] Thus, national character would continue to fill in the defects in the formal and informal institutional structures of American politics and to supply a recuperative power that would emerge in times of need.[67] As Woodrow Wilson approvingly commented in his review of *The American Commonwealth*, Bryce attempts to demonstrate that "our politics are no explanation of our character, but... our character, rather, is the explanation of our politics."[68]

III: Little Caesars: Moisei Ostrogorski and the American Immunity to Caesarism

In considering the danger of American Caesarism in a time of rising national executive power, I have mentioned in passing Bryce's awareness of the emergence of the effects of organized mass parties. James Bryce and Moisei Ostrogorski were among the first to describe in a systematic fashion how an informal shadow system of party organization had grown up to manage participation in democratic politics.[69] They largely agreed on the functioning and purposes of these parties, run by political professionals with no aims other than getting their candidates elected to gain the "spoils" of office. Mass parties challenged the very idea of representative government precisely because they tied national representatives to the needs of party machines. The central figure here was the powerful party boss, who, in Weber's formulation, lived off rather than for politics, and who became the real driver of the political agenda. Recognizing that parties had become integral to the functioning of American democracy, Bryce and Ostrogorski nevertheless disapproved. On their view, American-style parties discouraged rational deliberation, impeded government by discussion, and sidelined dedication to the public good. Bryce, however, tended to view parties as a necessary part of a representative political system—if sometimes, as in America, prone to excessive corruption. Ostrogorski painted a more dystopian portrait.[70] In his view, American citizens had completely ceded civic agency to a host of little Caesars in exchange for stability and operational efficiency, thus illustrating democracy's dark potential.

Before considering in more detail this Faustian bargain and its implications for the danger of a "big Caesar," I should note that Ostrogorski agreed with James Bryce about many of the exceptional circumstances that protected the United States from the dangers of democratic Caesarism. Her relative isolation meant that she did not need a standing army; her extensive territory and boundless opportunity cushioned the polity from destabilizing class tensions that a dictator might exploit; her commercial wealth allowed Americans to make mistakes and to tolerate the squandering of resources

[62] AC 1:61. Bryce concluded that "Caesarism is the last danger likely to menace America" (AC 2:1244).

[63] MD 2:73.

[64] AC 2: 888; Cf. MD: 2: 160: A "sane, shrewd, and tolerant type of political opinion" is "widely diffused through the whole native population."

[65] AC 1:245.

[66] AC 2:1503–04; Bryce, Preface to Ostrogorski in Ostrogorski, 1:xlvii; MD 2:96.

[67] AC 1:9; AC 2: 1506–1507; MD 2:164. In the chapter of *Modern Democracy* on Australia, Bryce also mentions recuperative forces linked to "hereditary virtues." The (white) Australians have great "recuperative power;" they are a "virile and high-spirited race, energetic and resourceful, a race which ought to increase and spread out till it fills the vast spaces, so far as habitable by man, of the continent that is its heritage." See MD 2:264.

[68] Woodrow Wilson, "Bryce's *American Commonwealth*: A Review," in AC 2:1581.

[69] They built, of course, on a half century of discussions in the United States and Europe of how the growth of political parties had been transforming the landscape of American politics. For a discussion of European debates on the American political party system after Tocqueville, see Gaetano Quagliariello, *Politics without Parties: Moisei Ostrogorski and the Debate on Political Parties on the Eve of the Twentieth Century*, trans. Hugo Bowles (Aldershot: Avebury, 1996), 60–74.

[70] On the complicated relationship between Bryce and Ostrogorski, see Paolo Pombeni, "Starting in Reason, Ending in Passion: Bryce, Lowell, Ostrogorski and the Problem of Democracy," *The Historical Journal* 37, no. 2 (June 1994): 319–341. Bryce's introduction to *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties* helped to ensure its wide readership, but he kept his distance from Ostrogorski's "Rhadamanthine" attitude and disputed his pessimistic view of the power of the caucus in British parties, noting that Ostrogorski had exaggerated, and that British party leaders were "free of the more sordid elements and in a different class of men" than those in the United States. James Bryce, "Preface," Moisei Ostrogorski, *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties*, 2 vols., trans. Frederick Clarke (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1902) xlii-xliii. Hereafter cited as Ostrogorski with volume and page.

without triggering political crises. Finally, the sprawling terrain of federalism provided a direct barrier to the ambitions of any presidential "man on horseback"[71] attempting to exploit a sense of national unity.

