THE NAPOLEONIC REGIME: ANATOMY OF A DICTATORSHIP

SINAN KIRCOVA

INTRODUCTION

"We stand on the threshold of a new beginning. In order to ensure our security and continuing stability, the Republic will be reorganized into the first Empire, for a safe and secure society, which I assure you will last for ten thousand years. An Empire that will continue to be ruled by this august body and a sovereign ruler chosen for life. An Empire ruled by the majority, ruled by a new constitution!"

Contrary to what you might think, the above-mentioned passage is not a speech by Napoleon during his coronation as the emperor of France. Rather, it is taken from George Lucas's immortal franchise, Star Wars, right out of the part in *The Revenge of the Sith* when the Republic supported by the Jedi Order was being replaced by the Galactic Empire of Chancellor Palpatine. Leaving aside the Manichean overtones, I think that the passage fits in well with this article's discussion and hints at several qualities of the Napoleonic regime quite remarkably: the reorganization of the old Republic, the persisting nominal allegiance to the old regime despite obvious dictatorial inclinations, and the emphasis on stability and security. I am not entirely sure whether Lucas was inspired by the downfall of the First French Republic in the Star Wars universe, but the resemblance is too strong to be coincidental. Regardless, one can say that the degeneration of democratic regimes into corrupt forms is a recurrent theme both in fiction and politics, but it never ceases its political relevance. Of course, Napoleon Bonaparte was not the first one in history to transform a democratic republic into a personal autocracy. Republics throughout history, the Weimar being the most notorious one, gave rise to tyranny quite often; therefore, a discussion about the Napoleonic regime is thought-provoking. I believe that examining the continuations and disruptions between the Napoleonic regime and the First Republic of France is the key to understanding the nature of such transformations. Moreover, the conjuncture, too, calls for attention to the Napoleonic regime: just as I was writing this article, President Duterte of the Philippines was preparing to make amendments to the constitution, which, according to the journalists, would open the gates of an "imperial presidency" (Hayderian, 2019) for him. The emergence of the so-called 'strong men' in Europe and around the globe requires looking into the internal dynamics of dictatorships.

CAESARISM, DICTATORSHIP AND NAPOLEON

Scholars (Baehr & Richter, 2004: 2) sometimes use the concept of 'Caesarism' to describe the Napoleonic regime. Hazareesingh (2004: 129) defines Caesarism as a political system in which ultimate political power predominantly resides in a single individual. As an introductory concept, the term 'Caesarism' addresses certain aspects of Napoleon's rule successfully. Apparently, it draws parallels between the rule of Napoleon and that of Julius Caesar, and there

are good reasons to bring this up when one thinks of many similarities: both Napoleon and Julius Caesar were generals beforehand, and both initiated coups to seize power and claimed a monopoly over it. Of course, the bloodless coup d'état of *18 Brumaire* is incomparable to the civil war between Julius Caesar and Pompey. Napoleon's ascendancy to power was, therefore, smoother largely due to the politically incoherent structure of the Directory (Doyle, 1989: 370) while Julius Caesar found the unified forces of the Senate against him (Toynbee, 2019). Another point of similarity is how Julius Caesar imposed a personality cult to the extent that his supporters deified him later on. Napoleon followed Julius Caesar's footsteps in forming his own cult. To substantiate this point, one could use two paintings of his contemporary, Auguste-Dominique Ingres.

Both paintings (see Figures 1 and 2) were often commissioned by different government authorities, one by a city council and the other by a body of the central government. *Napoleon on His Imperial Throne* perfectly demonstrates the cult of personality, so often found in dictatorships: the emperor sitting on the throne with a god-like posture with the classical wreath on his head. In its rich iconography, it surpasses even the portraits of the last monarch before him, Louis XVI. The idea of immortality is so much stressed in this painting that Napoleon's face almost looks like that of a living corpse – an observation also shared by Glover (2012). The painting was eventually acquired by a legislatorial body (*corps législatif*) under Napoleon (Young, 2017), and it exposes the radical rupture in terms of political imagery between the First Republic and the Napoleonic regime. To understand the extent to which Napoleon had embraced the figure of a demigod in politics, one should contrast this painting with an earlier one, again by the same painter, Auguste-Dominique Ingres. When *Bonaparte, First Consul*, was painted, the Napoleonic regime still had a nominal allegiance to the First Republic, which poses a great opportunity for comparison: two paintings could not be more different. The first Consul to the Republic, though acquiring extraordinary executive powers, still had the outlook of a civic administrator working in his office, conveying the image of the servant of the people still in touch with them as represented by the view of the capital from the window in the painting.

