Introduction

This is a book about a major historical figure, Napoleon III, and about a
political regime – the French Second Empire. It is a book both about great
figures in history and the contexts, the political institutions and social
networks, within which they were located. It is a study of the exercise
of power, of the institutions of the state and the mechanisms through
which these interacted with the enveloping society. Part I examines the
circumstances which made it possible for Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte to
secure election as president of the Republic and subsequently to launch
a *coup d'état*, as the prelude to an Imperial restoration. Historians have
frequently presented this Second Empire as a political drama in two acts
– authoritarian and liberal – focusing on high politics and the character
of Napoleon III.[1] The regime's ignoble origins in a *coup d'état* and the
tragedy of its final ignominious collapse in the war of 1870 have loomed
large. At first the dominant trend, as republicans struggled to secure the
Third Republic, was one of bitter hostility. The combination of a carefully
researched political narrative with moral indignation – the construction
of the 'black' legend – was exemplified by Eugène Ténot's studies of
the *coup d'état*, published even before the empire had disappeared. By
the 1930s and 1940s the Second Empire was described as a precursor
of fascism. However, more positive assessments were also beginning to
appear. Thus, from the inter-war years of the twentieth century and
during the period of reconstruction which followed the devastation of
the Second World War, historians' interests shifted to reflect a concern
with French 'backwardness' and 'stagnation'. They looked for inspiration
to the Imperial regime's 'technocratic' achievements and particularly
the reconstruction of Paris, the creation of a modern transportation
infrastructure, and, more broadly, the establishment of the conditions
for rapid economic growth. This 'revisionism' culminated in 1990 in

[1] On the historiography see S. Campbell, *The Second Empire Revisited. A Study in French Historiography*
(London 1978).

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the publication of *Louis-Napoléon le Grand* written by the conservative
politician Philippe Séguin, a work inspired by the search for a populist
politics capable of attracting disillusioned voters from both the far right
Front National and the socialist and communist left. On 13 June 1990
Séguin, at the inauguration of the Place Napoléon III in Paris and flanked
by Jacques Chirac – then the city's mayor – and the Prince Napoleon,
insisted that the much-disparaged Emperor had indeed been a great
head of state.[2]

Narrative political history has served as an important means of under-
standing the period. Historians have repeatedly described the regime's
growing political difficulties and the exhaustion and increasing irreso-
lution of the Emperor. The seemingly inexorable rise of opposition has
appeared to offer a clear linear vision of inevitable collapse. This perspec-
tive, however, underestimates the very real problems of regime transition
once its leading figure had taken the decision to adapt to changing po-
litical circumstances through liberalisation. Moreover, whilst the study
of political leadership is undoubtedly of crucial importance, so too are
questions about the nature of social and political systems. Thus a more
thematic, analytical approach also has its attractions. If the objectives
political leaders set for themselves need to be identified, so also does
the context within which they operate. Social structures and relation-
ships, both formal and informal, regulate the ways in which political
authority can be exercised, and influence the creation of a more dif-
fuse political culture. Various factors serve to reinforce or to restrict the
authority of governments. Our knowledge of the period has been en-
larged considerably by social historians working at the level of the com-
munity and region. The 'top-down' vision associated with a traditional
political history has been neatly supplemented by 'bottom-up' perspec-
tives much more concerned with the experience of the rural and urban
masses.

Governmental effectiveness depends in part on institutional design but
additionally on personal and political relationships, on economic and so-
cial circumstances, and frequently on the impact of largely uncontrollable
external events. It should be borne in mind also that governments are
far from being unitary enterprises, but are frequently riven by internal
rivalries which affect their capacity to define and achieve their objectives.
The debate on the nature of the Second Empire, and indeed on the state
in general, continues to be informed by the contribution of Karl Marx.

[2] R. Gildea, *The Past in French History* (London 1994), pp. 88–9.

