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The regime of Napoleon III

1. Late 1852

The preceding volume* recounted the final stages of the rapid march that in 1852 led the Prince-President Louis Napoleon to assume the title of Napoleon III: the *senatus consultum* of 7 November, the overwhelming 'yes' of the French people in the plebiscite of 21 and 22 November and, finally, the issuing, on 2 December, of a decree promulgating the earlier *senatus consultum* and proclaiming the Empire.

The transformation of a president of the Republic, even if elected for a ten-year term, into a hereditary emperor not only conferred a more prestigious title on Louis Napoleon but was also to be accompanied by a strengthening of his prerogatives, which were increased by the end of the year. Furthermore, it introduced an innovation into the Constitution that made it potentially more difficult to apply, since there was an apparent contradiction between the principle of the responsibility of the head of State and the hereditary character of the imperial dignity. Yet 2 December 1852 is a date that had very little impact on public opinion; the emperor's opponents regarded it as a pure farce, and historians have generally treated it as a 'mere constitutional formality'. True, the proclamation of the Empire may not have been the logical and ineluctable outcome of the principate, for the prince-president seems to have hesitated before deciding to change his title. But, as the proclamation entailed no major change in the arrangements of the constitutional edifice, it did not represent a decisive break. The foundations of the regime had been laid down as early as the morning of 2 December 1851, in the presidential proclamation posted on the walls of Paris. 'Thus, when opponents described the Second Empire as 'the regime of 2 December', their purpose was to emphasize that, as a product of the *coup d'état*, the regime bore what they considered the stigma of original sin.

* Maurice Agulhon, *The Republican Experiment, 1848-1852*, trans. by Janet Lloyd (Cambridge, 1983). (Trans.)

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A restoration?

But the son of Hortense de Beauharnais and Louis Bonaparte, king of Holland, invoked a more distant and far more glorious origin for his regime. Despite his 'equivocal filiation', he regarded himself, ever since the death of the Duc de Reichstadt (1832), as the heir to Napoleon I, destined to succeed his uncle one day and so to revive the great Napoleonic tradition. Thus, immediately after taking control, he solemnly declared (proclamation of 14 January 1852):

I have taken as models the political institutions that once before, at the turn of the century, in similar circumstances, gave new strength to a shaken society and raised France to the height of prosperity and grandeur. I have taken as models the institutions that, instead of vanishing at the first outbreak of popular disturbances, were toppled only by the coalition of all of Europe against us. In short, I asked myself: since France has been functioning for the past fifty years only thanks to the administrative, military, judiciary, religious and financial organization of the Consulate and the Empire, why should we not also adopt the political institutions of that period? As the creation of the same mind, they must surely embody the same national character and the same practical usefulness.

And it is indeed as a faithful and scrupulous imitator that he strove to revive the institutions of the First Empire (with the exception of the Tribunate) under the same names and with apparently similar powers. The *senatus consultum* of 7 November 1852 merely put the final touches on this resurrection, by stating in Article 1: 'The imperial dignity is *re-established*. Louis Napoleon Bonaparte is *emperor of the French*, under the name of Napoleon III.' (Emphasis added.)

Thus Napoleon I's very title was revived, and if the new emperor proclaimed himself to be the third to use the name, it was in order to underscore the regularity of his succession, for he regarded his cousin Napoleon II as having effectively reigned, however briefly, in June 1815. The last symbolic proof of this mimesis is Napoleon III's choice of 2 December for a solemn proclamation of the re-establishment of the Empire. He regarded this date as the anniversary not of the *coup d'état*, which had left him with a bad conscience, but of the coronation of Napoleon I and the glorious victory of Austerlitz. In short, Napoleon III's aim was to carry out a restoration.