Figure 1: Bonaparte, First Consul, Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1804)

Figure 2: Napoleon I on His Imperial Throne, Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1806)

If one should dig deeper into the term Caesarism, it is possible to suggest that Napoleon had also followed the footsteps of another Caesar, those of Octavian who turned Rome into a de facto empire of his own family. Similar to Napoleon, Octavian, too, pursued expansionist policies abroad. In addition, both shifted the balance of powers at the expense of the legislative branch of the government. Octavian restructured the Senate in line with his need for a staunchly loyal aristocratic class (Talbert, 1984: 56-57), and Napoleon and Sieyés crafted the new constitution after the coup of *18 Brumaire* with almost identical motives, which was approved by a plebiscite in 1799. Though the Directory regime before Napoleon's rule also controlled both chambers of the legislature, it was only thanks to informal means such as electoral fraud and purging dissident MPs. Napoleon admits this resentfully in a letter to Talleyrand: "for a nation of 30 million inhabitants in the eighteenth century, it is a tragedy to have to call on bayonets to save the state" (Doyle, 1989: 375). This situation was absolutely reversed by the subsequent constitutional amendments under Napoleon. The right to initiate legislation was exclusively given to the consuls, and the legislative branch which was divided into three separate bodies was responsible only for oversight and approval. Napoleon was the only consul who had ever proposed legislation, of course. The members of the newly formed Council of State were chosen directly by Napoleon himself in addition to the fact that the members of the Tribunate and the Senate were chosen for life by consuls (Grab, 2003: 37). Napoleon took advantage of his powers as the first consul only to advance his constitutional powers further, as demonstrated by the sequence of events: he first became consul for life in 1802 and then, was given the title 'emperor' in 1804, just like how Octavian was proclaimed by the Roman Senate as the "father of the *patrie*' and '*imperator*'.

Though the term Caesarism is useful to identify certain aspects the Napoleonic regime shares with other two transitionary periods in Roman history, it is not a sound approach to generate a concept in political science for every ruler in power, since concepts are useful only to the extent that they highlight common patterns between separate phenomena and certainly not because they particularize them. Otherwise, one would drown himself in an endless sea of obsolete words. Perhaps, scholars prefer using concepts like Caesarism and Bonapartism because they prefer euphemisms for dictatorship. On the other hand, there should not be much debate on the typological question of whether the Napoleonic regime was a dictatorship or not. Unchecked by any constitutional power, Napoleon certainly enjoyed dictatorial powers. Woloch (2004: 33) even writes about an instance, in which the Minister of the Interior Lucien Bonaparte fabricated votes "out of thin air" to distort the results of the plebiscite of 1800 in order to exaggerate Napoleon's strength. Therefore, the real conundrum lies in the relationship of Napoleon's personal dictatorship with the principles of the Revolution and the Enlightenment rather than in typological issues or the *modus operandi* of his dictatorial regime.

HOW TO SOLVE THE PARADOX OF THE NAPOLEONIC REGIME

There are two main characterizations of the Napoleonic regime with regard to its relationship with the Revolution: one sees it as the political heir of the Revolution, the other as a divergence from the Revolution. Two scholars, Isser Woloch and David Jordan, represent the above-

mentioned opposite viewpoints on this issue. Jordan (2014: 1-3) writes:

"The fear he instilled in the kings, priests, and the elites of the *ancien regime* was not just that he would destroy their armies or make them vassals, although he certainly did so. The greater threat was that he would make their states into revolutionized France, destroy privilege, and unleash the resentments of subjects long repressed [...] Napoleon was the child of the Revolution."

Woloch (2002: 242), on the other hand, writes that:

"[...] during the later years of the Empire, Napoleon sucked the air out of his regime. The latitude for independent opinion within the government vanished, as the emperor began to elevate mediocre sycophants to higher positions. In Paris, the regime's center of gravity shifted from the Council of State to the servile atmosphere of the imperial court."

Jordan (2002: xiii) claims that Napoleon knew very well what he was doing – the work of the Revolution. In opposition to this, Woloch (2002: 243) argues that the idea of France ruled by a liberal emperor was nothing but a wish, or rather a fantasy. Any progressive vision the Empire might have had or pursued under Napoleon, Woloch further elaborates, was owed to the ex-revolutionaries surrounding him from the coup of *18 Brumaire* onwards.

How can one explain this controversy over Napoleon? Could one serve the Revolution by undermining its core principles? When expressed as such, the issue sounds quite paradoxical. Let's unpack this seemingly paradoxical problem. One can approach the issue through the lenses of two separate lines of evaluation: one is that which is between political idealism and pragmatism. The other line is that which is between positive or negative definitions of the agenda of the Revolution.

The first dilemma must have preoccupied the minds of countless revolutionaries throughout history as every practice of an idea inevitably comes with a cost on part of its ideal characteristics. Of course, one could very well serve the Revolution through a blind idealism without any concern for realpolitik. In such cases, greater risks of causing a counter-Revolution are likely. What would the most liberal and idealistic Revolution mean if it were to last for a few months or years? After all Napoleon, despite a generous withdrawal from the Revolution's fundamental principles, prevented a truly royalist restoration during his reign. Therefore, the Napoleonic regime is at the very pragmatic end of this first evaluation. The Concordat is a great example: Napoleon shook hands with the Pope and curbed the Revolution's inspiring anti-clericalism (Grab, 2003: 43), but by doing so, he further weakened the royalist opposition. One can rightfully raise the question of what was left of the Revolution by 1815 that could legitimize the concessions made by Napoleon. To answer this question, the second part of the analysis is essential.

