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The Sublime Arc of Caesarism: Caesar, Shakespeare, and Radical Politics

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Abstract. This essay uses the controversy surrounding the 2017 staging of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar at Shakespeare in the Park as a launching point to explore the legacy of Caesarism as a political concept that attempts to reconcile popular sovereignty and dictatorship through the self-identity of ruler and the identity of the ruled. Drawing on descriptions of the importance of the name and signifier of Caesar from Lucan, Lefort, Laclau, and Lyotard, it develops a discourse analysis of the Caesarist phenomenon within the context of the 20th Century explications by Max Weber and Antonio Gramsci. This assessment of the "ideal name" and "floating signifier" of Caesarism and Bonapartism, as they pertain to popular sovereignty and the politics of subjectivity, is assessed in light of the Kantian idea of the sublime and a spectral existence of sovereignty. A subsequent definition is provided of Caesarism addressing the subject-oriented politics of personalized, mythically-rooted and symbolic authority.

Keywords: Caesar; Shakespeare; populism; history; Trump

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Introduction

On Friday, June 17, 2017, a protest erupted during a production of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* at Delacorte Theater in Central Park, New York City. The play's gruesome murder scene brought great controversy, since the man on stage who faced assassination did not look like a laurel-crowned Roman statesman, he looked a lot like Donald Trump. Though not uncommon, the comparison between then-President Donald Trump and Julius Caesar brought harangues from protesters and divestment by donors. People could countenance Trump as Caesar – indeed, some of his supporters even invited it – but the culmination of the Caesar narrative, his eventual assassination, made the analogy more real, leading to shock, terror, and protest.

The analogy between Trump and Caesar has an interesting place in the intellectual history of Western social sciences, stemming from the search for meaning amid the rise of authoritarian populist regimes throughout the 19th and 20th Centuries. Between 2020 and 2024, years after the controversy at Shakespeare in the Park, networks within the US far right began to develop notions of Trump as a "Red Caesar," described by right-wing professor David Slack as "a leader whose post-Constitutional rule will restore the strength of his people" (Wilson, 2023). From the Claremont Institute to the secretive Society for American Renewal, concepts of the "Red Caesar" range from "a natural, realism-based system, under which a civilization can flourish" to a "form of one-man rule: halfway … between monarchy and tyranny" (Wilson, 2023). By mid-June 2024, the *Financial Times* broached the story, declaring that a "well-organised cabal of rightwing intellectuals is assembling an authoritarian playbook for Donald Trump" (Luce, 2024).

That contemporary scholars' comparisons of Trump to Caesar may evoke contempt or agreement does not concern the present study. The important thing is the comparison, itself, how it coincides with previous iterations of the analogy, and the meaning that it produces today in terms of populism and the far right. Lastly, the concept of Trump as Caesar interests the present piece in light of the political concept of the name and the self-identity between ruler and ruled.

1. *The Show*

In his breezy curtain speech before the opening night performance of Shakespeare's play *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* on June 13, 2017, Artistic Director at the Public Theater in New York City, Professor Oskar Eustis of New York University, assured the audience, "neither Shakespeare nor the Public Theater could possibly advocate violence as a solution to political problems, and certainly not assassination" (ABC News, 2017). It was an apparently awkward concession to make, since performances of Julius Caesar do not typically bring with them the gravity of authentic reproducibility. However, in this case, the staging's analogy could not have been clearer.

As the entertainment newsmagazine Inside Edition narrated over video of the climactic scene, "It's an actor dressed to look just like President Donald Trump as he's assassinated on stage… And there's no mistaking the Trump connection. Check out the unbuttoned overcoat and red tie that hangs over his waist" (Inside Edition, 2017).

To make things worse, beside Gregg Henry, the actor playing Trump, with his red hair quaffed in a pompadour, Caesar's wife Calphurnia looked like Melania Trump. People began to refer to the show jocularly as Trumpius Caesar (Stewart, 2017).

Despite Eustis's curtain disclaimer, the right-wing media immediately began to whip up outrage over the horror of the site of their beloved leader massacred on a Manhattan stage. And the whole ecosystem of social media reaction and news hysteria was primed for the event. Just two weeks prior to the opening night, comedian Kathy Griffin posed for a photo while holding a likeness of the decapitated head of Donald Trump. Amid the immediate backlash, CNN fired her from her role as popular commentator, USA Today asked "Did Kathy Griffin break the law with her photo of a decapitated Trump?" (Cummings, 2017) and she produced a video publicly apologizing for the stunt (Park, 2017).

