Abstract

This chapter is a study of the major historiographical assessments of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte and the Second Empire. It begins with an analysis of the original 'Black Legend', first popularised by Victor Hugo who viewed Louis-Napoleon as a retrograde step, a dictatorial anomaly in the course of historical progress. The study looks at the development of this ‘Black Legend’ in nineteenth-century France, Britain and Germany before seeking to understand subsequent revisionism that focused on the economic policy, personality and ideology of Louis-Napoleon. It concludes with an overview of new scholarly interest in Louis-Napoleon and the Second Empire as a fundamental part of the histories of French imperialism and democratic practice.

From dictator to democrat? The ‘Black Legend’ of Louis-Napoleon and subsequent historical revisionism

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Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, nephew of the ‘great’ Napoleon, leader of two failed coup attempts, former prisoner and exile, returned to France as an elected member of the Constituent Assembly following the 1848 Revolution. His landslide victory in the Presidential election later that year inspired many journalistic works that attempted to frame Louis-Napoleon as, variously, a puppet of conservative interests, a utopian socialist, a corrupt charlatan, a fool, a dangerous demagogue, a defender of order in the face of ‘Red Terror’, or a committed patriot seeking build upon his

uncle's legacy. This is not an exhaustive list; President Louis-Napoleon posed as, and was initially represented as, all things to all men, which was important as virtually all men had been granted the right to vote in 1848.

On 2 December 1851, the President led a successful coup d'état and a year later announced the replacement of the Second Republic with a Second Bonapartist Empire, which ultimately collapsed during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. He had been the first President elected by universal male suffrage and instituted an authoritarian regime which nonetheless retained voting rights and underwent economic and political liberalisation over time. These events forced contemporaries to debate the relationship between democracy and dictatorship, question the personality and ideology of Louis-Napoleon and locate the proper place of the Second Republic and Empire in French history. Historians remain interested in Louis-Napoleon's rise and rule for what it says about the potential for mass democracy to produce and empower such figures, and where such regimes fit in the narrative of 'modern' history.

The 'Black Legend' in nineteenth-century France

Karl Marx's writings on France and Louis-Napoleon were cited frequently in the twentieth century as prophetic analyses that depicted the French leader as a lifeless caricature whose very existence marked a parodic repetition of history (Marx 1937, 1969). However, he was little read at the time. For the mid-nineteenth century public, it was the works of Victor Hugo, produced in the wake of the coup d'état, that provided the blueprint for the 'Black Legend' of Louis-Napoleon: a corrupt, brutal dictator with no laudable qualities whose very existence was an insult to his great

uncle and the glories of revolutionary France (Hugo 1885, 1888, 1909). For Hugo, the original sin of the Second Empire was the coup. This was a crime against the Constitution that Louis-Napoleon had sworn to protect and a crime against a vision of historical progress that should lead inevitably to a liberal, republican settlement: it represented a blockage that would have to be overwhelmed by a torrent of revolution.

Hugo depicted Louis-Napoleon's actions and rule as an anomaly, his barbarism marking him out as a 'man of another age' (Hugo 1909, 27). Louis-Napoleon was subjected to a series of attacks upon his personality and appearance that would be repeated as fact in scholarship for a century afterwards: he was weak, uninspiring, dull-eyed with a small forehead and large nose, slow moving and thinking, possessing none of his uncle's traits of genius or heroism; he was timid and indecisive, yet cunning and vicious. Hugo likened him to all kinds of animals, from a hyena to a parrot, but perhaps most significant was the racist comparison of Louis-Napoleon to a host of non-European despots, including the frequently caricatured Faustin Soulouque of Haiti, to symbolise the allegedly lower moral, racial and civilisational scale this Bonaparte operated on.

