

FORUM

Caesarism in the Age of Elitism: The Case of Pareto

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The goal of my article is to investigate the relationship between Caesarism and Elite theory across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In particular, I will focus on Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923), the older and, to a certain extent, most authoritative representative of the so-called Italian Elitism. By relying on a careful examination of a variety of texts, I will show how Pareto moves from an initial criticism of the Caesarist theory (conceived as a form of personalism) to a much more positive conception of it; that is, as a political tool able to save the state from the impending “catastrophe.” The analysis of Pareto’s reasoning is developed against the backdrop of a broader consideration of Elitist thinking as a whole, as well as with regard to the fin de siècle European culture—Pareto representing, therefore, the case study for the investigation of a wider political and intellectual movement.

In sociological discourse dealing with the issue of leadership, authors looking for a historical–conceptual anchorage of their arguments have frequently resorted to the category of “charisma,” recalling Max Weber’s (modern) paternity of the concept.¹ I would argue that, rather than a source, this reference often turned out to be a limit to a serious historical investigation of past reflections on leadership, insofar as it obscured previous conceptualizations and alternative ways of conceiving it.²

The first victim of this approach is no doubt the category of Caesarism, in which the role of the political leader is crucial, as underlined also in the introduction to this forum. Furthermore, Caesarism is charisma’s closest antecedent, both chronologically and thematically—and their relationship is far from having been exhaustively investigated by scholars.³

¹Usually, the reference is to the “classic” tripartite classification of authority (charismatic, traditional, and rational–bureaucratic) provided by Weber most famously in his posthumous *Economy and Society* (1922).

²For a recent example in this sense (where charisma is used to analyze contemporary populist leadership) see Daniel Nilsson DeHanas, “The Spirit of Populism: Sacred, Charismatic, Redemptive, and Apocalyptic Dimensions,” *Democratization* 31/4 (2023), 831–51.

³This is a theme that, to my knowledge, has been investigated mainly by Weber scholars, and, most notably, almost uniquely in relation to Weber’s own account of Caesarism in his political writings and its later move, in the sociological writings, to the category of charisma. See e.g. Peter Baehr, “Max Weber

Leaving aside the latter conceptual issue, I would like to fill this historiographical gap (to the extent that it is possible to do so in a short contribution), by focusing on the way in which Caesarism shaped the reflection on political leadership in the rising sociological discourse across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (*before* the emergence of Weberian charisma). More specifically, I intend to investigate the role Caesarism played within a sociological current that has long been out of fashion in spite of its influence on later theories; that is, Italian Elitism. While debating elites (as the name obviously suggests), Elitist thinkers have in fact offered a prime example of meditation on leadership dynamics in various political infrastructures, from the party to the state.

In what follows, I will concentrate exclusively on the older and, to a certain extent, most authoritative representative of the Elitist school, Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923). Unlike Gaetano Mosca and, especially, Robert Michels, Pareto has so far been (unfairly) considered only in passing in relation to Caesarism.⁴ My article, for the first time and in detail, will investigate all the references made by Pareto to this category and to Caesaristic figures. I claim that, if there is no doubt that his specific references to the issue are numerically scarcer than those made by the other two authors mentioned above, they still have considerable relevance.⁵

Attention will be devoted not only to the literal occurrences of the term, but also to the persistence of the idea of the rule of a “Caesar” beyond the specific reference to the concept of Caesarism—which, for various reasons, from a certain point in time onwards, is considered too biased to be openly adopted. In particular, this would allow me to demonstrate the existence of an extremely interesting overall shift in Pareto’s thinking (a move from condemnation of Caesarism to an ambivalent acceptance of it), which also rejects a simplifying reading of his work as a form of monolithic sociological system. More generally, such an investigation will also enable me to briefly address the issue of the relation between Caesarism and Elite theory in general, thus prompting novel reflections on a key political and historical question.

I want to start my discussion with a short introduction to Elitism while providing its historical and intellectual contextualization. I shall then concentrate on Pareto, by

and the Avatars of Caesarism,” in Peter Baehr and Melvin Richter, eds., *Dictatorship in History and Theory: Bonapartism, Caesarism, and Totalitarianism* (Cambridge, 2004), 155–74; also Baehr, *Caesarism, Charisma and Fate: Historical Sources and Modern Resonances in the Work of Max Weber* (New Brunswick, 2008). In broader accounts of Caesarism (e.g. Markus J. Prutsch, *Caesarism in the Post-revolutionary Age: Crisis, Populace and Leadership* (London, 2019)) or in essays on its “semantic family” (see Melvin Richter, “A Family of Political Concepts: Tyranny, Despotism, Bonapartism, Caesarism, Dictatorship, 1750–1917,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 4 (2005), 221–48) the problem of the conceptual relationship between Caesarism and charisma is not really developed.

⁴Further references could be quoted, but I limit myself to a couple of examples: Innocenzo Cervelli, “Cesarismo: Alcuni usi e significati della parola (secolo XIX),” *Annali dell’Istituto storico italo-germanico in Trento* 22 (1996), 61–197, at 84 n. 76; Salvatore Cingari, “Il cesarismo nel pensiero politico italiano del secondo Ottocento,” in Manuela Ceretta, ed., *Bonapartismo, Cesarismo e crisi della società: Luigi Napoleone e il colpo di Stato del 1851* (Florence, 2003), 95–104, at 102 n. 25. As for the general bibliography on Caesarism, see the introduction to this forum.

⁵The philological analysis of the texts will be combined with the reconstruction of their conceptual and historical context. Occasional parallels with other thinkers will further enlighten the fruitfulness of Pareto’s achievements.

reconstructing his reflection on Caesarism before and after the turn of the century, with a focus on Crispi's Italy and on the rise of Fascism respectively. In the third and concluding part of the article, I will draw some general conclusions both on Pareto and on the broader relationship between Elitism and Caesarism.

Elitism, *fin de siècle* culture, and social sciences

To begin with, I deem it pivotal to provide a definition of Elitism. Far from being a consistent and clearly limited school of thought, Elite theory could be defined, in broad terms, as an interpretive approach highlighting the role of powerful minorities, the elites, in society and politics. As such, we might retrace Elitist or proto-Elitist tendencies within an extremely wide range of theories, from antiquity onwards. As a specific sociological–politological reading, however, Elitism is a trend born in the nineteenth century with significant developments in the twentieth.⁶ Traditionally, scholars have identified three main phases of modern Elitist thought: the first spans from the 1880s to the interwar period; the second spreads during and around the Second World War; the third develops in the aftermath of the war and remains popular also in the following decades. This chronological development was accompanied by geographical shifts that made the Elitist panorama even more complex and articulated.