And on the day of Caesar's opening night, a shooter named James Hodgkinson armed with an SKS semi-automatic rifle opened fire on a Republican Party Congressional baseball game practice session in the DC suburb of Alexandria, Virginia. The attack turned into a ten-minute shootout with police, in which six people faced injuries, four of them were shot, and the shooter was killed. Although a supporter of universal health care and Bernie Sanders's democratic socialist movement, Hodgkinson had been charged with assaulting his own foster daughter. A few weeks before the shooting, he wrote, "Trump is a Traitor. Trump Has Destroyed Our Democracy. It's Time to Destroy Trump & Co" (Pagliery, 2017). It was a real bloodbath to coincide with the one on center stage in Central Park.

In the aftermath of the Griffin beheading and the Congressional baseball game shooting, the staging of Julius Caesar seemed all the more fraught. Within days of opening night, word of protest began to spread. Delta Air Lines rescinded their commercial sponsorship of the Public Theater, declaring that the play had "crossed the line on the standards of good taste," and that it did "not reflect Delta Air Lines' values" (Delta

[@Delta], 2017). Another sponsor, Bank of America, pulled out, insisting that the company did not know the play "was intended to provoke and offend" (Konerman, 2017).

Writing in a syndicated column, Canadian columnist Nigel Hannaford declared it "time to dial back Trump Derangement Syndrome," listing the theatrical reproduction alongside the Kathy Griffin beheading and baseball practice shooting as feats of liberal obsession with hatred of Trump (Hannaford, 2017). Another Canadian commenter rattled off more incidents, including rapper Snoop Dogg "shooting a clown dressed as President Trump in the head," and Stephen Colbert showing an image of a Trump aid with a severed head impaled on a spike (Bozell and Graham, 2017).

On June 17, a small protest gathered outside of the Delacorte theater. Coincidentally, it was exactly one year after a 19 year-old British man attempted to take the pistol from a police officer in a Las Vegas theater with the intention of assassinating Trump. The play went forward as planned, and just as the climactic moment took place, two protesters jumped up from their seats and began charging toward the stage.

"Stop the normalization of political violence against the right!" one 24 year-old woman shouted. "This is unacceptable." As security approached her, she began shouting "Nazis!" and then, turning toward the aghast crowd, she began to accuse the audience of acting like Joseph Goebbels. As security escorted her out, she left the audience with a final word of defiance: "Shame on Kathy Griffin, and shame on all of you for promoting political violence against Donald Trump" (Palmer and Salam, 2017).

Casting Trump as Caesar was always a gamble. One never knows what will happen before the final curtain, and in this case, the experiment rested on what the audience will think of both historical analogy, in general, and this particular analogy

between Trump and Caesar. A few years prior, a theater in Minneapolis placed Barack Obama in the position of Caesar, so the kind of positioning was not new or unique (Cooper, 2017). At the same time, the theater often stands out as a kind of social critique – to "hold a mirror up to nature," (Shakespeare, 1623) in Shakespeare's terms – so the association of Obama with Caesar could easily come off as self-criticism. Trump represented a different political phenomenon that fits in with two centuries of incisive commentary about Caesarism and populism in the West. So what does it mean to compare Trump to Shakespeare's Caesar in light of two hundred years of commentary on the nature of Caesarism in the modern world?

2. *Original Caesarism*

Shakespeare understood Caesar through various sources, and the general assumption that his Caesar derives largely from Plutarch is likely false. Shakespeare's Caesar is nothing if not complicated and contradictory; his death is hardly a celebratory scene in the play, but it also lacks moral clarity. Caesar and his death represented real problems in Shakespeare's world of Renaissance England – issues of tyranny, mob violence, and burgeoning republican sentiment – and there is no way of approaching the staging of Julius Caesar in New York in 2017 without acknowledging this.

I would argue that the Social War between the forces of Marius, on the side of the *populari*, and Sulla, on the side of the optimates, found a kind of rough synthesis in the figure of Caesar, who ultimately combined the dictatorship of Sulla with the popular appeal of Marius. Caesar destroys the Republic but seems to revive Rome by emphasizing military prestige and bestowing lavish favors and concessions to allies and lower classes.

Renaissance authors understood this history from different perspectives with contradictory opinions, in part based on the Roman sources that were available. Plutarch presented a Caesar who is a complicated character, by no means worthy of fulsome praise. Suetonius similarly combines a portrait of a power-hungry schemer with an assiduous and sober magistrate. Appian provides a wholly laudatory retelling of Caesar's role in the civil war. Lucan, on the other hand, reviles Caesar. Along with some of these sources, Shakespeare also probably relied on Orlando Pescetti's 1594 play, *Il Cesare*, which favors Brutus. Reflected in the multiplicity of perspectives on this historical story is the fact that Shakespeare's Caesar seems to fit none or all of them (Schanzer, 2013).