The second line of evaluation depends on two distinct ways to define the agenda of the Revolution that can radically alter the judgement on the Napoleonic regime. One can argue that the goal of the Revolution was freedom from the *ancien regime* in France and Europe, which leads to the conclusion that the Napoleonic regime performed remarkably. Through waging countless wars against absolutist kingdoms of Europe, Napoleon's empire shaped Europe in its

own image. It abolished medieval institutions of serfdom in nearby neighbours of France: "an enormous and bloody attempt to realize the ideological and messianic zeal [...] against the *ancien regime*," as Jordan (2014: xi) puts it. Nevertheless, there is another way to consider this, which is to define the goals of the French Revolution positively in line with the principles of the Enlightenment. Such a standpoint opposes the *ancien regime*, not for its beneficiaries had fancy titles but for it had oppressed its subjects in the interest of bigotry and privilege, for it rejected equal citizenship, denied the freedom of speech and conscience, ruled by nepotism for centuries. When evaluated from such a point of view which this article prefers to call the positive agenda of the Revolution, the Napoleonic regime performed poorly despite its continuous lip-service to the Revolution. It resembled very much the oppressive regime the Revolution sought to replace in its arbitrary "preventive detentions" (Woloch, 2002: 187) and police state attributes (Grab, 2003: 47), in its widespread censorship (Woloch, 2014: 206), and with its continuous erosion of representative democracy by plebiscitary moves. In fact, Fehèr (1990: 203) notes on an interesting encounter between Kant, the idol of the Enlightenment, and Napoleon. We learn that Napoleon quickly removed Kant from his list of special guests after a briefing on his ideas. Small wonder why the architect of militarism was not amused by the ideas of the philosopher of perpetual peace.

OTHER TYPOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS

To sum up, Woloch's analysis condemns Napoleon for his lack of commitment to the positive agenda of the Revolution and for his merely egotistical pursuit of power devoid of any principles. By contrast, Jordan deems Napoleon a hero, using a negative definition of the revolutionary agenda and fully endorsing his pragmatism in his fight against the *ancien regime*. However, one should acknowledge two other ways to think about the Napoleonic era and explain why they are problematic. The first one is picturing the Napoleonic regime as the last example of a long lineage of enlightened absolutists of the 18th century (Broers, 1996: 2-3). Broers argues that it would be folly to deny Napoleon such a position as his friends and foes alike thought that he was a man in tune with his times and operated together with his civil servants on their shared ideology of the Enlightenment. This article objects to such a characterization: it is true that both enlightened absolutists and Napoleon pursued common policies such as centralization of the state, the secularization of the law, and ending feudal privileges. However, those absolutists were called enlightened primarily because they were pushing for reforms in the extremely conservative institution of monarchy partly in line with the principles of the Enlightenment. Napoleon, on the other hand, inherited the political and social institutions of the most radically democratic Republic that Europe had ever seen till then and had transformed its institutions towards conservatism. Therefore, there is a mismatch between the context and the direction of change despite the similarity in policies. The backsteps of Code Napoleon demonstrate this point clearly as the liberal character of the right of divorce and marriage was repealed by the Napoleonic regime in a socially conservative manner (Dwyer & McPhee, 2002: 155).

This article also rejects the other alternative characterization of the Napoleonic regime as a military dictatorship (Lefebvre, 1964: 274). Such a proposition underlines the heavy dependence of Napoleon on the army to consolidate his

power. Grab (2003: 28), for instance, states that top generals made fortunes by tax farming and confiscation in the conquered lands of Europe. It is plausible to agree with the point that the army had been an essential part of the notoriously militaristic government of Napoleon, but all dictatorships depend on the coercive power of the army and the police to some extent. If one, however, asks the question of how much political influence generals exerted under the Napoleonic regime, it becomes harder to pass judgement. The key positions of the Napoleonic regime were held by career politicians like Talleyrand and Fouché with no background in the military. The Napoleonic government certainly did not depend on a hierarchy of command as in military dictatorships of Latin America, where the rule by generals had been the norm. The second and third consuls, namely Lebrun and Cambacéres, were both legal professionals (Woloch, 2002: 121) who had served in the *ancien regime* before the Revolution.

CONCLUSION

This article agrees with Grab's observation (2003: 19) regarding the Napoleonic regime when he calls it a "Janus faced" entity. Its intricate structure combined subordination with liberation in and outside France, which challenges conventional social scientific categories. Was not there anyone, in the meantime, who could act not because he or she loved Napoleon less but France more and would have resolved the issue for everyone with the old-fashioned way? Grab (2003: 40) notes on a bomb attack on Christmas Eve of 1800 when the first Consul was on his way to the opera, but alas, he survived by chance. As a result, the responsibility falls on social scientists to analyze this extraordinary era and expose the weak spots of dictatorship so that we can face the challenges of our contemporary world threatened by regimes of a similar sort.

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