Michels, Mosca, and Pareto belong to the first and foundational phase of the theory, which has been defined as “Italian”—as is well known, the one of the three not directly connected to the country, Michels, for both personal and professional reasons turned himself into an Italian, a profoundly passionate one at that. Despite acknowledging the debts and the affinities between them (especially by the younger Michels towards the older Mosca and Pareto), scholars have underlined the unique nature of their theories, with reference to the issue of the elites and beyond it. In quite a simplistic way, to each one of them could indeed be attributed a specific focus or idea: Pareto's “circulation of the elites,” Mosca's opposition between rulers and ruled, and Michels's “iron law of oligarchy.”

The success of Elite theory can be explained, to a significant degree, by its successful meeting with medium- and long-term developments proper of the (broadly conceived) *fin de siècle* European political and intellectual climate.⁷ If we look at the period that

⁶Scholars have extensively written on Elitism, with various approaches and results. Among the most important contributions it is necessary to mention James Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution* (New York, 1941), which represents an original rereading of the Italian Elite theory (see also his *The Machiavellians: Defenders of Freedom* (New York, 1943)). As for historiographical studies, it is worth mentioning, at least, Tommaso Ripepe, *Gli elitisti italiani* (Pisa, 1974); and, more recently, Giorgio Sola, *La teoria delle élite* (Bologna, 2000). In English see Tom Bottomore, *Elites and Society* (Harmondsworth, 1966); and, more recently, Richard Bellamy, *Modern Italian Social Theory* (Cambridge, 1987). The last few years have seen a significant renewal of interest in Elite theory: see e.g. Andrew G. Bonnell, *Robert Michels, Socialism, and Modernity* (Oxford, 2023), specifically, on Michels; Natasha Piano, *Democratic Elitism: The Founding Myth of American Political Science* (Cambridge, MA, 2025); and Hugo Drochon, *Elites and Democracy* (Princeton, 2026).

⁷For an introduction to *fin de siècle* society, culture, and politics see e.g. Michael Saler, ed., *The Fin-de-Siècle World* (London, 2014). A pathbreaking work is, in this regard, Luisa Mangoni, *Una crisi fine secolo: La cultura italiana e la Francia fra Otto e Novecento* (Turin, 1985).

goes, roughly, from the 1880s to the outbreak of the First World War, it is indeed possible to retrace some major changes that heavily impacted society and politics (not to mention the economic sphere)—changes that were announced by several “crises” of the modern way of thinking and by the more or less successful responses to them. As various scholars have stressed, the last decades of the nineteenth century saw the decline of a variety of allegedly inviolable truths and beliefs, as well as the weakening of the forces that led the Western economic, cultural, and political development from the Age of Revolutions onwards—this means, among other things, crisis of science, crisis of liberalism, crisis of the bourgeoisie. To an important extent, even the early life of the national states in Italy and Germany could be read from the standpoint of the crisis of the nationalist ideology that had made them possible. Moreover, the rise of new sociopolitical entities and projects (notably the proletariat and socialism) significantly changed the political landscape, by engendering the erosion of the then constituted power relationships.

These transformations could be summarized by way of referring to the passage from an individualistic perspective to a collective one, in the framework of a progressive democratization and reorganization of (political) societies themselves. This is practically embodied by, among other things, the birth of trade unions and modern political parties. Theoretically, this phenomenon reflects itself in the growing interest for power dynamics in both their rational and irrational dimension (the queries intellectuals address are: what makes an individual a political leader? How and to what extent could society be influenced by specific ideologies?), as well as in the establishment of a nascent and destabilizing category, that of the “masses” or, rather, of the “crowd(s),” or of the “mob”—the slightly different terminology signals the difficulty in grasping it.⁸

Both already existing disciplines and emerging social sciences attempted to interpret this *âge des foules* (“age of the crowd”) through a very fertile but, to a certain extent, also quite confusing cross-contamination.⁹ Criminological reflections *à la* Lombroso were merged with observations taken from the new “collective,” “social,” or “crowd” psychology. Yet they also combined with insights from the so-called “peoples” or “folk” psychology, from anthropology, as well as from a variety of political theories and ideologies. From within this framework, sociology (broadly defined as the study of society) turned into its modern version too. Leaving behind its initial positivistic, Comtian imprint, sociology became an autonomous discipline with clearly defined objects of research and methodologies. This occurred thanks to the contribution of different figures, from Herbert Spencer to Émile Durkheim, Ferdinand Tönnies, Weber, and, above all, Pareto. Central in these thinkers’ theories were the key themes of the establishment and change of the social order, just as those of social conflict and of social integration.

⁸On this point see, among others, Michela Nacci, *Il volto della folla: Soggetti collettivi, democrazia, individuo* (Bologna, 2019).

⁹This is an expression used by the French thinker Gustave Le Bon, later adopted also by Serge Moscovici for the title of his 1981 influential book. For the English translation see *The Age of the Crowd: A Historical Treatise on Mass Psychology* (Cambridge, 1985).

Geographically speaking, the circulation of ideas in Europe was very intense, and in no way unidirectional. Thus, while French intellectuals and themes were particularly influential (be it sufficient to think of the primary role of Le Bon and Tarde, or of the impact of the reflections on the political and social legacy of the French Revolution), the approaches and the concepts first developed in other countries, and the political and cultural instances they deal with, rapidly spread across national borders, coming back modified and updated.

It is against this backdrop that Elite theory thrived, offering answers to the questions stemming from the new configuration of society—answers that were convincing to many, especially on the conservative front.¹⁰ Moreover, it is within this context that the Elite theory met Caesarism, both implicitly and explicitly. Not only did the already mentioned representatives of the first wave of Elitism openly adopt more or less thoughtfully the Caesarist model, but also they referred in a sustained way to themes and instances proper to the decades-long discussion on Caesarism and incorporated them into their own reflection.

Pareto and Caesarism in the 1890s

As is well known, Pareto was a profoundly European thinker and a great polymath, whose intellectual contribution spread across a wide range of disciplines, from sociology to economics, and beyond.¹¹ His sociological theory, mostly contained in his 1916 masterpiece *The Mind and Society* (original Italian title *Trattato di sociologia generale*, literally translated *Treatise on General Sociology*) is a highly complex and systematic

¹⁰It is worth remembering that Elite theory influenced also the historiographical reflection, especially that looking at the present—see e.g. the impact of the elitist model on the modern historiography on the late Roman Republic. On this point see Luca Fezzi, “Matthias Gelzer, Guglielmo Ferrero e Gaetano Mosca,” *Quaderni di storia* 76 (2012), 155–64.