Schanzer writes that Shakespeare's portrayal of Caesar contains an incredibly complex array of characteristics viewed from different positions, ultimately asking if "there is no real Caesar, that he merely exists as a set of images in other men's minds and his own?" (Schanzer, 2013). Caesar becomes little more than a name, a complex of features, images, ranging from weak to strong, intelligent to foolish, material to sublime. Caesar reflects more the identity of the subject than an individual personality. It is especially the last thing I want to consider the most – what is sublime in Caesar between his identity and the subject – because I think it is there that we find the durability of his sovereignty.

It is interesting to consider Immanuel Kant's Third Critique on judgement in this context, because it is entirely devoted to exploring the depths and extent of the borders of humanity, nature, and reason that lie within the notion of sovereignty. For Kant's aesthetics, the sublime is precisely what exists outside of these borders, outside of our rational minds; and when it is introduced to our minds, the sublime has a terrifying, almost shattering effect (Kant, 2008). In Kant's world, nature is

sublime; lightning and thunder are sublime. Kant claims women love beauty while men love the sublime, which if elucidated would indicate that he believes women are sublime and men are beautiful. Sovereignty must remain sublime – what is beast in man and man in beast (Kant and Guyer, 2011).

If we assess Caesar in both the Roman histories and Shakespearian adaptation on the Renaissance stage, we find a kind of duality – the normal and the sublime. In Shakespeare, Caesar calls himself "constant as the Northern Star," and is associated with supernatural forces (Shakespeare, 1599). I should also note here feminist readings of Shakespeare's Caesar that consider his less masculine attributes in terms of his wounds and vulnerability (see for example the work of Coppélia Kahn). Caesar's body is weak and failing; he makes mistakes; he is afraid (Kahn, 2013).

In Lucan, Caesar is compared to the wolf, to thunder and lightning; he flashes and flies in storms of violence and unleashes torrents of blood. Yet Lucan also writes that Caesar appropriated "the empty name of authority" in order to pursue personal aims (Lucan, 1909).

We should not ignore the concept by the Roman poet of "the empty name." If we investigate the original Latin, we find the words, "*nomen inane imperii*," "the empty name of the imperium." "Inane" here can be alternately operationalized as vain, futile, or insignificant. Lucan follows by saying that Caesar, "stamped the sad times with a worthy mark" (Lucan, 1909).

So we have Caesar's conquests marked by the symbols and signifiers of military authority, and to them is fixed this empty name of *imperii,* the vanity of empire, which Caesar assumes. And when reflecting on this empty name of imperii, we must recall not only Caesar's identity but Caesar's existence precisely as an identity interpolated by the subjects who encounter and view him in Shakespeare.

For imperialists, Lucan's statement is impossible to imagine. The Italian Traditionalist Giulio Evola would write that "the old Roman notion of imperium referred to the pure power of command, the quasi-mystical force of *auctoritas*" (Evola, 2002). For Evola, this authority required spiritual fervor at all times, or it would disintegrate into an empty mechanism. This spiritual fervor of Empire is its sublime quality, its irrational core for which the identity of Caesar stands.

Yet with Lucan we see this occult spiritual power as completely empty at the same time – it is a sublime, destructive force that loses energy and speed, ultimately becoming self-destructive. For Lucan, the Caesar principle fills in and blocks what key thinker of populism Ernesto Laclau calls the "empty signifier," an object that gains meaning only in relation to the desire of the subject (Laclau, 1996). The historical significance here is that, emerging after the Social War, Caesarism attempts to replace the empty signifier of the "people" as sovereign with that of Caesar, as sovereign. This process of filling the empty signifier of the "people" – debasing popular sovereignty – with personalized power is one of desublimation through which meaning – and the way it is derived – is fixed by the sovereign.

In Shakespeare, the audience is constantly reminded that Caesar is a mere mortal, which makes his power all the more difficult to comprehend. Casius complains that Caesar's authority derives not from his own sublime dominance but from the people's stupidity. "And why should Caesar be a tyrant, then?" Casius asks:

> Poor man, I know he would not be a wolf
> But that he sees the Romans are but sheep;
> He were no lion, were not Romans hinds.
> Those that with haste will make a mighty fire
> Begin it with weak straws. What trash is Rome,
> What rubbish, and what offal when it serves

> For the base matter to illuminate
> So vile a thing as Caesar! (Shakespeare, 1599)

Once his figure is clarified, Caesar is not wolf but man, yet the Roman crowds follow him. And here we have an epic contradiction in Cassius's character: he is the most Machiavellian of the republicans, less of an idealist and more practical in thought. He seeks liberty for the people, yet he hates them at the same time. Caesar is more beloved, yet he craves more power, which he can only find in death.