> A Caesar or a Napoleon, who "bestrides a world like a Colossus," and sways an empire from a capital, can only rise and flourish on a levelled political soil which presents a flat and smooth surface; now the American soil was broken up by a number of political units which, in spite of all vicissitudes, had preserved their individuality. There has been a rough outline of a national boss, but the influence of the personages who more or less realized this type was reduced mainly to the role of a grand wire-puller."[72]

Ostrogorski also agreed with Bryce that these circumstantial barriers to the emergence of a national boss who was more than a mere "wire-puller" were fortuitous because Americans, lacking traditions of parliamentarism and class deference to traditional leaders, were in some sense more vulnerable than the English to manipulation by demagogues. They were "in no way a deferential people 'after the heart of the Bagehots.'"[73]

Among all this superficial agreement, however, Ostrogorski had a fundamentally different understanding of how the rise of democratic mass politics interacted with national character in the United States. He was both more idealistic and less optimistic than James Bryce. Openly valuing a liberal form of democracy as a universal human aspiration, a form of government that should aim toward collective identity through the free exercise of reason and moral conscience, Ostrogorski argued with Rousseau as a respected interlocutor rather than a figure mired in unrealistic French abstractions. Deeply influenced by the French milieu in which he had been trained, he resisted the inductive comparative method in favor of a more abstract deductive methodology.[74] Thus, he conspicuously failed to echo Bryce's faith in the legacy of Anglo-Saxonism and the racial roots of virtuous democratic "usages."[75] But Ostrogorski was at the same time less optimistic than Bryce because he envisioned the party system as an existential menace to the ideal of government by free discussion, rather than as a set of flawed institutions that could be reformed and improved. And if Bryce viewed national character as a partial corrective to the ills of party, Ostrogorski obsessively chronicled a fatal attraction between the American national character and the party regime: a complementarity of corruption that had repressed true political freedom in the United States. Paradoxically, however, Ostrogorski would argue that Americans' abdication of civic agency would make a national Caesar even less likely.

On Ostrogorski's account, the masses accepted the services of the party organization to make democratic government manageable. But while things indeed worked in the sense that professional bosses efficiently operated a massive electoral system in the states and at the national level, and roughly processed the immigrant waves coming into the cities, the system hollowed out citizens' power, selected candidates with no regard for the public interest, and undermined the working of representative bodies, which had become parodies of government by discussion.[76] Abandoned, according to Ostrogorski, were the functions that parties had exercised, if imperfectly, in the pre-democratic past: leading public opinion and creating a public agenda. Despite these collateral goods, the old parties had planted a fatal seed in the soil of developing democracies: mindless polarization stoked by an almost religious enthusiasm. In this way, they had "arrested the free development of political life" and helped to precipitate the modern apolitical party system.[77] In America, party bosses foisted spurious national differences onto local politics and gerrymandered voting districts, thus undermining the valuable spirit of local liberties.[78] Finally, they forged alliances with the

[71] Ostrogorski, 2:593. Ostrogorski here refers to the misplaced worries of "anxious minds," who feared that President Grant would break political norms by running for a third term and use his popularity as a platform to seize power in a Caesaristic coup.

[72] Ostrogorski, 2:594. While Ostrogorski thought of federalism as a mechanical or structural barrier to the emergence of Caesarism, he neglected Bryce's ancillary argument that decentralization strengthened the political norms of compromise and self-restraint that Americans inherited from Anglo-Saxon forbears.

[73] Ostrogorski, 2:561.