¹¹A monumental intellectual biography of the author was published by Fiorenzo Mornati, probably the best connoisseur of Pareto's work (first Italian publication: *Una biografia intellettuale di Vilfredo Pareto*, 3 vols. (Rome, 2015–20); English translation: *Vilfredo Pareto: An Intellectual Biography*, 3 vols. (Basingstoke, 2018–20)). The bibliography on Pareto's thinking is extensive, although quite uneven in its focus (Pareto's economic thought has received, and still receives, more attention than his sociological and political theory) and its quality. Moreover, compared to the number of contributions in Italian, research items available in English are relatively limited. For a dated but still useful survey of the scholarly contributions on Pareto in the first fifty years after his death see Giovanni Busino, *Gli studi su Vilfredo Pareto oggi: Dall'agiografia alla critica (1923–1973)* (Rome, 1974). In later decades some important studies have been published. Among them see e.g., in Italian, Corrado Malandrino and Roberto Marchionatti, eds., *Economia, sociologia e politica nell'opera di Vilfredo Pareto* (Florence, 2000); Emanuela Susca, *Vilfredo Pareto: Tra scienza e ideologia* (Naples, 2006). For bibliographical studies in English, Joseph V. Femia's contributions as author and editor should be mentioned: Joseph V. Femia, *Pareto and Political Theory* (Abingdon, 2006); Joseph V. Femia and Alasdair J. Marshall, eds., *Vilfredo Pareto: Beyond Disciplinary Boundaries* (Farnham, 2012). For a thorough but succinct analysis (in English) of Pareto's contribution to sociology see also Giovanni Busino, “The Signification of Vilfredo Pareto's Sociology,” *Revue européenne des sciences sociales* 38/117 (2000), 217–28. As for Pareto's economic thought see, for example, the new critical edition of the *Manuale di economia politica* by Aldo M. Montesano et al. (Milan, 2006; English translation Oxford, 2014). On the occasion of the centenary anniversary of his death (2023), a number of new studies were published—among them see, e.g., Emanuela Susca, *Logiche dell'irrazionale: La sociologia di Vilfredo Pareto* (Milan, 2023).

work.¹² The latter's ambition is to offer a scientific explanation of the mechanisms that, at first, make a certain sociopolitical order successful and, later, explain its being overcome by a new order—its core being represented by Pareto's Elitist reading and, as already mentioned, by his principle of the "rotation" or "circulation" of the elites.

As much as his cycle theory is consistent and structured (to a certain extent even ahistorical in its effort to explain change as such), his attention to the present is equally developed and relevant to his understanding of the social and political reality. It is therefore legitimate to maintain that his extensive exchange of correspondence, occasional writings, and contributions to a variety of (Italian, but not only Italian) journals and reviews represents an unavoidable and valuable counterpart to his systematic theory—a litmus test for it and, at the same time, a stimulus for its updating and enlargement.

It is in this interplay between theory and praxis that we should interpret Pareto's usage of the Caesarist model and the references to Caesaristic figures. These occurrences, all contained in his letters and in other minor publications, can be divided into two chronologically different groupings. The first group is that of the occurrences of the 1890s. The second group concerns the occurrences of the 1920s. In between we can find an instance of an autobiographical nature, which could be read as an "interlude" between the former and the latter ones.

The occurrences of the 1890s are the most specific ones, insofar as Pareto explicitly adopts the category of Caesarism. Here I am hinting primarily at the letter to Maffeo Pantaleoni of 27 July 1892, and to the letter to Filippo Turati of 11 November 1893.¹³ The two following excerpts from these letters help clarify my main point:

I believe that we have to deal with things [*cose*] and not with men [*uomini*], set the goal at which we aim and then accept all the help that can bring us closer to that goal. This is not usually allowed. The theory that dominates is, if I may use this expression, the theory of Caesarism. We want to judge the usefulness of a man's intervention from the *whole* of his doctrines, and not limit ourselves to the special one for which his help can be useful to us. And this is fine, if it were a question of giving him the *imperium*; but it is not fine when it is desired that *no one* should have the right to dispose of public affairs to his own liking.¹⁴

¹²As is known, Pareto had been working on sociological themes since 1897—more precisely, *The Mind and Society* was elaborated between 1906 and 1913. An abridged and simplified version of his sociological theory is contained in his 1920 book *Compendio di sociologia generale*. The English translation of the *Trattato di sociologia generale* was published in 1935.

¹³On these letters, see also Mangoni, *Crisi fine secolo*, 180–81.

¹⁴See Vilfredo Pareto, *Lettere a Maffeo Pantaleoni*, 3 vols. (Rome, 1960), 1: 254. Italics, here and in the rest of the article, are already present in the original Italian text. Pantaleoni was an Italian economist and politician, and Pareto's close friend. "Io credo che dobbiamo occuparci di cose e non di uomini, fissare lo scopo al quale miriamo e poi accettare *tutti* gli aiuti che a quello ci possono avvicinare. Per solito ciò non si ammette. La teoria che domina è, se posso adoperare questa figura, la teoria del Cesarismo. Vogliamo giudicare dell'utilità dell'intervento di un uomo dall'*insieme* delle sue dottrine, e non limitarci a quella speciale per la quale il suo aiuto può esserci utile. E ciò sta bene, se si trattasse di darne a costui l'*imperium*; ma non sta bene quando si vuole che *nessuno* abbia il diritto di disporre a suo beneplacito della cosa pubblica." All translations, here and in the rest of the article, are my own.

Dear lawyer [he is referring to Turati], in fact at first the article in the *Critica* displeased me because it contrasted with your courteous welcome in Milan. It was natural that you were very strict on doctrines, but I thought you had left the person alone. Then I thought that ... it was perhaps necessary for your public to express themselves in this way ... But be aware that if it is true that arguments about *people* [*persone*] are more effective for the people [*popolo*] than arguments about *things* [*cose*], it is also true that this is the way to prepare for Caesarism. You have a very serious danger to avoid: that of a reaction that may follow either from a premature movement or from too little popular education. The fetishism of our prehistoric ancestors unfortunately still persists in our people [*popolo*].¹⁵

In spite of the obvious differences between the two letters (while Pantaleoni shares Pareto's liberal political ideals, Pareto is definitely not a "comrade" of Turati), it is worth remarking that Pareto adopts in both texts the same terminology. In particular, he establishes a contrast between *gli uomini* or *le persone* ("men", "people") and *le cose* ("things", i.e. the political ideas and actions).

On the one hand, this distinction is justified by a contingent political strategy.¹⁶ On the other, it can be explained thanks to his overall scientific attitude.¹⁷ What is more significant here, still, is the connection between the widespread misplaced attention to the "people" and what Pareto defines, not without some terminological caution (due to the problematic legacy of Caesarism), as the current "theory of Caesarism." In Pareto's view, Caesarism represents a form of "personalism" to be condemned, a myopic political gaze according to which the personal (i.e., ultimately, irrational and emotional) features are more important and effective than a well-thought-out, objective strategy.