It is of course possible that he may have deliberately built up his image as faithful heir in order to appear in the eyes of the French as the full embodiment of the 'Napoleonic myth' from which he had benefited so in the 1848 election. Hence the accusation of being a mere 'plagiarist' that was levelled against him by several of his contemporaries, most notably Karl Marx. But can one consider his attempt to copy the First Empire sheer bluff? Why not believe the sincerity of proclamations of faith made well prior to his coming to power?

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New times

The question is ultimately a secondary one. Whether or not Napoleon III was sincere, was he not deceiving himself as to the possibility of reproducing intact a regime that was half a century old? There had been a sea-change since, and contemporaries were fully aware of the fact. Thus, in *L'Homme à l'oreille cassée* (1861), the journalist Edmond About told the story of a colonel of the First Empire desiccated by a German scientist and brought back to life under Napoleon III after being rehydrated. Finding himself suddenly plunged into a France that is entirely new to him, the colonel feels totally out of place; he is incongruous. This novel has the merit of emphasizing that the Second Empire, whatever its appearances, was in no way a reproduction of the First, a resuscitated and anachronistic fossil.

The subjects of Napoleon III even felt they were living through a period that, to be sure, was far removed from the First Empire, but also very different from the more recent world that many of them had known in Guizot's day. The Second Empire was marked by a change so thoroughgoing that many contemporaries had difficulty finding their bearings. One can imagine the reactions of ordinary folk, of peasants seeing trains for the first time, or of workers – who had often only just left the peasant state – making contact with monstrous machines. Others, wealthier and better educated, left descriptions of their surprise. Among them, the travellers, tourists, poets or plain bourgeois who discovered that Paris was no longer Paris. Or the honourable members of the governing board of the Banque de France, who, faced with the changing dimension of their concern and the expansion of its activities, had to resolve week after week a host of problems previously unknown to them, the most pressing of which was to find an effective foil to the photographic forgery of bank notes. Some of these men, accustomed to relying in their decision-making on hitherto proven and now worthless precedents, wistfully observed: 'One cannot be guided by past conduct.' Finally, certain politicians who once belonged to what the Bonapartists pejoratively called the 'old parties' were no less bewildered. One of the most perspicacious among them, Rémusat, following the legislative elections of 1852 – whose results he 'could not imagine' – admitted having lost his last 'illusions' and, in his disenchantment, wondered 'how to believe that thirty-eight years of national opinions and habits could vanish in a few days'.¹ These were no doubt over-reactions, for there was both a continuity and a break between the age of Guizot and the Second Empire.

The unity of the Second Empire

But did the Second Empire itself constitute a homogeneous whole? If we limit ourselves for the moment to the political aspect, was the regime

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that existed in 1852 truly 'the' regime of the Second Empire, or was it characteristic only of its first phase? The question is a valid one, for Napoleon III's reign has traditionally been divided roughly in two, the 'authoritarian' Empire contrasting with the 'liberal' Empire. This presentation is especially striking in the two volumes of Lavissee's *Histoire de France contemporaine*, in which Seignobos links the first phase of the Empire to the revolution of 1848 (vol. VI) and the second to the founding of the Third Republic (vol. VII). It then becomes difficult to agree on the moment that marked the turning-point. Seignobos dates the caesura to about 1859, while the tendency in present-day research has been instead to reduce the truly liberal phase to the last year of Napoleon's reign, and at the same time to regard him as always having been a liberal! For others, who share the same impressions as many contemporaries of the period, the history of the Second Empire appears as a succession of contradictory images in a confused and incessant flow. Thus the British historian J. M. Thompson, who sees Napoleon III as a sort of Hamlet of French history, concludes that 'in fact the character of the imperial regime was changing all the time'.*

Such interpretations are not without value, for, in eighteen years of imperial reign, a considerable number of changes did take place. The period will therefore have to be studied here in an evolutionary perspective. But was not change itself foreseeable from the outset and, to a certain extent, foreseen, since the emperor always presented his Constitution as adaptable? And, if there were contradictions, were they not present more or less potentially from the outset, as inherent in the regime and in its head? One must be careful not to neglect the permanent features that made for the continuity of the Second Empire: first, the persistence of the institutions already established in 1852, since, despite policy changes, these institutions underwent only minor alterations until 1867 and even 1869; second, the remarkable stability of the governing personnel until approximately the same dates. The same men, by and large, served as ministers, as members of the assemblies and often as prefects; finally, the same sovereign ruled throughout the period.