In *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* he contended that 'the executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie'. It was the product of class rule at a particular stage of social development. His stress on the repressive role of the state was supplemented by an insistence on the state's employment of religion and patriotism, and on its recourse to war, as a means of reinforcing its position – an emphasis foreshadowing Gramsci's notion of hegemony. Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte's seizure of power caused problems for Marx.[3] It represented an apparent renunciation of power by the 'ruling classes' and a step back from bourgeois liberalism to absolute monarchy, to a situation in which 'the executive power with a host of officials numbering half a million, besides an army of another half a million, [an] appalling parasitic body ... enmeshes the body of French society like a net and chokes all its pores.'[4] The state had apparently achieved autonomy. However, this contradiction could be resolved by stressing that the state continued to favour the interests of some social groups rather than others. It remained the guarantor of the established social order. Marx assumed that in the longer term state policy had to remain compatible with the interests of economically and socially powerful interest groups and particularly of those from which ministers, bureaucrats, and army officers were recruited.[5] Part II will shed light on these issues by focusing on the machinery of state, on the personnel involved, on policy formulation and upon its impact. Its primary concern will be with state–society relations but viewed from the perspective of the state. Its concerns will include some of the central issues of socio-political history including the identity of those individuals and social groups enjoying privileged access to the state apparatus. After all, to a large extent 'the action of the state as an institution depends ... on the people who direct it.'[6] The first chapter will examine the institutions of the Second Empire and the roles of the Emperor himself, of his courtiers, ministers, and officials. Succeeding chapters will consider the practical workings of the machinery of government in four crucial areas – electoral management; the preservation of public order; the establishment of 'moral order;' and the creation of the conditions for socio-economic modernisation and public prosperity. They will consider the means by which state agencies sought to

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[3] A. Gilbert, *Marx's Politics* (Oxford 1981), pp. 220f.

[4] K, Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* in *Marx-Engels Selected Works*, I (Moscow 1962), p. 284.

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 340–1.

[6] P. Birnbaum, *The Heights of Power. An Essay on the Power Elite in France* (London 1982), p. 1.

legitimise their authority and how effective they were in penetrating societies combining *archaïsme et modernité* (Corbin) and in achieving their goals.

Awareness of context is all important. The rulers of a nineteenth-century authoritarian state could deal harshly with opponents, but were neither willing nor able to engage in the forms of extreme and sustained brutality which were employed to ensure compliance during the twentieth century. Whilst those who had shared political power during the Restoration and July Monarchy might be willing to accept a temporary dictatorship at a time of extreme crisis, in the fashion of the Roman Republic with whose history these classically educated elites were so familiar, in the longer term they would favour a return to 'normal' and a renewed fragmentation of political power. In effect the boundaries to state action were defined partly by power centres – social groups, political alliances, institutional bodies – capable of political organisation. Stability depended upon accommodating their special interests. As a result of the introduction of manhood suffrage, greater attention than hitherto also had to be given to the concerns of socially subordinate groups, to the small businessmen, professionals, peasants, and workers, all increasingly anxious to influence state policy. Indeed, one of the central questions to be considered will be the degree to which these various groups might have lost or benefited from changes in the (unequal) balance of power. Another concern will be the ways in which state power impinged upon the various groups and how they perceived its diverse activities – as class oppression or as the benign exercise of authority. How would people react, not only to governmental activity, but also to social change on a previously unimagined scale? Whilst continuities with the past will need to be stressed, contemporaries could hardly fail to be aware of the tearing down and reconstruction of city centres, of the railway lines and telegraph wires extending their tentacles across the landscape, affecting the capacity of the government machine to penetrate society, and creating new opportunities for enrichment albeit within a far more competitive environment. More than ever before people were on the move in search of a better life. What were the relationships between economic and social change, the 'formal' establishment of manhood suffrage, and the evolution of local and national political cultures? Certainly historically based expectations conditioned individual political behaviour to a large degree. The Second Empire is of particular interest, however, because in a relatively short time radical changes in economic structures and political institutions forced people to adapt their life strategies.

The primary responsibility of every political regime is the mainte-
nance of order. However, definitions of what constitutes 'order' and the
systems constructed and methods employed to achieve this objective will
vary both between regimes and, in the case of the same regime, over time,
as situations and personnel change. Political repression can be regarded
as a 'normal' feature of governmental activity although its intensity and
form vary with both perceptions of the threats posed as well as the ca-
pacity of the administration to conduct 'police' measures. The 1848
Revolution led to increasingly intense counter-revolutionary repression.
Most regimes would, however, probably prefer to exercise power through
consensus-inducing forms of social control with a clearly defined moral
and legal basis. This explains the importance of securing cultural hege-
mony through the religious or educational institutions which provide
means of socialisation, designed to induce conformity to essentially con-
servative norms. In this context, both the criteria employed for defining
potential threats and ensuing policy decisions – as between repression or
concession – tell us a great deal about a regime and its relationships with
the wider society. During the Second Empire the state also assumed a
far more substantial economic role than its predecessors. The Emperor
was determined to promote modernisation along the lines suggested by
the British model. How did this perceived need to promote economic
development affect the regime's agenda?