If, as Luisa Mangoni has aptly observed, in this respect Caesarism is first of all a "cultural phenomenon" proper to the *fin de siècle* culture, to its insecurity and lack of perspective, then there is no doubt, however, that this reasoning also implies a

¹⁵See Vilfredo Pareto, *Epistolario, 1890–1923*, 2 vols. (Rome, 1973), 1: 235: "Caro signor Avvocato, infatti sulle prime l'articolo della *Critica* mi dispiacque perché contrastava colla cortese vostra accoglienza a Milano. Era naturale che foste severissimo per le dottrine, ma credevo che aveste lasciato perdere la persona. Poi pensai che ... era forse necessario pel vostro pubblico di esprimervi in questo modo. ... Ma badate che se è vero che pel popolo hanno maggiore efficacia gli argomenti di *persone* che quelli di *cose*, è vero altresì che così si prepara il cesarismo. Avete un gravissimo pericolo da scansare; quello cioè di una reazione che può seguire sia per un movimento prematuro, sia per essere troppo scarsa l'educazione popolare. Il feticismo dei nostri antenati preistorici persiste disgraziatamente ancora nel nostro popolo." Turati was the famous Italian socialist leader. In the opening of the letter, Pareto refers to a debate that took place in the socialist journal *La critica sociale* (founded by Turati in 1891), as well to a personal meeting between him and Turati in Milan in the spring of 1893—for the details, see *ibid.*, 236.

¹⁶At the time, Pareto was in fact a supporter of the thesis according to which liberals should seek support in every political group available, including the socialists. On this point, see the footnotes in Pareto, *Lettere a Maffeo Pantaleoni*, 1: 254. This explains also Pareto's sincere advice to the socialist leader.

¹⁷I would argue that we might read in this opposition between "people" and "things" an anticipation, *mutatis mutandis*, of his later discussion of the distinction between "logical" and "non logical" actions (and, more generally, as connected to his discussions of feelings or "residuals," as he names them in his sociological theory).

judgment of how the political system (mal)functions.¹⁸ This is a reasoning to be understood in the framework of the nineteenth-century discussion of Caesarism, the issue of popular democratic legitimacy and its “deception.” What is more specific to the discussion of the 1890s is the focus, veiled yet present, on the mass dimension of the phenomenon—hence the hint to the “people” (*popolo*) as the real kingmaker.¹⁹

Thus the observation made at the end of the quotation from the second letter (“the fetishism of our prehistoric ancestors unfortunately still persists in our people”—the Marxian language is, by the way, singular) is all the more remarkable. I argue that it is particularly interesting not only for its precise reference to the Italian people (Pareto’s remark seems to anticipate Guglielmo Ferrero’s influential reading, according to which Caesarism is the political system characterizing the Latin races in decay),²⁰ but also for its sociological implications. Pareto alludes to a returning or resurfacing “primitivism” as the origin of the worship of the individual over his political ideas and actions.²¹ This testifies to a lack of intellectual strength informing not only the proletarians who vote for Turati, but also society as a whole.

Most importantly, I claim that this hint should be understood within the framework of Pareto’s later observations about the crisis that characterizes contemporary European society—to use a Gramscian expression, about the “crisis of hegemony” of the bourgeoisie and the stagnation that it brings with it.²² As Paolo Portinaro has recently observed, such a diagnosis of this conjuncture is deeply embedded in Pareto’s theory, from his early sociological writings onwards, and becomes progressively clearer.²³ While claiming the constancy of human nature and putting forward the sociological principle of the continuous substitution of one declining elite for a rising one (the already mentioned Elitist principle of the circulation of the elites), he

¹⁸ Mangoni *Crisi fine secolo*, 180.

¹⁹ It should be noted that, in the first letter to Pantaleoni, Pareto’s argument is more elaborate, but still coherent with the general reading proposed above. He establishes not only a contrast between “men” and “things,” but also one between the “whole” of “doctrines” of a man and the “special one for which his help can be useful.” The latter option represents but another form of personalism, to a certain extent even a more extreme one, insofar as it implies not only a personalized, but also unilateral view of the political leader. This is made clear by the reference to the “imperium” conceived of as classical Roman political practice: an absolute form of political power limited in time and scope, a special command with which an individual is entrusted with power under exceptional circumstances and with the aim to “save” or restore the republic. For a discussion on the nature of imperium see e.g. Mark B. Wilson, *Dictator: The Evolution of the Roman Dictatorship* (Ann Arbor, 2021).

²⁰ I am referring here to Guglielmo Ferrero, *L’Europa giovane* (Milan, 1897). Moreover, see Mangoni, *Crisi fine secolo*; Cingari, *Il cesarismo*; and Luisa Mangoni, *Civiltà della crisi: Cultura e politica in Italia tra Otto e Novecento* (Rome, 2013).

²¹ On political primitivism see also, *mutatis mutandis*, Gramsci’s reasoning. On this point see Francesca Antonini, *Caesarism and Bonapartism in Gramsci: Hegemony and the Crisis of Modernity* (Leiden and Boston, 2020), 109–10.

²² On this point see again *ibid.*, *passim*.

²³ See Paolo Portinaro, “Pareto fenomenologo della decadenza: Disgregazione sociale e cesarismo politico,” *Rivista di politica* 2 (2023), special issue on *Vilfredo Pareto nel centenario della morte: L’attualità di un “guastafeste”*, 23–32, at 23, where Portinaro refers to the book *Les systèmes socialistes* (1902) and to *Un’applicazione di teorie sociologiche* (1900). Both texts anticipate Pareto’s reasoning in *The Mind and Society* in significant ways.

needs to acknowledge that, in the contemporary world, this process is blocked. Society is in fact leading towards decadence rather than towards evolution.²⁴

This argument not only unveils the intrinsically normative nature of Pareto's sociology, but opens the floor for an investigation of the social and political degeneration in which Caesarism plays a pivotal role, as a phenomenon that thrives "in between"; that is to say, in situations of equilibrium between the "old" and the "new."

In the 1890s, however, when Pareto was corresponding with Pantaleoni and Turati, this theoretical reflection was still in the making. It found its main expression in Pareto's growing discomfort with the clash between the existing order and the new instances emerging in the political, social, and economic arenas, as well as with the constitutional short circuit connected to it. This mismatch between the current state of things and the increasing demands of modern society reveals itself most explicitly in the case of Italy, which represents the background of the quoted letters.