How did such a man manage to stem the flow of progressive history? Here Hugo established the 'Black Legend' as a theory of causation: an unholy alliance opposed to modernity united behind Louis-Napoleon. His voters were drawn from the stupid, degenerate and dangerous sections of society: ignorant peasants, hypocritical Catholics, corrupt office holders and selfish stockholders. They fell for scaremongering about the 'Reds' and looked to Louis-Napoleon as a saviour of

society out of greed and idiocy. Hugo also indulged in anti-Semitic attacks upon the bankers who financed Louis-Napoleon's bribery of the French people. This combination of political prophecy, historical causation and character assassination shaped subsequent republican analyses of Louis-Napoleon's rise and regime. It itemised the crimes committed, offered hope of future retribution, underlined the righteousness of opposition and, most importantly, just as the Second Empire was being established, Hugo's work framed it as an absurdity that God and the flow of modern history (for they were one and the same in Hugo's writings) would sweep away in due course.

This 'Black Legend' was further developed during the more liberalised atmosphere of the mid-to-late 1860s. Future Prime Minister of the Third Republic, Jules Ferry, found fame denouncing the Prefect of Paris, Georges-Eugène Haussmann, for extensive corruption. This charge drew upon a key theme of Hugo's attacks upon the decadent, criminal associates of Louis-Napoleon. Another figure who would go on to play a significant role in the Third Republic, Leon Gambetta, launched his political career in 1869 with a legal defence of those who sought to commemorate the death of Victor Baudin – a republican martyr of the coup, named directly in Hugo's work (Hugo 1888, 195).

The 1860s saw the rise of a new generation of scholars, including Eugène Ténot and Taxile Delord, whose antipathies provided a new academic backbone for the 'Black Legend', which was subsequently spread after 1870 with government support via the Société d'Instruction Républicaine (Hazareesingh 1999). This 'tyranny of republicans' (Sowerwine 2019, 214) produced teleological works of history for the

masses that drew a direct line from Louis-Napoleon's coup in 1851 to defeat in 1870. Thus Victor Hugo's splenetic vision became enshrined in academic scholarship and the 'popular imagination' (Guérard 1955, 3) of France during the Third Republic.

British and German responses

In Britain and Germany, the French republican 'Black Legend' had less purchase. Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston lost his job for conveying British approval of the coup without consulting the Queen, but for him and his successors, notably the 3rd Earl of Malmesbury, the Second Republic's demise and replacement with a Bonapartist regime offered hope for an improved trading relationship and greater diplomatic cooperation. Pragmatic acceptance did not amount to admiration for Louis-Napoleon, but many British commentators looking back on the revolutionary upheaval of the past few years deemed authoritarian measures to be necessary. Writers like Walter Bagehot (1966) defended the installation of a French Caesar in this manner as an essential measure for a populace that was incapable of the kind of political maturity the British apparently displayed.

Other voices, most notably in *The Times* and *Punch*, concurred with this low opinion of the French but were steadfast in their denunciation of Louis-Napoleon as a demagogue who wielded universal male suffrage as a weapon against constitutional government. He was, in their view, a dangerous dictator who displayed no conservative or liberal inclinations, only a deeply held ambition for personal gain (Parry 2001). At times these charged views aligned with the French 'Black Legend', as when A.W. Kinglake devoted an entire chapter of his epic *The Invasion of the Crimea* to rehashing and expanding upon the claims of French republicans, often

without evidence (1877). Indeed, Kinglake's work established an English-language 'Black Legend', presenting Louis-Napoleon as an Asiatic despot who fabricated the Crimean War to divide England from Russia.

However, the influence of these attacks was blunted in Britain by the likes of Bagehot and Blanchard Jerrold, whose multi-volume *Life of Napoleon III* (1874-1882) sought to correct the 'disastrous' influence of Kinglake on perceptions of the Second Empire. Nevertheless, Louis-Napoleon's style of government was used more often than not as a warning in Britain. After the fall of the Second Empire, prominent liberal opponents of Benjamin Disraeli labelled his 'new imperialism' and patriotic appeals to the newly enfranchised as Caesarist in nature, recalling the unprincipled demagoguery of the French Emperor (Parry 2001). As with Hugo's attacks, anti-Semitism was evident in these charges against Disraeli (Davis 1996).