Another distinctive feature of the regime was its capacity for adapta-
tion. Inevitably, in a society which remained profoundly inegalitarian,
the scope for political mobilisation varied considerably. The Emperor's
freedom of action varied to an important degree according to the will-
ingness of elites to accept his dominant position. Efforts to reinforce his
authority and appeal over their heads to the 'sovereign people,' employ-
ing such devices as the plebiscite and electoral manipulation, enjoyed
only limited success. As a result some degree of agreement with, as well
as substantial cohesion within the political elite, would appear to be a
prerequisite for effective state action. Unlike his predecessors, Napoleon
III was prepared to contemplate adapting to circumstances. Liberalisa-
tion and the institutionalisation of protest could be seen as representing
either the creation of a slippery slope towards regime collapse, or else an
effective method of moderating opposition and of more effectively ensur-
ing long-term stability. The transition from an authoritarian to a liberal
regime was to be fraught with difficulties. To what extent did it involve
concessions freely made, and to what extent was it a response to growing
pressure and the rise of opposition? To what extent did liberalisation

occur as the result of competition for power between rival elite groups and to what extent did it represent a challenge, from below, to the established social order? These questions will be at the heart of Part II and also of Part III, which concentrates on the rise of opposition. The final section (Part IV) will bring some of these threads together by means of an analysis of the interaction between internal and external politics and of the causes of military defeat and the regime's rapid collapse.

The sources for this book are many and varied, and all of them have their shortcomings. An effort has been made to consult as wide a range of sources as possible, including private papers, memoirs, administrative reports, official and private economic and social enquiries, and the newspaper press. A massive amount of information was gathered by more or less zealous and competent officials operating within the various administrative hierarchies (especially those reporting to the Ministers of the Interior, Justice, and War). Complaints about the quality of reports were frequent. There was especial concern about the unwillingness of those at the bottom of the hierarchy – mayors, justices of the peace, and gendarmes – to spare the time and effort. As always, the directly expressed views of the masses are greatly under-represented. Much of the extant information on these groups is derived from the observations of members of other social groups and is distorted inevitably by their particular concerns and prejudices. Reporters from the social elites tended to focus in particular on novelty and whatever appeared to be threatening to their interests. Government officials frequently told their superiors what it was presumed these wanted to hear, in the hope of enhancing their own career prospects. The quality of reporting obviously varied according to the skills and commitment of individual reporters. Experience suggests that the recruitment, training, and professional concerns of the judicial administration resulted in more objective and frequently more comprehensive reports than those emanating from the parallel prefectoral hierarchy. If this book has a claim on the reader, it will be based on the exceptionally wide range of primary and secondary sources employed – in critical fashion – as well as on the complex of questions raised. I hope that it adds up to a well-informed and searching study of the historical role of the Emperor Napoleon III, of the workings of the French state, and of the inter-relationships between state and society during an important period of political and social 'modernisation'.

PART I

The rise of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte

CHAPTER I

President of the Republic

MID-CENTURY CRISIS

In the preface to *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte*, Karl
Marx described his purpose as being to 'demonstrate how the class
struggle in France created circumstances and relationships that made
it possible for a grotesque mediocrity to play a hero's part'. Alexis de
Tocqueville similarly insisted that 'a dwarf on the summit of a great
wave is able to scale a high cliff which a giant placed on dry ground at
the base would not be able to climb'. The 'great wave' was the intense
mid-century crisis – economic, social, and political – lasting from 1845
until 1852, and marked by widespread popular protest, revolution, civil
war, and the prospect (or threat) of a démocrate-socialiste electoral vic-
tory in 1852. These were the circumstances – widespread deprivation
and misery combined with disappointed expectations and social fear –
that made it possible for the nephew of Napoleon I to exploit the potency
of the Bonapartist legend – 'this deplorable prestige of a name' which,
according to the exiled republican Victor Schoelcher, 'entirely made the
incredible fortune of M. Bonaparte'[1] – by ensuring that large sections of
the population were tempted to look for a 'saviour'.

At the middle point of the nineteenth century France might be defined
as a transition society. Substantial continuities with the past survived. The
economy remained predominantly agrarian. Within the manufacturing
sector most workers were employed, using hand tools, in small-scale en-
terprise. However, there were clear signs of structural change, most no-
tably with the development of growth 'poles' characterised by advanced,
large-scale industrialisation and, from the 1830s to 1840s, the broader
development of an industrial economy as coal and steam power came

[1] Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, p. 244; A. de Tocqueville, letter to Beaumont, 29 Jan. 1851 in *Oeuvres
complètes* (Paris 1959), vol. VIII, p. 369; V. Schoelcher, *Histoire des crimes du deux d' ecembre* (London
1852), p. 402.