We might well submit that these remarks are stimulated by the discussion around Francesco Crispi, who was repeatedly prime minister of the Kingdom of Italy through the 1880s and 1890s, and who was one of the main promoters of Italy's colonial venture. The "Crispi phenomenon," as Cesare Lombroso defined it, was more than an episodic event in the post-Risorgimental Italian history. Famous for his strong-willed character and his constitutionally borderline usage of the available institutional tools (such as decrees-laws), the old politician exploited the weakness of the Italian ruling class and the general political uncertainty (increased by transformism) to establish a personal, Caesaristic, regime.²⁵

For this reason, Crispi was harshly labeled by Ferrero a "dictator without *coup d'état*" ("dittatore senza colpo di stato").²⁶ Even more explicitly, he was called, by the socialist Antonio Labriola, "little Caesar of the new Italy" ("piccolo Cesare della nuova Italia").²⁷ For his part, in an 1895 chronicle written for the *Giornale degli economisti*, Pareto called Crispi, less directly but still unkindly, "such an ungentelemanly man" ("un uomo cotanto poco perbene").²⁸

Pareto's analysis of Crispi's political actions largely reproduces the theoretical model already sketched, insofar as it identifies in the inconsistency between the increasingly bureaucratic state, political institutions, and a weak bourgeois society (the mismatch mentioned above) the primary cause for the rise and success of Crispi. What I find particularly interesting in this chronicle is the comparison between the Italian politician and Napoleon III, which will return also in other writings by Pareto.²⁹

²⁴See Portinaro, "Pareto fenomenologo della decadenza," 23.

²⁵See Cesare Lombroso, *Il fenomeno Crispi* (Turin, 1898). On this book by Lombroso and, more generally, on the "Crispi phenomenon" see Mangoni, *Crisi fine secolo*, 178–203. On Crispi see also Francesco Bonini, *Un Bonaparte italiano? Francesco Crispi*, in Alceo Riosa, ed., *Napoleone e il bonapartismo nella cultura politica italiana: 1802–2005* (Milan, 2007), 99–108, and the bibliography mentioned there.

²⁶Guglielmo Ferrero, *La reazione* (Turin, 1895), 10.

²⁷Antonio Labriola, *Scritti politici* (Bari, 1970), 361. The definition is contained in a text written by Labriola in 1895 for the German public of the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*.

²⁸Vilfredo Pareto, *Cronache italiane* (Brescia, 1965), 301.

²⁹On this point see Mangoni, *Crisi fine secolo*, 181.

The parallels highlighted, more or less explicitly, are indeed multiple.³⁰ Just as the weakened French bourgeoisie of the late 1840s and early 1850s thought itself (wrongly) to be able to manipulate Louis Napoleon for its own interests, so did the Italian bourgeoisie with Crispi in the 1890s.³¹ Moreover, a specific feature of Crispi's political leadership, just as before him of Napoleon III, is his militarism—"militarism" constitutes a crucial category in late nineteenth-century political and intellectual debates, and is closely connected to the issue of Caesarism.³² Not only did Crispi strengthen the Italian army, but he also played a pivotal role in the development of the military campaigns in Africa that characterized that period. Strategically speaking, as the history of the Second French Empire demonstrates, drawing attention to wartime enterprises represents a widespread expedient with which to divert attention away from a problematic domestic policy.

Past and present of Caesarist models: Pareto and Fascism

The historical analogy established by Pareto in the 1890s chronicles just analyzed enables me to widen my outlook on the topic, and move to the "second phase" in Pareto's usage of the Caesarist model.

I argue that, although fleeting and apparently superficial, the later mentions of other past Caesarist figures (and, consequently, of Caesarist political solutions) should not be underestimated. Instead, they should be considered symptoms of growing anxiety caused by the uncertainties of the present. This symptomatic use of historical analogies is typical not only of Pareto's account, but of the entire epoch too: the most obvious example in this regard is Guglielmo Ferrero, whose monumental *Grandezza e decadenza dell'impero romano* could be read as a sharp analysis of his own time.³³

From this point of view, it is worth paying attention to a long letter Pareto sent to Antonio Antonucci on 7 December 1907. This is an autobiographical piece, in which Pareto reconstructs his political and intellectual evolution. More specifically, Pareto

³⁰ Considering the relevance of French modern political history, the events connected to the seizure of power by Louis-Napoleon and his political strategy, also when not explicitly mentioned, were clear to the Italian people at the end of the nineteenth century (this is even more true if we consider Pareto's French-speaking background).

³¹ In another chronicle of 1896, Pareto highlights the shortcomings of the Italian bourgeoisie with a meaningful yet vague reference to *un Bonaparte*, "a Bonaparte"—to be intended as either Napoleon I or Napoleon III, the uncle and the nephew overlapping in their rule over the French people, as often happens in the play on historical analogies proper to the Caesarist imagery: "La borghesia è per indole timida. Ha bisogno di uomini energici che la proteggano. Si trova un Bonaparte, le si getta in braccio, e in mancanza di un Bonaparte si contenta di un Crispi." "The bourgeoisie is by nature timid. It needs energetic men to protect it. It finds itself a Bonaparte, throws itself into its arms, and in the absence of a Bonaparte is content with a Crispi." Pareto, *Cronache italiane*, 405.

³² Guglielmo Ferrero will write extensively on militarism a few years later (see his 1898 book *Il militarismo*, in which he dwells specifically on French military Caesarism). On militarism and Caesarism see Peter Baehr, *Caesar and the Fading of the Roman World: A Study in Republicanism and Caesarism* (New Brunswick, 1998), 130.

³³ On Ferrero, his reading of the history of the historiography on ancient Rome, and its later interpretations see e.g. Federico Santangelo, "Il Ferrero di Piero Treves," *FuturoClassico* 10 (2024), 275–86.

emphasizes his move from a sincere democratic belief to a conservative position. As he puts it,

my belief at that time was roughly as follows. Political economy as the so-called classical economists had constructed it, was a perfect or almost perfect science ... In politics, the sovereignty of the people was an axiom, freedom was the universal panacea. History showed us on the one hand the good, honest, intelligent people, oppressed by the upper classes, whose superstition was their own. Militarism and religion were the greatest scourges of mankind. Caesar among the ancients, Napoleon I and Napoleon III, among the moderns, were for me types of evildoers [*malfattori*]. I denied or at least excused the evils of democracy. *Terror* was a slight stain in the bright picture of the French Revolution. ... As the years passed these youthful ardors faded a little and when the Left came to power in Italy, when in France the Empire was succeeded by the Republic, I was also forced to recognize that my theories did not correspond to the facts ... Studying history better, I saw that what had previously seemed simple was in fact very complex, and I began to understand that the word *democracy* meant everything and nothing.³⁴

The text is remarkable in that it contains a number of valuable observations on the role of *ragionamento* (“reasoning”) and *sentimento* (“feeling”) in human society; as a result, it well describes Pareto’s analysis, while also addressing *lo studio della storia* (“the study of history”) as a guide in orienting him in this research.³⁵

In light of these considerations, Pareto’s references in the letter to Caesaristic figures are also especially meaningful. More than the customary references to Julius Caesar and to the two Bonapartes (less obvious is the connection with the issues of militarism and religion),³⁶ their combination with Pareto’s autobiographical trajectory is particularly insightful. In my view, extending the reversal of Pareto’s judgment on popular sovereignty and democracy to Caesarism transforms the latter from an absolutely condemned phenomenon into a potentially useful political tool.