In the German states, writings on Louis-Napoleon took a more conceptual approach. An early French analysis, Auguste Romieu's *L'Ère des Césars*, was translated into German before the coup, urging an authoritarian solution to problems inherent in industrialising, democratising societies. The following year, Constantin Frantz authored one of the most influential German-language analyses of modern Caesarism. It mirrored Romieu's and many British assessments by concluding that the executive bypassing of 'liberal parliamentary vacillation' in 1851 was necessary for France (McDaniel 2018, 320). However, this was presented as a cautionary tale for Germans who sought to institute mass suffrage and liberal constitutions themselves, lest they invoke similarly dictatorial figures.

The rise of Otto von Bismarck sparked further interest amongst German writers who analysed the propensity for certain conditions to give rise to modern Caesars. Many recognised that whilst Louis-Napoleon represented ‘corruption in every shape and form’ (Baehr 2017, 83), he was a very modern tyrant who thrived in the political and social turmoil of the mid-nineteenth century. Authors recognised that Louis-Napoleon and his ilk were able to promise stability amidst the collapse of monarchies and the centralising, alienating forces of nationalism and democracy.

Pioneering historians and sociologists, such as Friedrich Naumann, Friedrich Meinecke, Heinrich von Treitschke and Max Weber, used the example of Louis-Napoleon to offer structural explanations for a German Caesarism and imperialism that they explicitly condemned (Mitchell 1977). They broadly agreed with Frantz’s analysis and English-language accounts that a plebiscitary dictator was sadly necessary for the French, but bemoaned the inability of Germany to avoid what Weber dubbed ‘bad Caesarism’ (Baehr 2017, 46). Suggestions of dictatorial inevitability in the age of mass democracy were challenged by reference to the US and UK, who seemingly harnessed the demagogic, irrational power of the voters and preserved liberalism within a parliamentary system.

Louis-Napoleon as a proto-fascist

In the 1930s, Frantz’s writings were reprinted and reclaimed by the Nazi Party as a prophetic defence of the need to ditch parliaments to craft a strong empire (McDaniel 2018). The aim of this Nazi distortion of Frantz’s thesis was to transform Louis-Napoleon into a proto-fascist. This was paralleled by some American and British historians and journalists, making the same claims as a warning from history

(Rosenfeld 2018). The need to find antecedents for the rise of Mussolini and Hitler was strong, and the ultimate demise of Louis-Napoleon offered comfort to enemies of fascism before 1945 and a degree of confirmation bias immediately afterwards.

None were more explicit or outspoken in making this connection than J. Salwyn Schapiro who combined traditions of criticism from France, Britain and Germany to produce the academic nadir of 'Black Legend' scholarship (Schapiro 1949). French republican depictions of Louis-Napoleon as a bloodthirsty tyrant, German writings on modern Caesarism and British attacks upon the Second Empire's authoritarianism served to demonstrate how Louis-Napoleon's rise, like that of fascist leaders, was dependent upon mass democracy, manipulated by propaganda and state-organised censorship. In short, for Schapiro, the Second Empire provided a 'historic preview of the fascist state' (1949, ix).

It was at this point that Marx's now-famous analysis entered wider circulation. Schapiro used the language of Marx to dismiss Louis-Napoleon as 'a caricature of the great Napoleon' (1949, 316) and combined this with a structural explanation for his rise via manipulative offerings of socialistic protections to the masses while promising, with support from the 'moneyed class', to protect the nation from the ravages of actual socialism (1949, 317). Only from this perspective can we understand the assertion, otherwise ahistorical and without merit, that Louis-Napoleon was a 'national socialist' (Hoffman 1943, 117).

In France, explicit accusations of proto-fascism were less common. René Rémond's analysis (1969) placed Bonapartism firmly on the political 'Right' but any significant

development of ‘fascism’ in France was ascribed to foreign ideas imported long after Louis-Napoleon’s death. This absolution of a French role in fascism’s origins was challenged by Zeev Sternhell (1987), but there remain no legitimate historical reasons to label Louis-Napoleon a proto-fascist in any meaningful sense.

The worst excesses of ‘Black Legend’ scholarship ceased to have a significant impact on scholarship soon after 1945. Instead, there was a sustained effort at revising these narratives and reintegrating Louis-Napoleon and his Empire into a progressive, modernising narrative of French history rather than an anomaly, interlude or fascist prelude.