This is what I'm calling the "sublime arc of popular sovereignty," the mix between beast and sovereign, the combination of mortal and sublime in everyone. The way that Caesar comes to power on a wave of sublime force associated with the populist side of the social war, and the way that this irrational movement opens up the empty name of authority, which is overdetermined by his identity as a substitute for popular sovereignty. Caesar's death, however, unleashes chaos and returns as a spirit of sovereignty betrayed. In Shakespeare, it is the time of "fell deeds" smelling "above the earth," of Caesar's ghost plaguing his assassins, of "dogs of war" and of haunting suicides. The death of Caesar unleashes the sublime and renders Caesar to the spirit.

3. *Caesarism and Populism in the 19^{h} Century*

It was not until the fall of Napoleon Bonaparte that the term Caesarism emerged within the lexicon of European political discourse (published already in 1816 by Paul-Louis Courier), and in many ways it can be used synonymously with Bonapartism (Antonini, 2020). Whether written in favor or opposed to Napoleon's regime, Caesarism immediately indicated a tendency of European dictatorship that often emerged during a

crisis but did not involve hereditary rule. Caesarism ruled through a dictatorship of popular sovereignty, a paradoxical twist on the republican tradition that attempted to balance both left and right-wing aspects.

The comparisons between Caesar and Napoleon were invited by Napoleon, to some degree. However, they remain complicated. Calling himself a "republican emperor" and minting coins of his face crowned with laurels, Napoleon embraced the trappings of dictatorial sovereignty, and his military successes drew comparisons to the Roman conqueror. Napoleon refused to be called Caesar, because he believed the name had been tarnished by the Holy Roman Empire, not because he rejected the comparison. In his book about Caesar, Napoleon argued for Caesar's legitimacy based on "necessary and protective" rule that "was the result of the opinion and the will of the people" (Prutsch, 2020).

The leading critics of Caesarism (or what soon came to be called Bonapartism) during the Bourbon Restoration were liberals like the pluralist Benjamin Constant and the doctrinaire François Guizot. Constitutional monarchists, Constant and Guizot helped formulate an alternative to the restoration of Bourbon absolutism during the July Monarchy (Prutsch, 2020). Thus, Guizot and Constant would represent the right wing of the republican cause, whereas on the radical left wing, a new Caesarism would emerge.

The military downfall of Napoleon led some Romantics to suggest that, if uninhibited, he might have ushered in far more sweeping reforms to improve the lot of rural farmers and the urban proletariat. Jean-François Lyotard notes that, after the fall of the Corsican military leader, the younger generation of Romantics conferred upon him the Ideal name – a "watchword" that takes up universal forms of the "aesthetic, ethical, and the political, not cognitive" (Lyotard, 1988). In other

words, they viewed Napoleon as a figure who represented the image of their hero – possessed of political virtue, ethical superiority, but not rational action. That is to say, a sublime identity.

Lyotard's assessment of the Ideal name can be observed in Hegel, who insisted that Napoleon does not represent but radically inhabits the spirit as it conquers the Earth in the name of Reason (Arthur, 1989; Hegel, 2018). Napoleon becomes associated with the Napoleonic Code, the law-bringer, liberator, clearing the way for the new Empire. Here, Napoleon means the order of *virtù*, and vice-versa. Bonaparte makes history, and history makes Bonaparte. With Hegel, the spirit remains sublime to all but the one who lives directly within it, conducts it, and is conducted by it. The sovereign is Ideal in so far as he understands that which exists beyond mundane knowledge, and manifests it on earth (Arthur, 1989; Hegel, 2018).

The Romantic admiration of Bonaparte and Caesar involves the belief that only these Great Men could finally force through the kind of popular reforms that the *populari* and Jacobins had sought to enact (Crossley, 2002). While critics of Caesarism argued for rational constitutional systems to keep revolution in check as they increased the economic productivity of the state, Caesarists on both left and right pushed for an authoritarian strongman, a dictatorship to pursue radical aims.

The Romantic offensive against the moderate theoretical corpus contributed to secret societies like the *Amis du peuple*, who struggled in order to implement a more democratic regime. So it is not surprising that the *Amis du peuple* – those who resisted against the Bourbon restoration and then militated against the Orléanist July Monarchy – also included circles who harbored furtive hopes about the restoration of the Bonapartist regime (Caron, 1980). From Heinrich Heine and August Blanqui to Karl Marx, we can see the development of a socialist dictatorship engaging with the Caesarist idea amid the growing

nationalist and communist movements of the 19th Century (Sammons, 2016; Prutsch, 2020).

Napoleon's nephew, Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte III, emerged through such utopian socialist and subversive networks established during the Orléanist constitutional monarchy. In them, he found a conduit for his enthusiasm for state-backed industrialism and his populist flare. Taking power through a coup that he called Operation Rubicon, Louis Napoleon III immediately commandeered the legacy of Caesar. It will be Napoleon III, perhaps more than the first Bonaparte, who established the name as corollary to universal male suffrage, the plebiscite, and industrial modernism (Thody, 1989).