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Although heir to the Napoleonic legend, and thus the perpetuator of a family tradition, the new emperor had no intention of sharing his authority with the other members of his clan. He adamantly refused to allow his uncle Jérôme, the sixty-eight-year-old former King of Westphalia, to take part in the council of ministers. As for Jérôme's son, Prince Napoleon, his personality hardly inspired the emperor's trust, and the latter never

* J. M. Thompson, *Louis Napoleon and the Second Empire* (Oxford, 1954), p. 225. (Trans.)

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assigned him anything but ephemeral or minor tasks. After the emperor's marriage in 1853, Empress Eugénie, while not a visibly inconsequential figure, exerted only a weak direct influence on her august husband, except perhaps during the last years. As for Napoleon III's numerous mistresses, they never played a decisive political role.

Thus Napoleon was determined to exercise personal power – in every sense of the word – alone. He created a regime in which, in the last resort, every major domestic or foreign decision depended on him, and he intended to avail himself constantly of the right to modify the role of every institution and the responsibilities of every one of his followers.

The sphinx

One can see, therefore, how valuable it would be if one could define the emperor's personality, which proves to be almost impossible to grasp. 'How,' asks Theodore Zeldin, 'can one understand a man who spoke so little and wrote even less?'² Made secretive by his experience of conspiracies, he seems to have done his utmost to make the investigator's task a difficult one: he left very little indeed in the way of personal evidence, and in his official speeches it is hard to isolate what is pure propaganda. As he was not in the habit of speaking his mind openly and unambiguously, even to his close relations, his contemporaries have left only very superficial portraits of him, at first accompanied by the extravagant praise of courtiers, and soon after submerged by an onslaught of judgements warped by blind and often unfair hatred. One can retain from all this a series of images of the emperor (his official portrait by Flandrin, or a classic photograph taken by Nadar towards 1865), and a catalogue of his faults and qualities: it has been said that he was a sexual maniac, that he was curiously devoid of moral sense, that he had no respect for the law and was no doubt full of contempt for men; but much has also been made of his peculiar charm, his good-heartedness, his generous loyalty to his old friends and his absence of cruelty.

But what was his worth as a statesman? It is certain that the caricatured portrait drawn by his first biographers can no longer be accepted, even though it continues to exert a widespread influence on opinions concerning Napoleon and on discussions about him.³ Today, historians are generally agreed that Napoleon III deserves greater credit. Far from having been an insignificant puppet, he had the makings of an innovative politician far superior to the members of his entourage and to most of his opponents. He also comes across as a far more complex figure than has hitherto been imagined, since Adrien Dansette, speaking of the man whom Hugo saw as a tyrant, states that 'his ideology inclined him towards liberty'.⁴ Thus one can no longer be content with the cliché of an incredibly fortunate adventurer or a crowned mafioso.

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But it is not enough to rehabilitate Napoleon. It would be desirable to understand his personality in all its richness. However, the emperor still remains 'the enigma, the sphinx', as Zola put it in the special note that he compiled on Napoleon in the early days of the Third Republic, when he was working on his political novel *Son Excellence Eugène Rougon* – a note that is in a way a digest of opinions then prevailing.⁵

In order to solve this riddle, it is tempting to proceed by comparisons, to draw a parallel between the Second Empire and its master and other regimes and their leaders. Napoleon III then becomes an enlightened despot or a 'man of the twentieth century', in particular a precursor of fascism. Admittedly, one can discover a 'fascistic' aspect of him, and the resemblance is striking between his historical role and that of Mussolini:

Both men, in the wake of a social crisis that set proletarian expectations aflame in a wild and disorderly fashion, frightened the bourgeoisie and laid the groundwork for the exercise of personal rule, took advantage of the impotence of elected assemblies to acquire – with the extensive connivance of military, financial and certain aristocratic circles – the acquiescence of the majority in a *coup d'état* dressed up as a 'return to order'. Both men, in order to consolidate their usurped authority, were obliged to pursue a glamorous foreign policy and, at first, scored a series of military and diplomatic successes; they promoted industry and agriculture, thus augmenting private wealth; they showed themselves to be well disposed towards the Church and obtained its support; they surrounded themselves with a camarilla of regime profiteers, many of whom, incidentally, proved to be excellent ministers or administrators; both men, however, overestimated their strength in an ill-prepared and ill-waged war in which all their glory collapsed.⁶

The list of these comparisons is not closed, and surely there is also room on it for a 'Gaullian' Napoleon III?

Each of these comparisons can undoubtedly shed more light on a given aspect of this complex figure, but at the risk of producing a series of different and more or less distorted Napoleon IIIs. One must resist the temptation of facile analogies that in various ways fail to take into account the factors essential to an explanation and an understanding of the man, his environment and his times.

The antithesis of the 'men of stature'

Without adding yet another portrait to a perhaps overstocked gallery, let us try to put Napoleon III back in his historical context by drawing on contemporary accounts, particularly those left by the men who belonged to the élites, to the political class or to the intelligentsia – men who were often close to business circles, who were part of *la société*: at the time, they called themselves, in Thiers's words, the 'men of stature [*hommes considérables*] who spoke out for respectable folk [*honnêtes gens*]'. Leaving aside the opinions of those 'men of stature' who rallied to the

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regime and were impressed by Napoleon III primarily for the simple reason that he was the emperor, special attention will be paid here to the judgements of some of his opponents, not in order to side with them, but in order to perceive, through their criticisms, what separated them from Napoleon III, what they found objectionable about him – his personality, his methods and, finally, his ideas.

These men reacted, in the first place, to the gaps in the emperor's training. They regarded this old conspirator, who had long lived at odds with established authority, as a man with little education, in the classical sense that they gave to the word. Little did it matter that he possessed some technical knowledge in military affairs and was unusually well acquainted with scientific fields, foreign languages and even history, or that he had had an enriching series of experiences. These qualities did not really count, and this self-taught man would have had to be keener on the humanities, well versed in those ancients with whom one had to be conversant in order to possess the art of discourse, to partake of Truth, Good and Beauty – and to be admitted to the élite. Accordingly, Napoleon had little talent for parliamentary eloquence, he was bereft of an artistic sense (at least, he did not share the sometimes doubtful tastes of the 'men of stature') and he was never able to adopt good manners except superficially, so that his court, however brilliant, never truly had *le bon genre*. In short, as Rémusat observed in his memoirs, 'Louis Napoleon Bonaparte is weak in those areas where the well-bred appear as men of discernment'.⁷ Hence, Napoleon, who on his arrival in France in 1848 hardly knew *la société*, was never accepted by it unanimously. For many, he remained an intruder, always something of a parvenu. As he did not share their cast of mind, his adversaries accused him quite unfairly of lacking all intelligence. Already in 1848, Thiers was not alone in calling the prince 'a cretin'. And twenty years later, one seems to find an echo of this in the verdict of the republican Jules Favre, whom the emperor had just received following his election to the Académie Française: 'What an idiot!' Zola himself noted, somewhat contemptuously: 'An average intelligence for his day: the secret of his success. The naïve heir to a legend, he has not upset it by individuality.'