Such reasoning acquires a greater weight if we turn our gaze to Pareto’s writings of the 1920s. Here the situation becomes thorny, as it revolves around the much-debated

³⁴Pareto, *Epistolario*, 1: 613–16, at 613–14: “Il mio credo in quel tempo era all’incirca il seguente. L’economia politica come l’avevano costruita gli economisti detti classici, era una scienza perfetta o quasi perfetta ... In politica, la sovranità del popolo era un assioma, la libertà era la panacea universale. La storia ci mostrava da un lato il popolo buono, onesto, intelligente, oppresso dalle classi superiori, di cui era propria la superstizione. Militarismo e religione erano i maggiori flagelli dell’umano genere. Cesare tra gli antichi, Napoleone I e Napoleone III, tra i moderni, erano per me tipi di malfattori. Negavo o almeno scusavo i mali della democrazia. Il *terrore* era una lieve macchia nel quadro luminoso della rivoluzione francese ... Cogli anni sbollirono un poco questi ardori giovanili e quando la Sinistra venne al potere in Italia, quando in Francia all’Impero succedette la repubblica, fui pure costretto a riconoscere che le mie teorie non corrispondevano ai fatti ... Studiando meglio la storia, vedevo che quanto prima mi era paruto semplice era invece molto complesso; e principiai ad intendere che la parola *democrazia* significava tutto e niente.”

³⁵*Ibid.*, 615–16.

³⁶Pareto condemned religion for its irrational dimension, which increases political conflict and strengthens the people’s tendency to search for a “savior.”

scholarly issue of Pareto's support for the Fascist regime.³⁷ Despite not aspiring to provide an answer to this question, I nonetheless believe that reflecting on Caesarism helps in shedding some light on this point alike.

First of all, it is important to note that, in his late writings, Pareto does not speak explicitly of Caesarism, nor does he use any of its cognates. However, this does not mean that the "spirit" of the category is absent altogether. On the contrary, I would argue that it is more present than in the writings of the 1890s, albeit in a different and indirect way, thanks to the reflection on dictatorship and its (potential) Italian form: Fascism.

As Emanuela Susca has convincingly demonstrated, it is possible to reconstruct a coherent intellectual pathway running through Pareto's journal contributions, letters, and other publications from the 1920s onwards. Moving on from an even deeper conviction of the gravity of the sociopolitical crisis then affecting Italy (he harshly condemns what he calls the "demagogic plutocracy"³⁸), Pareto identifies the only possible solution to this impasse by resorting to physical and institutional force—a *coup d'état* being the sole way to restart the blocked historical cycle. Thus, although at first he dismissed it as "romantic" and lacking the necessary strength to unblock the situation, Pareto came to progressively judge Fascism in a more positive light.³⁹ Following the March on Rome of October 1922, Mussolini (albeit with some relevant caveat) seems to emerge in Pareto's eyes as a truly charismatic leader able to save Italy.

Due to his death in 1923, when Fascism was still in its early stages, we cannot state that Pareto could not have changed his mind, as much on Il Duce as on the Fascist seize of power. This does not imply, however, that his observations on the issue of dictatorship are not valuable, especially vis-à-vis Caesarism.⁴⁰

What stands out from Pareto's writings is in fact the recurrent acknowledgment of Caesaristic figures from the more or less distant past, just as from the present, as terms of (a necessarily slippery but still very relevant) comparison for Italian Fascism.⁴¹ Moving from antiquity up to his own epoch, Pareto repeatedly mentions Julius Caesar,

³⁷ Many contributions have been published on Pareto and Fascism. See James Vander Zanden, "Pareto and Fascism Reconsidered," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 19/4 (1960), 399–41; Renato Cirillo, "Was Vilfredo Pareto Really a 'Precursor' of Fascism?," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 42/2 (1983), 235–45; Giovanni Barbieri, *Pareto e il fascismo* (Milan, 2003); Emanuela Susca, "Recidere il 'nodo gordiano': Ancora su Vilfredo Pareto e il fascismo," *Studi urbinati: Scienze umane e sociali* 80 (2013), 69–92; Alvaro Bianchi, "Vilfredo Pareto e o Fascismo," *Dados* 68/3 (2025), 1–37, available at <https://doi.org/10.1590/dados.2025.68.3.375>. In what follows, I will rely mostly on Susca's work.

³⁸ On Pareto's category of "demagogic plutocracy" see Portinaro, "Pareto fenomenologo della decadenza," 28.

³⁹ The Romantic side of Fascism is associated, in Pareto's view, with the role played within the movement (in its early stages) by the poet and intellectual Gabriele d'Annunzio. It is noteworthy that Antonio Gramsci also initially defines the Fascist ideology exactly as "Romantic." On this point see Antonini, *Caesarism and Bonapartism*, 28 ff.

⁴⁰ In spite of the significant number of contributions on Pareto's judgment on Fascism (see note 37 above), the issue of Caesarism has not been fully dealt with (in the mentioned essay by Susca, for instance, Caesarism is not mentioned even once).

⁴¹ As we are reminded also in the introduction to this forum, historical analogies can be as fascinating as they are difficult to interpret: not by chance, they are often rather suggestions than fully developed thoughts. We could even say that, to a certain extent, they represent a way of avoiding directly addressing a topic that

Octavian/Augustus, Robespierre, Napoleon I, Napoleon III, and even Lenin. See the following excerpts:

Persuade yourself that ... until they [the Fascists] have an ideal, a myth, a programme, they will not be a party. They have benefited Giolitti now, as the gangs in the Roman rallies benefited Caesar ... Even on Mussolino [*sic*], he is a *faccendiere*. Here too the ideal is lacking ... In vain do you hope that the present strike will be an opportunity to put the clerks to the sword. Where do you find the foothold to resist them? There would be only one: armed force; the legions of Caesar or Octavian Augustus, the soldiers of Napoleon I, or those of Napoleon III, etc.⁴²

[The bourgeoisie] acclaimed Napoleon I, then the Restoration, then Napoleon III; they constitute a mass that has no value of its own and can only go after bold conquerors ... In Italy ... its [the bourgeoisie's] small mind allowed it to follow Caesar as far as the Rubicon, never to cross it with it. Now it accepts the protection of fascism in its profits, perhaps, in secret, it helps it pecuniarily, but it would not lift a finger, openly, to defend it from its enemies.⁴³

It remains to be seen how far this crumbling will continue, and whether the future does not have in store some Caesar, some Octavian Augustus, some Bonaparte, or other such men ... Compare, in Italy, the bourgeoisie as the [Albertine] Statute had made it, as it had remained until towards the end of the 19th century, and as it is now. In France, that state of affairs changed in a few days; after 18 Brumaire order and prosperity returned.⁴⁴

an author does not (yet) feel comfortable dealing with immediately, for various conscious or unconscious reasons. I would argue that this reasoning might be applied to Pareto as well.