While the young Marx took inspiration from Blanqui's concepts of a triumvirate dictatorship to educate the proletariat into self-governance, his adoption of an ambiguous dictatorship model would not prevent him from fiercely attacking the new Bonapartist regime in France. The critique of Bonapartism is perhaps most schematically represented by Karl Marx's text on Louis Napoleon III's rise. Called the *18th Brumaire*, this document accuses Bonaparte of rallying the poorest of the poor, the lumpenproletariat, together with the aristocrats, noting that the two appear as mirror images of licentiousness and disorganization. With the poor and aristocrats, the small business owners, shopkeepers, workshop masters, skilled tradesmen, and other middle-class professionals decided to elect Louis Napoleon, because they believed he would secure the peace and order of the state better than the volatile republican system ushered in by the revolution of 1848.

Marx even borrows from Shakespeare in his depiction of the lumpenproletariat. Marx writes, "This Bonaparte, who constitutes himself chief of the lumpenproletariat, who here alone rediscovers in mass form the interests which he personally pursues, who recognizes in this scum, offal, refuse of all classes the

only class upon which he can base himself unconditionally, is the real Bonaparte" (Marx, 1999). Shakespeare's Caesar rallies the same crowds according to Cassius, who seeks to dethrone the tyrant in favor of a republican return. Cassius speaks:

> Those that with haste will make a mighty fire
> Begin it with weak straws. What trash is Rome,
> What rubbish, and what offal when it serves
> For the base matter to illuminate
> So vile a thing as Caesar!" (Shakespeare, 1599)

So it seems that Marx echoes Shakespeare's Casius remarking on the "offal" who cast their support for Caesar. I contend that this is no coincidence but an intentional echo, since Marx's next sentence describes, "performances of state as comedy in the most vulgar sense, as a masquerade in which the grand costumes, words, and postures merely serve to mask the pettiest knavery." And after citing the "Napoleonic eagle," Marx just two sentences later describes Napoleon's supporters as "play[ing] the part of the people as Nick Bottom," the oafish character from Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* (Marx, 1999).

Here we find several sad ironies about Marx's critique of Bonapartism. Firstly, the long list of those who supported Bonaparte hardly indicate a kind of secret conspiracy; instead, it helps to explain the broad popularity of *the name of Bonaparte* among the French. This popularity inhered in Louis Napoleon's ability to move beyond the elitism of the July monarchy and the nostalgia for his uncle's unmatched glory. The second major irony there is that Marx, himself, supported not a republic but a dictatorship. The third irony, which hangs over all of this, is the fact that Shakespeare's Caesar does not adequately fit the template of the tyrannical oppressor; there is far more nuance to it.

While Marx's own "dictatorship of the proletariat" developed through engagement with Blanqui's proto-caesarism, the latter's followers ultimately supported the revanchist populist General Georges Boulanger five decades later (Hutton, 1974). Meanwhile, Blanqui's influence extended to the writings of revolutionary populist Pyotr Tkachev, and thence Sergei Nechayev. This lineage fed into the Marxist ideology of Vladimir Lenin, although the latter would have a difficult time attempting to differentiate his own strategic position from theirs, which Russian intellectuals viewed as overly Jacobin and not realistic enough. In this tradition, the isolation of Stalin as a uniquely Caesarist figure among the Bolsheviks fails to reckon with the complex revolutionary situation of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party in its formative years as an evolution of the populist movement.

In the United States, one finds ramifications of this Bonapartist legacy in the populist movement that comes into full form at the end of the nineteenth century. Thomas Watson, the founder of the original populist movement in the US, the People's Party, surprisingly took up Napoleon's laurels after his own electoral failures. In his fulsome biography of Napoleon, social control and censorship, brutal repression, militarism, imperialist expansion, and even his eventual aristocratic court are glossed over in a fawning portrait of a man who represented, to the prototypical populist, the height of popular sovereignty. Watson's leading biographer concludes that the populist was "reconciled to a union of Caesarism and democracy" (Jäger, 2021).

It is, thus, not at all contradictory that when Mussolini turns toward fascism, he publishes a newspaper, *Popolo d'Italia*, with the masthead featuring quotations from August Blanqui and from Napoleon (Camus and Lebourg, 2017). By the same coin, it is small wonder the Marxist Michael Parenti wrote such a

favorable biography of Caesar, calling him the "dictator of the *proletarii*" (Parenti, 2004). What the Bonapartist and Caesarist trends of the 19th Century show us is that, unfortunately, there is a profound tendency of democratizing movements to flow into a dictatorial resolution to the socio-economic problems confronting them, and Caesar becomes a prototype for this trend on the imperial level.