His success, therefore, could be explained only by an outrageous – because wholly undeserved – stroke of luck. Yet he regarded his good fortune as entirely natural, for he had always considered himself to be the providential man whose destiny it was to govern France. But this faith in his mission appeared to his adversaries as a ridiculous pretension: 'Idol and high priest. Heir to a misunderstood prophet, prophet himself, responsible to the people and to God, he leads us to progress and freedom by Napoleonic grace', Zola commented ironically.

The second object of criticism and astonishment was his bizarre and

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almost abnormal behaviour as a politician. He did not intervene in important discussions, and remained oddly 'silent, unforthcoming, impassive' (Zola). His silence seemed to betray a lack of frankness, compounded by the fact that he would later prepare his decisions in utmost secrecy, with a pathological taste for concealment. Basically, he was being reproached in this for being a solitary manoeuvrer who did not seek advice from the 'men of stature' and failed to trust them as they felt they deserved to be. His attitude can be explained by his past, but it also stemmed from his very keen awareness of the opposition that his policies would arouse. If he avoided discussion, it was because he felt incapable of dealing with contradiction, and also because he knew with certainty that if he showed his hand he would have to face numerous critics.

Furthermore, in practice, his politics seemed incoherent: he was 'constancy in hesitation', said Zola. At times he behaved like a perpetual hesitator, at times he displayed amazing stubbornness and an occasional capacity for surprisingly daring moves. The contradiction was only superficial: his hesitations and retreats were the actions of a man who, lacking exceptional authority, was apprehensive about coming to grips head on with obstacles too great for him. Such behaviour was part of his convoluted but flexible – indeed skilful – tactics, and would not imply that he had abandoned the prospect of implementing his schemes. Several contemporaries saw this clearly: 'He never regarded a postponement as a definitive abandonment' (Falloux); 'he takes short cuts, circumventing difficulties', but he remained 'in obstinate pursuit of his goal' (Zola). He did indeed hold fast to certain schemes and could for a long time give the impression of having shelved them; but they lingered on in his mind, and he revived them often when public opinion no longer expected it. These schemes were in the nature of intermittent obsessions. Most of his major decisions, at least until 1867, seemed to be the fulfilment of plans that he had worked out some twenty years earlier.

Well before coming to power, he had actually set out the guidelines of his policy in pamphlets such as the short but famous *Extinction du paupérisme* (1844) and the one entitled *Les Idées napoléoniennes* (1839). But many contemporaries refused to admit that these were indeed 'ideas'. Rather, they saw them as 'Napoleonic follies', 'pipe-dreams' (Rémusat), at best the 'reveries' (E. Ollivier) of a 'mediocre visionary' (Prévost-Paradol). And Zola said of him that he had 'more imagination and reverie than judgement. He tried to live the life dreamt of by the prisoner of Ham.' It is true that the emperor too was a romantic dreamer, but why this scorn for his ideas?

First, there are some obvious contradictions between certain of his views. For example, how could his concept of a strong, authoritarian government be reconciled with his professions of faith in liberal ideas (if

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one admits the sincerity of such statements)? In the words of Dansette, 'he proved unable to control his diversity: he failed to produce a synthesis of his heterogeneous aspirations', and he found himself torn between motives of various origins, for 'he remained all at once Napoleon's nephew, a child of exile, a man of 1848'. Furthermore, the formulation of his schemes remained somewhat vague and imprecise, and, once he became emperor, he never presented a full and systematic programme of his objectives. The reason was that this romantic cared little about putting in order and harmonizing his disparate aims, but also perhaps that he was afraid to provoke a concert of protest.