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to replace wood and water as the primary sources of energy and power,
and the first railways were added to the developing road and waterway
networks. Appreciating that this was a world in flux is vital to an under-
standing of the complex and intense nature of the economic difficulties,
which from 1845 to 1847 combined the features of a traditional sub-
sistence crisis with those of over-production/under-consumption and
loss of confidence in financial markets more typical of an industrial
society, as well as the fears and aspirations which informed political
activity.[2]

To most informed observers the July Monarchy, created by the 1830
Revolution, had seemed secure. The various oppositions, ranging from
the Legitimist supporters of another Bourbon restoration on the right, to
the republicans on the left, were weak and divided. The regime's lead-
ing personalities insisted on the finality of 1830. Personalities were all
important in the absence of a stable party system. Alexis de Tocqueville
likened the July Monarchy to an 'industrial company all of whose op-
erations are designed to benefit the shareholders'.[3] The historian A.-J.
Tudesq has defined a social elite, of men with national power, made up of
grands notables each paying over 1,000f a year in direct taxes (in 1840) and
including landowners (65.3%); bureaucrats (11.7%); liberal professions
(5.9%); and businessmen (15.9%).[4] These groups shared similar lifestyles
and belonged to the same or contiguous social networks. In whatever way
they are categorised, most members of this social elite possessed land as a
source of both income and status, had received a similar classical educa-
tion and a grounding in the law, and had served the state at some stage in
their lives. Virtually all were anxious to share in lucrative new investment
opportunities. Candidates for election to the Chamber of Deputies were
wealthy – paying at least 500f in taxes, whilst voters, contributing 200f,
were at least moderately well off. There were roughly 250,000 of them
by 1846. If debate in the cities with their large electorates was politicised,
in rural areas a small electorate resulted in highly personalised electoral
campaigns dominated by the competition for power and status between
a few wealthy families and their clienteles.[5] This was an elite possessing
power through control of the institutions of state, and by means of the

[2] R. Price, *An Economic History of Modern France, c. 1730–1914* (London 1981) and *A Social History
   of Nineteenth Century France* (London 1987), ch. 1.
[3] A. de Tocqueville, *Souvenirs* (Paris 1964), p. 79.
[4] A.-J. Tudesq, *Les grands notables en France (1840–49): Etude historique d'une psychologie sociale* (Paris
   1964), I, p. 429.
[5] *Ibid* p. 365f; T. D. Beck, *French Legislators* (Berkeley, Calif. 1974), p. 127.

local social and economic power conferred by the ownership of prop-
erty and control of access to employment and scarce resources. They
supported a regime which had appeared fully committed to maintaining
social order and the conditions for continuing prosperity.

The regime's most articulate critics were drawn from the ranks of the
so-called 'dynastic' opposition. Although they proclaimed their loyalty
to their king, opposition politicians returned to the language of 1789 to
attack the dominant *aristocratie bourgeoise*. Former ministers, like Adolphe
Thiers, condemned the corruption of the parliamentary process through
the abuse of government influence in elections and, particularly following
the opposition's dismal failure in 1846, sought to change the rules of the
electoral game through franchise reform. The objective was certainly not
to enfranchise the masses which, liberal politicians agreed, would lead to
anarchy, but rather the wider enfranchisement of the educated, property-
owning middle classes. The government was associated with scandals in
high places, electoral corruption, and the use of patronage to control
deputies. It was blamed for the economic crisis and for the widespread
popular protest, which suggested that the authorities were unable to
safeguard public order. The corrosive impact of competition for power
amongst the landowners, financiers, senior civil servants, and wealthy
professionals who made up the political elite was thus reinforced by the
concerns of businessmen faced with bankruptcy, workers threatened with
unemployment, and the mass of urban and rural consumers faced with
the spiralling cost of food. The image of prosperity and order cultivated
by the July Monarchy was shattered. Political agitation multiplied.[6]

It would culminate on 22–24 February 1848 in a demonstration in
Paris which, as a result of ineffective government crisis management and
military incompetence, turned into an insurrection and finally a revo-
lution with the establishment of a Second Republic. To their own great
surprise a small group of republicans had been able to take advantage of
governmental collapse and to assume power. It was then that their prob-
lems really began. The sense of expectancy amongst the crowds in Paris
ensured that even these cautious men felt bound to take such decisive
steps as the introduction of manhood suffrage, conceived of as 'universal'
because of contemporary assumptions that by their nature women were
unsuited to roles in public life and were thus best represented by their

[6] H. Collingham, *The July Monarchy: A Political History of France* (London 1988), pp. 398–402;
J. Gilmore, *La République clandestine* (Paris 1992), pp. 302–15.