4. *Twentieth Century Caesarism*

All this suggests that Caesarism appears to develop through populist movements – the populari, the Jacobins, the utopian socialists of the Second Republic, and the Populists. It rises amid the sublime chaos of contentious conditions, and in seizing what Lucan called "the empty name of authority," it overdetermines the sovereignty of the "people" with its Ideal name. In this regard, Caesarism is post-populist; it uses the aegis of popular sovereignty to destroy dissensus; it imposes the name of empire over that of popular sovereignty and establishes Caesar as the political subject *par excellence*.

Max Weber's theory of Caesarism posits the trend as a form of *Herrschaft*, a kind of irrational dominion based on emotional proclamations and authority. Weber's sociology of Caesarism, like his general approach to ideal types, begins with passion and the unknown and resolves in an effort to grasp it. Where power is irrational, it becomes sublime by eluding normal categories and obtains a protean, labile characteristic. Weber's assessment of Caesarism begins with invective, as he criticizes Bismarck as a Caesarist, but once he begins to understand Caesarism as plebiscitary power, he recognizes it as a form of legitimacy and subsumes it within the broader charismatic type (Baehr, 2017).

Weber declares that, as a form of Herrschaft, Caesarism involves a condition where the ruled follow the commands of the ruler "as if the ruled had made the content of the command the maxim of their conduct for its very own sake… the command is accepted as a 'valid' norm" (Breuer, 1998). So for Weber, Caesarism involves the self-identity of the ruler and the ruled on the level of (delusional) acceptance of the sovereign's will as one's own. Caesarism becomes the *volonté générale* inverted.

Gramsci was certainly an avid reader of Weber while he developed his own theories of Caesarism and totalitarianism. For Gramsci, popular sovereignty creates a crisis of class struggle that fosters the inexorable persistence of disequilibrium. The history of class struggle is a history of disorder – disruptive, a force of disorganization – inherent within the fabric of society. The Marxian concept of sublime class struggle is restructured on the terrain of Casearism through a social peace that converges with the assignation of the "Ideal name" mentioned above. It disrupts the disruption, confronts sublime with sublime, and in overdetermining popular sovereignty, desublimates the political (Antonini, 2020).

Yet this desublimation leaves both Gramsci and Weber somewhat ambivalent about Caesarism. Ultimately, Weber's rejection of Caesarism folds into his depressing resignation to the realities of the triumph of the charismatic personality in democratic systems filled with weak individuals.

Discussing Shakespeare's *Caesar* in 1947, poet W.H. Auden was quite Weberian in noting that "it is about a society that is doomed… not by the evil passions of selfish individuals, because such passions always exist, but by an intellectual and spiritual failure of nerve that made the society incapable of coping with its situation, which is why the noble Brutus is even more at sea in the play than the unscrupulous and brutal Antony"

(Auden, 2008). For Auden, the problem is not merely that Brutus presents an indecisive cluster of feelings and ideals that ultimately collapses into treachery; it is that the smallness of Brutus's character is manifest within the Roman crowds, themselves, in turn grotesquely violent, obsequious, and vacillating.

For Gramsci, Bonapartism can be progressive or regressive, depending on whether the imposition of sovereignty takes place to restore a reactionary equilibrium or midwife a new one based on altered social conditions. Similar to the 19th Century critiques, Caesarism is also a post-populist phenomenon, a political trend imposing the semblance of unity on a political condition riven by complexity and dissensus, which takes up the name of the people, and even replaces the name of the people, in order to quell the upheavals of popular sovereignty with the identity of no identity (Antonini, 2020).

Developing that evanescent identity of Caesar even further, sociologist Claude Lefort would contend not that Bonaparte represents an Ideal name but a kind of illusion, a mirror game. "Bonapartist power appears as an imaginary product, a product of combined myths, a product of a society that can only face the problem of its unity – or better, of its identity – through the mode of illusion" (Lefort, 1986). Hence, with Lefort on Bonaparte, as with Lucan on Caesar and Weber on Caesarism, we find a kind of imperial illusion with which to impress people during hard times, and which impresses on them a feeling of self-identity with the sovereign as power and collectivity or unity.

It is that unity to which European New Right exponent Alain de Benoist is referring when, in 1994, he called for Europe to assemble into a new federated empire, backed by the slogan, "Imperial principle above, direct democracy below: this is what would renew an old tradition!" (de Benoist, 1993) He had not changed by the publication of his recent book on populism, in

which he champions the Bonapartist right for favoring "'the appeal to the people' together with anti-parliamentarism, anti-liberalism and the plebiscite tradition" (de Benoist, 2017). It is the same political tendency that led Jean-Marie Le Pen to accuse de Benoist's research group of being mired in "Sovietophile sub-Gaullism," and it is why the Russian political system resonates with the European New Right (Von Beyme, 2013).