[74] For Ostrogorski's scholarly apprenticeship amidst French intellectual and academic preoccupations, see Quagliariello, *Politics without Parties*, 5–85. For his debts to English reformist anti-partyism, see Gregory Conti, "Ostrogorski before and after: Three moments in anti-partyism and 'elite theory'," *Constellations* 27 (2020) 170–175.

[75] Ostrogorski's rare references to the "Anglo-Saxon" roots of the Americans usually describe the religion bequeathed by early settlers. See 2:154, 2:257. There are no laudatory references to a specifically Anglo-Saxon character. He mentions the widespread claim that the English character was marked by an "Anglo-Saxon" hostility to political abstractions only to denigrate that view as completely unfounded (1:99–100). Moreover, he omits praise of the reconciliation of North and South after the Civil War, calling it a ruse to get voters to vote at the behest of machines. Indeed, he notes that "the frame of mind developed in the southerners under the slavery regime naturally inclined them to such renunciation of private judgement" (2:122). White southern elites' appeals to "save civilization" by disenfranchising blacks were in his view transparently self-serving (2:124). Finally, Ostrogorski thought Blacks were fully capable of learning to be citizens and immigrants were no more corrupt than the native New England farmer enmeshed in the spoils system (2:344–345, 431).

[76] Ostrogorski, 2: 546.

[77] Ostrogorski, 2: 457.

[78] Ostrogorski, 2: 552.

"plutocrats" who had come to the fore with capitalist development, granting them outsized influence on political decisions in exchange for financial support. Yet the people tolerated this exploitation and protested only sporadically.

> It is beyond dispute that the capitalists enrich themselves and they do so at the expense of the people, but it is not proved that they impoverish the people, that they rob them. The harm done to the citizen as taxpayer and consumer is very slight: the gigantic concentration of industry enables a few men to grow rich by an infinitesimal illicit toll on each member of the community at large.[79]

On this view, democratic citizens—elites and masses alike—had sold their souls to the little Caesars who both managed and fleeced them.

Ostrogorski depicted an American political culture in which "civic courage shriveled up... like a body exposed to the cold."[80] What appeared to be patriotic fervor was false enthusiasm and a spurious sense of competition created by political entrepreneurs to power an electoral machine. Party leaders then instilled the pseudo moral norm of "regularity" (party loyalty) to keep that machine running.[81] Eventually, like Weber's bureaucratic iron cage, the machine became self-perpetuating, absorbing and blunting the principled protests that erupted periodically without fundamentally changing the system. An obvious question—which Ostrogorski posed directly—was how the formal republic continued to survive, and why little Caesars did not take advantage of the decline of civic spirit either to select candidates with Caesaristic ambitions or to try to become national Caesars themselves.

His answer to this question comes into clearer focus if we consider the nature of his agreement with Bryce on the forces that impeded executive overreach in America: public-opinion and presidential self-restraint. Like Bryce, Ostrogorski thought that the party caucus system had nullified the constitutionally mandated separation of powers. The rise of informal parties had broken "the two big wheels of the [constitutional] machine—the executive and the legislative."[82] The evisceration of institutional controls, then, left only public opinion as a functional restraint on presidential ambition. Ostrogorski also seemed to concur with Bryce that, despite these changes, a "usurper and would-be Caesar" would be powerless to overthrow the constitutional barriers surrounding individual freedoms. These guarantees, in his words, had been "formed into a sacred deposit" and were a "subject of satisfaction and pride."[83] Yet this agreement was more apparent than real. Bryce thought of adherence to constitutional norms as a distinctive variation of Anglo-Saxon virtue. Ostrogorski focused on the political implications of self-interest and materialism, ubiquitous instincts that were evident even in Americans' attachment to their Constitution.[84]