⁴²Vilfredo Pareto, letter to Maffeo Pantaleoni, 17 June 1921, in Pareto, *Lettere a Maffeo Pantaleoni*, 2: 285. "Persuaditi che [i fascisti] ... finché non avranno un ideale, un mito, un programma, non saranno un partito. Hanno giovato ora al Giolitti, come le bande nei comizi romani giovarono a Cesare ... Anche su Mussolino [*sic*], è un faccendiere. Anche qui manca l'ideale ... In vano spero che il presente sciopero sia occasione per mettere al segno gli impiegati. Dove trovi il punto d'appoggio per resistere loro? Ce ne sarebbe uno solo: la forza armata; le legioni di Cesare o Ottaviano Augusto, i soldati di Napoleone I, o quelli di Napoleone III, ecc."

⁴³Vilfredo Pareto, "Il fascismo," *La Ronda*, Jan. 1922, now in Vilfredo Pareto, *Scritti sociologici minori*, 2nd edn (Turin, 1980), 1088: "[I borghesi] acclamarono il primo Napoleone, poi la Restaurazione, poi il terzo Napoleone; costituiscono un gregge che non ha valore proprio e che può solo andare dietro ad audaci conquistatori ... In Italia ... il piccolo suo animo [della borghesia] le consentiva di seguire Cesare sino al Rubicone, non mai di passarlo con esso. Ora accetta negli utili la tutela del fascismo, forse, di nascosto, lo aiuta pecuniariamente, ma non muoverebbe, a viso aperto, un dito, per difenderlo dai nemici."

⁴⁴Vilfredo Pareto, "Previsione dei fenomeni sociali," *Rivista d'Italia*, 15 April 1922, in Pareto, *Scritti sociologici minori*, 1125. "Rimane da sapere sin dove questo sgretolamento seguirà, e se l'avvenire non ha in serbo qualche Cesare, qualche Ottaviano Augusto, qualche Bonaparte, o altri uomini simili ... Si paragoni, in Italia, la borghesia come l'aveva fatta lo Statuto [Albertino], come era rimasta sino verso la fine del secolo XIX, e come è ora. In Francia, quello stato di cose mutò in pochi giorni; dopo il 18 Brumaio tornarono l'ordine e la prosperità."

Other passages could be mentioned too.⁴⁵ Whereas Pareto's classical references are self-evident,⁴⁶ his engagement with modern and contemporary sources is more intriguing. In this regard, it is fascinating to find Pareto mentioning Lenin, and this not only because he praises a political "enemy," but also because Pareto acknowledges the dimension of "myth" as an essential ingredient of the communists' success.⁴⁷

This being said, Pareto's most important references are those to key figures of modern French history, from Robespierre to Louis Napoleon. In turn, this is part and parcel of a broader comparison between twentieth-century Italy and nineteenth-century France, which returns more than once in Pareto's late writings. In fact, Pareto refers not only to the late revolutionary period and the Eighteenth Brumaire of Napoleon Bonaparte. He also thoroughly engages with the Second French Republic, its crisis, and the seizure of power by Napoleon I's nephew. The historical comparison between the stalemate existing in mid-nineteenth-century France and that affecting the contemporaneous Italian situation (with a weakened bourgeoisie, a still underdeveloped socialist elite, and an unchecked popular mass) reinforces Pareto's belief that an emergency solution is all the more necessary in order to "save" Italy. This solution is achievable, according to Pareto, thanks to rulership by a dictator.

Most importantly, I think that Pareto's focus on the French leaders, especially Napoleon III (who is clearly Pareto's main model of the dictator), and his extending comparison from the individuals to the whole historical-political situation (Italy as France, France as Italy) reveals something quite fundamental. This is to say that Pareto's reflection on the issue of dictatorship is an unconfessed reassessment of his

⁴⁵ Vilfredo Pareto, letter to Arturo Linaker, 18 March 1921, in Pareto, *Epistolario*, 2: 1062: "I fascisti, per ora, mi paiono essere solo *frondeurs*. Perché divengano rivoluzionari occorre che trovino un mito ... Ci vuole un mito come quello dei comunisti. Lenin è uno Tzar con un mito democratico." "Fascists, for now, seem to me to be only *frondeurs*. For them to become revolutionaries they need to find a myth ... It takes a myth like that of the communists. Lenin is a tsar with a democratic myth." Pareto, "Il discorso di Treves," *Il Secolo*, 17 Aug. 1922, in Vilfredo Pareto, *Scritti politici* (Turin, 1988²), vol. 2, p. 768: "La dittatura presuppone il dittatore, si nomini esso Cesare, Augusto, Robespierre, Napoleone I, Napoleone III, Lenin, o come altrimenti si legge negli innumerevoli esempi che reca la storia." "Dictatorship presupposes the dictator, be it Caesar, Augustus, Robespierre, Napoleon I, Napoleon III, Lenin, or as we otherwise read in the countless examples in history." Pareto, letter to Vincenzo Fani, 11 Oct. 1922, in Pareto, *Epistolario*, 2: 1106: "Lo Stato presente dell'Italia ha alcuni punti di somiglianza con lo Stato della Francia nel 1849; ma manca un Luigi Bonaparte; se si potesse trovare, il colpo di Stato sarebbe sicuro e di esito certo." "The present state of Italy bears some resemblance to the state of France in 1849; but it lacks a Louis Bonaparte; if one could be found, the *coup d'état* would be certain and certain to succeed." Pareto, letter to Maffeo Pantaleoni, 17 Oct. 1922, in Pareto, *Lettere a Maffeo Pantaleoni*, 2: 313: "[Ai fascisti] manca ... un Luigi Napoleone Bonaparte." "[The fascists] lack ... a Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte."

⁴⁶ Julius Caesar and Augustus are described as successful military leaders, with great political bargaining skills and the ability to establish a dictatorship. The figure of Caesar, in particular, is often associated with the episode of the crossing of the river Rubicon, which, as known, represents a turning point in Roman history. For a reflection on Caesarism, classical antiquity, and its legacy see Federico Santangelo, "Caesarism in Ancient Rome?", *Ancient History Bulletin* 37 (2023), 151–64. Given the number of the classical references made by Pareto, we might wonder whether there is a specific connection between his interest in ancient Rome and his reflection on Caesarism.