As Alexandar Mihailovic writes in his new book *Illiberal Vanguard*, "Flirting with authoritarianism in the trappings of both ultramontane conservatism (monarchy) and notional leftism (the Soviet legacy), Putin and the United Russia Party have positioned themselves as agents of an autonomous and Caesarist state in which leadership is placed in the role of negotiating and adjudicating between the disparate demands of various constituencies, in a pantomime of acting on behalf of the common good" (Mihailovic, 2023).

This is also why Richard Spencer referred to Donald Trump as the "Napoleon of the current year" (Spencer, 2016) and why his former business partner Jason Jorjani, proclaimed that "We will have a Europe in 2050 where the bank notes have Adolf Hitler, Napoleon Bonaparte, Alexander the Great" (Pharos, 2018). This is what constitutes the end state of so-called illiberal democracy, which is also the end state of the populist radical right: a sovereign who claims the mantle of the people, yet rules with only the appearance of a parliament, seeking to spread his political model to other states in the hopes of building a federated empire.

Thinking all this together, I will venture the following claim:

> Caesarism or Bonapartism imposes a rationalized order over the persistence of class struggle that results from the sublime complexity of popular sovereignty, thus emptying the latter of its cognitive content and producing in its place the illusion of self-identity with the ruler.

5. *Back to Shakespeare in the Park*

Returning to the staging of Trump as Caesar in 2017, I want to contend with the reason for the historical analogy and its interesting parallels with past theories of Caesarism. In short, I contend that Caesarism is essentially a form of identity politics, a self-identification with the personalization of authority that brings a feeling of sublime power. In Shakespeare, we find that this power is only realized through death. When Casius attempts to bring his fellow politician Brutus into the assassination plot against Caesar, he pads his ego and, essentially, evokes his name. Cassius tells Brutus:

> 'Brutus' and 'Caesar' – what should be in that
> 'Caesar'?
> Why should that name be sounded more than
> yours?
> Write them together, yours is as fair a name;
> Sound them, it doth become the mouth as well;
> Weigh them, it is as heavy; conjure with 'em,
> 'Brutus' will start a spirit as soon as 'Caesar.'
> (Shakespeare, 1599)

For Shakespeare, the importance of Caesar's name is shown in the return of Caesar as a ghost, which becomes far more powerful than his enfeebled, partly deaf body, suffering from the falling sickness. After his murder, Caesar's ghost presents itself to Brutus plainly as "thy evil spirit." In this way, Caesar's spirit doubles Brutus's own, returning to Cassius's doubling of their names in Act I. Note here, as well, that Cassius's comparison of the names of Caesar and Brutus involves the invocation of conjuring magic through these names. By usurping the name of Caesar, Brutus has taken not only Caesar's mantle but also his vengeful spirit. The two – the name and the spirit – are

intertwined in this way, and they are both more powerful than the man.

Committing suicide at the end of the play, Brutus invokes the name and the ghost, not the man, declaring, "O Julius Caesar, thou art mighty yet! / Thy spirit walks abroad, and turns our swords / In our own proper entrails." German philosopher Hermann Ulrici would write in 1846 that Shakespeare took from Plutarch the idea of a ghost appearing to Brutus as "his evil genius," and gave it the form of Caesar representing, "the offended spirit of history itself, which, in fact, not only avenges political crimes, but visits ethical transgressions with equal severity" (Ulrici, 2008).

For Ulrici, Caesar becomes the ultimate spirit of history for Shakespeare, just as Napoleon takes on the world-historical manifestation of the *Zeitgeist* for Hegel. These two figures – Caesar and Napoleon – become inextricable in their names and what they represent on the level of the spirit, both in encomium and critique. In other words, they become part of a sublime realm. J.E. Phillips even goes so far as to claim that the "ghost of Caesar" represents "that 'spirit of Caesarism,' which … is the concept of unitary sovereignty" (Phillips, 1940). The ghost indicates the sublime return of Caesarism as unitary sovereignty which forces the suicide of democratic usurpers.

This was similar the analysis of Alessandro Muccioli, who did one of three translations of Shakespeare's play in 1924, where Caesar as ghost takes primacy over Caesar as man. Giuseppe De Lorenzo's introduction to a different translation identifies both Brutus and Caesar in the figure of Mussolini. By 1928, however, Brutus was condemned in Fascist Italy by Carlo Formichi, who called Shakespeare "a fervid patriot." In 1935, a new heavily-censored run of Caesar was staged, with references to his weakness cut out and Brutus' character simplified to make him appear less conflicted. As Silvia Bigliazzi writes,

"Shakespeare's Caesar could still be a political icon [under fascism] as long as Caesar-the-man was forgotten and his spirit assumed as the tutelary deity of an Empire which was no longer to be imagined, but had become a new reality" (Bigliazzi, 2020).