In the United States, according to Ostrogorski, economic interests and activity had always energized people of all ranks. The imperialistic take-over of politics by parties further intensified and corrupted these instincts: "belittling unassuming and honest work, giving rein to desires and appetites, and making pursuit of wealth the highest aim."[85] Americans indeed clung tightly to guarantees of economic and personal freedoms, which furthered their pursuit of material wealth. Those were the protections that formed a constitutional "sacred deposit." Americans had let slip, however, the constitutional safeguards that structured political agency. Whatever civic and patriotic instincts remained were diverted into meaningless partisanship artificially manipulated by non-ideological parties to maintain a political monopoly. Having "expended all their moral strength in the material building up of the commonwealth," Americans had allowed their political capital to be expropriated and their rights usurped. When Ostrogorski describes American attitudes toward political rights enshrined in the constitution as a "subject of satisfaction and pride," he means to denigrate these attitudes as a species of fetishism. Americans are like misers who gaze at their gold without spending it in order to gain the illusion of satisfaction, or like cult worshippers who ritualistically discharge a sacred obligation by depositing a voting-paper, mysteriously prepared for them and without them.[86]

This materialistic corruption of character, which caused Americans to cede political agency to the party regime, was also indirectly the cause of executive self-restraint. Put simply, would-be presidential Caesars were incapable of being moved by the passion for power, having been thoroughly seduced by the passion for money.

> Lastly, even the usurpation of power by the bosses, the rings, and the machines, substantial as it was, did not and could not entail the political consequences which the illegal seizure of power produces in the countries of the Old World, or even in Latin America [i.e., Caesaristic coups d'état that abrogate political liberties]; it has not touched, or has scarcely touched liberty. In the United States the latter has never been the objective of the usurpers; besides, it had been made safe from

[79] Ostrogorski, 2: 573.

[80] Ostrogorski, 2: 567.

[81] Ostrogorski, 2: 426–429, 438–39, 460.

[82] Ostrogorski, 2:546, 595.

[83] Ostrogorski, 2:593, 595.

[84] See, for example Ostrogorski, 2:43–44, 55. Bryce denied that Americans were especially materialistic; rather they were energetic and competitive, traits inherited from the English, but intensified by the pre-eminent place of commerce and industry in American society. MD 2:121.

[85] Ostrogorski, 2:574.

[86] Ostrogorski, 2:55, 2:361.

their possible designs on it. The first fact is due primarily to the cardinal phenomenon to which Tocqueville has already called attention, namely, that the passions of the American people are not of a political, but of a commercial nature. In that world, awaiting cultivation, the love of power aims less at men than at things. The Caesar called for by the abdication of American society, engrossed in the pursuit of wealth, made his appearance animated with the same instincts and the same greed of gain. . . . Thereupon the usurpers who exploited the public interest fastened on the forms, and made a speciality of them with eagerness, to obtain, in their turn, the maximum of profit.[87]

Although Ostrogorski explicitly invokes Tocqueville in this passage, their worries about the threats to liberty posed by rampant self-interest were different. Thinking more of France than America, Tocqueville feared that individualism would draw citizens into private life, eventually leading them to tolerate political subjection in exchange for economic stability. They would passively acquiesce in the rise of a "master" wielding despotic power made more frightening by its administrative reach.[88] Ostrogorski, in a series of striking images, pointed to a different malignant political metastasis in a society in which self-interest reigned supreme. So pervasive was American materialism that it had changed the very horizon of ambition. Rather than the dystopia of an administered society dominated by a leader of a new kind, he envisioned a mindless formalism that extinguished ambition even in would-be usurpers.

Tocqueville had contrasted the false promise of a unified sovereign people on offer from a power-seeking figure at the head of a centralized regime with a different, more complex union based on the practices of "self-government" that he idealized in America. Although Ostrogorski articulated an analogous ideal, calling it true democratic "union" rather than false democratic "unity,"[89] that ideal was no longer to be found in the United States, which in his account was a cautionary tale rather than a morality lesson. For Ostrogorski, false democratic unity came in two varieties: the "Caesarean mould"[90] and the party mold. The latter, most highly developed in the United States, encased the polity in a formalized organizational apparatus geared to the self- interest of amoral political bosses. Both false unities were nefarious responses to the same democratic vulnerability: the challenge of how to translate equality and universal rights into collective action. Both false unities prevented a more spontaneous democratic union from emerging, but it seemed they were mutually exclusive. A party regime that disciplined and diminished the citizenry would eliminate any perceived need for a single Caesar embodying a form of pseudo unity in his person.