Indeed, those determined to see in the 'Napoleonic ideas' only an amalgam of insubstantial visions condemned them primarily because they could sense very well that these notions were radically at variance with their own views. Such critics regarded the emperor's ideas as monstrous because they were disturbing. Neither Thiers nor his friend Rémusat were wrong on this score, and their diagnoses, dating from the time when Louis Napoleon was only president of the Republic, show the deep cause of the durable opposition of a section of the élites to his schemes. Thiers observed, in a conversation with his mother-in-law, Madame Dosne, that Napoleon III's views were 'the opposite of those of the men of stature'. And Rémusat, in a rough comparison between the future Napoleon III and a Thiers or a Guizot, credited the latter pair with the ability to express with particular enthusiasm the ideas of 'respectable folk', to 'enact with . . . talent the ideas of others, sometimes of everyone else. Many others, less gifted and less brilliant, would have done what these men have done'; but the newcomer was an original with a 'gift. . . This idiot is endowed with a rare and powerful faculty, that of making his own mark in human affairs. . . [He] brings his imagination to bear on the affairs of the world and produces or modifies events according to his whim. . . [this] puts him in the ranks of historical figures.'⁸

'Napoleonic ideas'

These guiding ideas, which were uppermost in the emperor's mind and recognizable in his policies, indeed presented an undisputably original character, and proceeded from an inspiration more coherent than is generally thought. Napoleon III was neither a reactionary, nor an advocate of immobility. Without harbouring a 'social scheme', he felt the need for a move in the direction of progress. He perceived the changes in the world around him, and sought to provide an answer to the problems of his time. His aim was to 'bring the age of revolutions to a close by satisfying the legitimate needs of the people' (proclamation of 2 December 1851). And the same argument, expressed in the same words, was repeated in connection with the Italian problem in an 'unofficial'

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work published in 1859, *L'Empereur Napoléon et l'Italie*: 'revolution [must] be avoided by giving legitimate satisfaction to the needs of peoples'. This was at once an anti-revolutionary, ambitious and paternalistic notion, since ultimately it was he, the predestined leader, who was to be sole judge of the legitimacy of the needs of peoples (and not only of the French people). But Napoleon III was also inspired by progressivism, in his own manner (one could even speak of a left-wing inspiration, without defining the term too precisely), for his first concern was with the 'masses'. It is no coincidence that the latter word made its appearance in the language of politics at about this time. Madame Dosne had already remarked, when Napoleon was only president of the Republic, that 'his hobby-horse is the people' – a concern that was the main source of conflict between him and the friends of Thiers. One should not, therefore, regard his attitude as a mere ploy to avert all revolutionary peril. The emperor sincerely believed that the people were his chief support, and his generosity consistently led him to care about the fate of the masses and to try to ensure their happiness.

Accordingly, on the international level, he strove to deprive revolutionary movements of the mobilizing theme of nationhood, and, in the name of the right of peoples to self-determination, he sought to build a Europe of nation-states. This reshaping of the map of Europe, which ran counter to the principle of monarchic legitimacy, could naturally lead to conflict and so be unpopular in business circles, which were strongly attached to peace; but the policy would satisfy the French people's pride, or at least the chauvinism of the urban masses, who still regarded their country as *la Grande Nation*. Were they not thus to obtain the twofold satisfaction of a revenge for the shameful treaties of 1815 – which simultaneously humiliated France and toppled the Napoleonic dynasty a first time – and a new promotion to the rank of guide for other peoples? The chief point of impact of this policy was Italy, for which Louis Napoleon had always wanted to 'do something'. Finally, this policy was not confined to Europe. Its extension to central America (Nicaragua, Mexico) had been planned for a long time, and the policy was also intended to apply to the colonial sphere. It is symptomatic that as early as November 1852 Louis Napoleon had wanted to take on, at the same time as the title of emperor of the French, that of king of Algeria – a portent of what was later called the 'Arab kingdom' policy.

In the economic and social spheres, it would be vain to try to 'classify' the emperor, to make him the disciple of any given school. He appears in turn as a man influenced by English liberals, as a 'Saint-Simonian' Caesar, or at times as a socialist. He was above all an eclectic who borrowed from every doctrine whatever in his view could better the lot of the people. For Napoleon III, their fate was contingent upon material progress, and, in order to ensure the latter, he placed his trust above all in