In 1933, Mussolini told interviewer Emile Ludwig, "I love Caesar. He was unique in that he combined the will of the warrior with the genius of the sage. At bottom he was a philosopher who saw everything sub specie aeternitatis" (Bigliazzi, 2020). The reference to seeing the eternal reminds one both of the ghost of Caesar and the world spirit it represents – a sublime spirit Mussolini believed himself to inhabit. Yet between 1924 and 1935, the regime lost the revolutionary impulse that drew comparisons to the Caesar-Brutus twin, smoothing out Brutus's complexity, and molding Caesar into a strongman. Shakespeare had become fascistized (Bigliazzi, 2020).

Yet we must return to the essence of *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* as a problem play. Is the unedited Shakespeare's Caesar moral? It is difficult to say. Was it moral to kill him for a higher ideal? Shakespeare seems to leave the question open in some ways. Drawing on Sigurd Burckhardt, Coppélia Kahn writes of the guilt of Caesar's assassins not as one of treachery so much as anachronism: "In this play, republican ideology can be adopted or coopted by any ambitious man so as to violate its basic tenets – without him or his enemies even realizing it" (Kahn, 2013).

The problem, in the end, isn't about fixed certainty but its lack: the fluidity with which the categories are rapidly dissolved, laying pride low and throwing assumptions into question. Again, the sublime prevails over all efforts to prevail over it; the spirit exacts revenge over those who rebelled against Caesar.

So what does it mean if the Central Park Caesar smooths over Caesar in the opposite way as the fascist regime? For critics at the *Financial Times*, the staging of Shakespeare's history was too on the nose, offering "a flattened sense of Julius Caesar's ambiguities; a less subtle play" (Maltby, 2017). What happens if Caesar becomes too menacing and Brutus too heroic? Perhaps it is too sublime. In the US, the democratic desire to know the unknown, the expansive will to have freedom, the drive to be reconciled to meaning, are all things that might hazard a belittling of the problem play, falling into the same problems that it presents. And this, in itself, is a form of desublimation.

As artistic director Oskar Eustis noted on opening night, the play presents "the danger of a large crowd of people, manipulated by their emotions, taken over by leaders who urge them to do things that not only are against their interests but destroy the very institutions that are there to serve and protect them" (ABC News, 2017). Here, Eustis could be speaking about Caesar taking up the crown. In imposing his personal brand over the symbols of the US, Trump overdetermines the political system with his own meaning during a period of socio-political disequilibrium. In this case the play seems more like a warning to Trump not to become Caesar.

But Eustis could just as easily be speaking about those hoping to unseat Trump through illegal methods, who would destroy those institutions of the Republic that offer their protection. His evocation of the phrase "serve and protect" immediately indicates the motto of US law enforcement, suggesting perhaps that the widespread opposition to police brutality in the US could present just as doomed a usurpation as Trump's. It is this fluidity and uncertainty underlying the staging of *Julius Caesar* that returns us to Auden's phrase, "it is about a society that is doomed… by an intellectual and spiritual failure of

nerve that made the society incapable of coping with its situation" (Auden, 2008).

6. *Conclusion*

In this sketch, I have outlined theories of Caesarism, showing that the political trend involves suppressing the sublime forces of popular sovereignty in favor of the Ideal name of political order. Caesarism represents an identity crisis in which sovereignty and spirit remain sublime in spite of efforts to establish order and embark on political desublimation – an idea of sovereignty without government. By indicating the guilt on "both sides," the staging of Caesar in Central Park cast both Trump and his detractors as two forces in radical disequilibrium engaged in struggle with no clear victor. In swooping down from above in order to restore order in such a paradigm, perhaps the real Caesar would have been the man behind the curtain, the Oz-like spinner of fantasy and marvel concealing reality in a complex of myth and mirrors.

In this regard, a connection must be drawn between discourse analysis and phenomenology, where the unknown sublimation of the subject's identity joins a spectral world of sovereignty. In Caesarism there is only the illusion of an Ideal name, an ambiguous floating signifier that links the subject to power with the objective of order and *authority*. Where these themes rejoin Trump and Trumpism, more studies should be carried out to understand the self-identity between Trump and his followers, as well as the nature and importance of his name as a signifier and ideal.

We will see what happens, but I will leave you with the words of Cassius: "Forever and forever farewell, Brutus. / If we do

meet again, we'll smile indeed; / If not, 'tis true this parting was well made" (Shakespeare, 1599).

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