Moisei Ostrogorski, then, painted a far gloomier picture than James Bryce. Yet he too concluded with surprising images of potential liberation. He sometimes viewed the party reformers in whom Bryce placed his hopes as only the latest in a long line of idealistic attempts to purify American politics: futile rebellions against party whose successive failures he had analyzed in the historical sections of *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties*. But Ostrogorski could not help but hope that some such attempt to break out of the party system would set the country on the path to a different outcome. He ended his book with a long and detailed utopian vision of a democratic institutional structure without permanent parties. In this romanticized account, special interest "leagues," new methods of voting, and nonpartisan primaries organized by the state would at last supply an institutional apparatus for true democratic union rather than false democratic unity.[91] Americans' ritualistic belief in their own civic agency—the belief that the citizen "can put things to rights there when he chooses"—might yet effect an alteration in their destiny: "like a fire which barely emits a spark, but which is not extinguished and may at any moment burst into a generous flame, giving light and warmth."[92]

Conclusion

This essay has focused on a period in the intellectual history of democracy in which observers of political democratization were haunted by the potential subversion of democratic politics by a distinctively modern Caesar, a leader who capitalized on the opportunities inherent in democratic politics to eviscerate representative institutions and legal procedures by claiming a higher legitimacy in the people. I have argued that

[87] Ostrogorski, 2:592–593. Ostrogorski sometimes contrasts the "European" passion for power, still capable of spawning power-hungry Caesars, with a new form of politics organized as a commercial enterprise. See 2:195.

[88] See his chapter on "What Type of Despotism Democratic Nations have to Fear" in the 1840 volume of *Democracy in America*. There he painted a dystopian portrait of a nation of passive sheep guided by a centralized power, a regime that, in the worst of all cases, would be "delivered into the hands of an unaccountable man or body." DA Nolla/Schleifer, 4:1256. Cf. his parliamentary speech of January 18, 1842 ("Discussion de l'Adresse") in which he used similar imagery to castigate his fellow deputies and chide them for their lack of civic courage: "I say...that it is by going down this route that nations ready themselves for a master. I do not know where he is, and from what direction he might come, but he will come, sooner or later, if we follow this path for long" (OC 3:2, 199).

[89] Ostrogorski, 2:671–681.

[90] Ostrogorski, 2:673.

[91] AC, 2:607–740. As Gregory Conti has argued, any attempt to coopt Ostrogorski into the "elitest" company of Mosca, Michels, and Pareto ignores his underlying democratic utopianism. "Ostrogorski: Before and After," 175.

[92] Ostrogorski, 2: 596.

during this period an important strand of opinion, put forth by writers claimed as avatars of empirical social science, judged the American republic to be immune to this danger. Today political observers obsess over an analogous peril: the risk of a political takeover by "personalistic, typically charismatic leaders [who] exercise power through unmediated, quasi-direct appeals and connections to an amorphous, heterogeneous, largely unorganized mass of followers."[93] How might reflection on an earlier period of certainty about resistance to Caesarism bear on present discontents?

One obvious observation is that the circumstantial and institutional barriers that underlay earlier views of the likely failure of presidential adventurism in America have now completely eroded. The United States is no longer geographically isolated, uniquely blessed with economic opportunity, dominated by one hegemonic ethnic group, militarily weak, or protected from its own missteps. Moreover, federalism, rather than providing a prophylactic structure that prevents a take-over by a would-be national Caesar, is now seen by some political scientists as fostering "laboratories of authoritarianism" in the states.[94] It has become a phenomenon that can facilitate rather than thwart the national rise of personalistic plebiscitarian presidential candidates.