⁴⁷ These observations seem to echo Georges Sorel's *Réflexions sur la violence* (Paris, 1908).

earlier considerations on Caesarism and, in general, advances a reevaluation of this very category.⁴⁸

I believe that Pareto's choice to speak of dictatorship instead of Caesarism stems from the neutrality of the former category in contrast to the latter. In spite of its recent birth, Caesarism was a biased and negative concept because of its close connection to the Bonapartist ideology and the French imperial experience. By contrast, dictatorship always remained open to various, even opposite, applications. Moreover, the establishment of the rule of a *dictator* (to use the Latin term) is historically connected to the idea of the "saving of the state" (and its translation into the modern world)—an issue that, in those same years, was being extensively addressed also by Carl Schmitt.⁴⁹

Regardless of the terms used, what is certain is that this reappraisal of the theoretical–conceptual legacy of Caesarism implies, in Pareto's view, a reversal of the order of priorities identified in the 1890s letters analyzed above. Now "men" come before "things," or, rather, and perhaps even more meaningfully, "ideas" coincide with "people" who embody them (the reference to the *imperium* acquires a new weight in the light of these developments).

In tune with his own scientific attitude, Pareto tends to present his concrete historical–political statements as fully coherent with his theoretical construction, as an application of them—this is the case also of these historical comparisons and his judgment on Fascism and Mussolini as Italian dictator or as a Caesar. We might question, however, to what extent the opposite is untrue; that is, to what extent the practice and the concrete historical circumstances influence the theory.

Not only do Pareto's decades-long reflections on the crisis of Italian and European bourgeois societies and political systems contradict the allegedly immutable cyclicality of the elite informing his sociological theory. These late observations on the rule of the single one over the rest of the people also seem to move, theoretically speaking, in a different direction. Pareto's resorting to analogies, which are as evoking as unstructured, seems to me exactly a sign of the fact that something is changing, although the process is still ongoing. Caesarism is no longer a condemnable (yet minor) consequence of the current crisis: it is a major challenge and opportunity for the future.

Broadening the perspective

In this article I have examined the occurrences of the category of Caesarism and the references to Caesaristic figures and Caesarist-like ideology contained in Vilfredo Pareto's writings, starting with two letters from the early 1890s and concluding with the texts of the 1920s, which deal with the rise of Fascism—the hinge element being represented by

⁴⁸It has to be reminded that Caesarism and dictatorship belong to the same conceptual family, as historian Melvin Richter has written (see Richter, "A Family of Political Concepts"). Therefore, this implies that an absolutely independent usage of the categories is not possible. On this point, see also the other contributions in this forum, especially those by Cesare Cuttica and Alexander Jordan.

⁴⁹As is known, in 1921 Carl Schmitt published his influential work on dictatorship (*Die Diktatur*). For an overview of the evolution of the category of dictatorship, with a specific focus on law, see e.g. Dimitrios Kivotidis, *Dictatorship: New Trajectories in Law* (London, 2021). As with Sorel, we might not draw a direct connection between Schmitt's and Pareto's thinking, but there is no doubt that there are fascinating similarities.

a 1907 missive of autobiographical nature. As the preceding pages have demonstrated, the development of the Paretian thought on Caesarism over these decades describes a parabola, insofar as Pareto moves from a clear rejection of the category as a form of short-sighted personalism to an implicit reassessment of it as an essential political resource.

As emerged from the later quotations (not always easy to interpret), Pareto's adherence to a dictatorial–Caesaristic ideal is far from being clear-cut, for methodological, theoretical, and even chronological reasons. This does not mean, however, that it is not an important development. On the contrary, Pareto's relationship with Caesarism reveals a trend towards a reshaping of the principle of the circulation of the elites in the name of a realistic consideration of their problems in contemporary democratic societies—hence the role of the leader as potential creator of a new ruling class and its renewal.

The fact that Pareto's trajectory remains conceptually unsolved (that is, he substitutes the category of Caesarism with that of dictatorship, without explicitly addressing the issue) does not constitute a problem in itself. Instead, I see it as a sign of Pareto's perception of the complexity of the topic, and as an effort to restart without bias the reflection on it.

It is not by chance that a somehow similar approach also informs another father of Elitism: Robert Michels. The latter moved from an initial rejection of the twin category of Caesarism, Bonapartism, to the adoption of a reassessed Elitist theory in which a charismatic leader towers over the elite ("charisma" is here the key concept, along the lines of Max Weber's thinking).⁵⁰ Notwithstanding the differences between the two authors, this parallel leads us to rethink, although necessarily succinctly, the relationship between Elite theory and Caesarism in general.

At first, Elitism as an all-embracing theory tries to "limit" Caesarism, classifying it as a marginal development, a by-product of the conjunctural crisis of Western society. As far as the features of the *fin de siècle* society unfold, however, the confrontation with Caesarist episodes and figures becomes unavoidable. Not only does Caesarism reveal itself as a truly internal problem of liberal democracies, but it also turns out to be a real catalyst for the confrontation of Elitism with the upcoming issues of contemporary political life. This is primarily the case with regard to the elites' inability to share power and manage the masses.

In trying to address these challenges, Elite theory adapts itself (more or less successfully) to the new context, being shaped by the same phenomenon which it was initially trying to contain. In other words, there is a retreat from Elitism to Caesarism (or, better, a twentieth-century version of it),⁵¹ which is presented by Elitist authors,

⁵⁰ On Michels see Francesca Antonini, "Between Weber and Mussolini: The Issue of Political Leadership in the Thought of the Late Michels," *Intellectual History Review* 34/4 (2024), 773–90. It is worth remembering that Michels's reading is different from Pareto's, both in relation to his political background (see Michels's early socialist faith) and in view of his judgment on the role of the elites (Michels's "iron law of oligarchy" is conceived as a failure of democratic mechanisms). In addition, Michels's late support for the Fascist regime and the connected theory of the "charismatic direction of public affairs" does not contradict, in his own view, his overall democratic beliefs.

⁵¹ On the evolution of the category of Caesarism see the introduction to this forum.

explicitly or implicitly, as an antidote to the realities of elite formation under democratic conditions—we might wonder, however, to what extent this is a real solution and not a form of self-deception.⁵²

In the end, what I would like to stress is the richness of the discussion on Caesarism. Rather than representing the tail end of bygone debates (with reference both to their objects and to language), reflection on this topic represents a valuable laboratory for an understanding of the structural impasses affecting modern political society—if not also of those informing our own time.

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⁵²Evidently, this question would open up a broader discussion on the meaning and usefulness of Elitism, a discussion that cannot be addressed here, for obvious reasons.