James Bryce and Moisei Ostrogorski recognized that changes effected by political parties had already altered the institutional reality behind constitutional guarantees and had made possible a shift to an executive-centered national polity. And they also acknowledged that future changes (for example, the passage from isolation to world engagement, the closing of the frontier, the rise of inequality) might further affect the functioning of democracy through attitudinal shifts. For all their realism and detailed analyses of the workings of democratic institutions in the United States, however, each assumed that American norms of political behavior, in the form of a persistent American national character, would resist the rise of political authoritarianism. Bryce, following the earlier Walter Bagehot, assumed that the sturdy good sense of the Anglo-Saxons would emerge like a *deus ex machina*, in wise leaders and canny voters, to meet perceived dangers and to provide a continuing source of mutual toleration and forbearance. Ostrogorski argued that national character provided a different kind of buffer. Building on long-standing views of how the workings of self-interest corrupted the American character, he described self-interest as regulated and directed in the United States by a satanic rather than deistic invisible hand. Party regularity trapped voters and elites in a corrupt form of political community that paradoxically saved them from the lure of a figure who appealed to political ambitions that neither he nor they could recognize.

One cannot help but be struck by the frailty and irony of these assumptions about a persistent common culture that somehow deflects political dangers despite institutional change. Rather than a wellspring of democratic resilience through its virtues of self-restraint and toleration, "Anglo-Saxonism"—always deeply entwined in America's racist political exclusions—has proved an incendiary source of intolerance, partisan aggression, and violent norm-breaking. Moreover, it has lost all claim to exceptionality, capable as it is of forging strategic alliances with movements based on ethnic resentment around the globe. A consideration of the lineage of these views suggests that those who hope for a "restoration of civility" must face the sobering reality that norms of reciprocity and toleration do not merely have to be reclaimed but must be recreated out of different institutional materials for a different kind of multiracial and multiethnic polity.

In one sense, Ostrogorski's view of the ways in which pseudo patriotic national instincts embedded in the party regime held in check the rise of rogue leaders and produced a form of democratic stability, however morally compromised, has proved more prescient. The decline of such party "gate-keepers" has often been identified as a key factor in the rise of Trumpism in the United States.[95] But Ostrogorski was spectacularly wrong about how institutional reforms leading to the decline of parties would unleash a different, more authentic and participatory form of representative democracy. Rather than providing a foothold for reasonable discussion and moral conscience, the rise of single-interest organizations, free primaries, and unfettered public opinion has intensified partisanship, whose roots obviously lie beyond the party system. With the weakening of parties, identity politics—stoked by a transformed media landscape that fosters a new sense of intimacy between leader and followers—has upended politics as usual and facilitated the rise of demagogy.

Finally, common socialization, allowing past observers to project a stabilizing American political culture and to imagine a singular national character that transcended elites and masses, is declining to a vanishing point. Many commentators across the political spectrum point to intensifying social and political tribalism and mutual incomprehension as the primary causes of our current vulnerability to democratic reversal. Demagogues can stoke and exploit divisions without much pushback from what past observers thought was a well-nigh impregnable consensus on shared democratic norms. We are often urged, then, to fix our broken culture

[93] Kurt Weyland, "*Why US Democracy Trumps Populism: Comparative Lessons Reconsidered*," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 55: 3 (2022) 478.

[94] Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2018) 2.

[95] Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 33–71.

and to rebuild a sense of shared citizenship. This is not bad advice, but my reading of old arguments about why Americans were immune to the virus of Caesarism points in a slightly different direction. Bagehot, Bryce, and Ostrogorski, I have argued, finessed the challenging task of explaining the contingent connections between democratic norms and democratic institutions, institutions that both foster such norms and in turn are supported by them. In their explanations for why Americans were unlikely to turn to a plebiscitarian demagogue, they gave lip service to this task, but offered explanations that privileged unsubstantiated notions of national character. I suspect that we can no longer tolerate such sleight of hand. Perhaps it is time to focus squarely on the imbrication of democratic institutions and democratic "usages," to use Bryce's word, recognizing that they have been linked in complex, unstable, and sometimes unjust feedback loops. Getting that story right might allow us to nudge our institutions in directions that will allow us to keep our democracy from being hijacked by the twenty-first century's version of democratic Caesars.

Declarations

Funding: The author has no relevant financial interests to disclose.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no competing interests.

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