Revisionism

Sympathetic accounts of Louis-Napoleon’s rise, rule and even legacy had been written since the 1850s but struggled to gain leverage in unsympathetic contexts. Pride of place amongst these went to Louis-Napoleon’s own writings. It became a trope to label him a riddle, a sphinx, or a ‘man of mystery’ (Taylor 1963, 115) but few other nineteenth-century rulers published more of their ideas (Bonaparte 1869). The Emperor and several of his major collaborators, such as Charlemagne de Maupas and Duc de Morny, produced works attempting to explain and excuse the and yet it was Hugo and Marx that endured in the scholarly and popular imagination of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Similarly, political figures such as Emile Ollivier (1895-1918) wrote extensively on the liberal transformation of the Second Empire, defending its reforms and foreign policy decisions. Their views were echoed by writers in Britain such as Jerrold, Bagehot

and Albert Vandam (1897) who praised the free-trading instincts of the Emperor, his support for national self-determination and even his political insight and trustworthiness. However, the tone of wider scholarship only began to change in the first half of the twentieth century as historians utilised first-hand accounts to demonstrate that the Emperor had, in fact, enjoyed considerable popular support and was broadly motivated by a desire to enhance the welfare of the masses.

The most influential and explicit in their revisionist aims were F. A. Simpson and Albert Guérard. Simpson (1923) attempted to demonstrate the political and economic modernity displayed by the Emperor and his regime. Guérard focused his works on the simple idea that Louis-Napoleon was not the 'sinister caricature' (1955, 3) of legend. In Guérard's view, 80 years of misinformation had served to hide or completely misrepresent some basic facts. There was a contemporary urgency in understanding the place of Louis-Napoleon at the gateway to a modern era that began with agrarian aristocracies and ended with industrial mass democracies. For Guérard, Louis-Napoleon was at the heart of it all, the very opposite of the aberration he had been depicted as for so long.

Revisionist historians who followed Simpson and Guérard sought to integrate Louis-Napoleon and the Second Empire into a progressive narrative, no longer as merely enemies of republicanism, democracy, liberalism and socialism. Post-war discussion of the collapse of the Third Republic in 1940, and the 1958 replacement of the Fourth Republic with the Gaullist Fifth Republic (in circumstances very like a coup d'état) provided a clear impetus for revisiting some of the assumptions around the rise of Louis-Napoleon. There could be little doubt that De Gaulle and his regime

were part of a narrative of French modernisation and whilst he could be accused of many things, De Gaulle was not a fascist. As T.A.B. Corley noted at the time: 'the parallels between the General and the Emperor are striking' (1961, x). The areas most impacted by this revisionism were the economic transformations of the Second Empire, Louis-Napoleon's personality, and his political ideology, including foreign policy where the heaviest and most sustained attacks of the past 80 years had been focused.

The economic history of Empire, revised

Grudging acceptance that the Second Empire brought economic and social benefits had long been tempered by the view that these came at the expense of repression or were overshadowed by corruption.

After 1945, in an age of planned industrial democracies, the Second Empire's marshalling of finance capital and state power to boost industrial output, infrastructure and trade volumes could be easily reimagined as a forerunner of social-democratic economics. In the context of France's post-war *Trente Glorieuses*, the economic development of the 1850s and 60s was credited to decisions taken by the regime, in particular expansion of credit, construction of railway, port and road networks as well as investments in urban infrastructure and agricultural modernisation (Caron 1979). Furthermore, the Second Empire engaged in state interventionism where market individualism was judged to have failed and recognised trade unions. In this way, as a bourgeois regime that demonstrated prescient economic and social welfare policies, the Second Empire found a place in socialist-inflected narratives of French modernisation (Magraw 1983).

For many revisionists, the most stark evidence of the regime's economic modernity was the 'Haussmannisation' of Paris; a series of state-backed subsidies and loan schemes which enabled the Prefect Haussmann to level and rebuild swathes of the capital. David H. Pinkney's influential work underlined the astonishing costs of this endeavour but also judged it to be a 'large item of credit' (1958, 211) in the Empire's win/loss column. Pinkney viewed 'Haussmannisation' as evidence of Louis-Napoleon's creativity and judged accusations of rampant corruption to have been given too much credence by scholars raised on the 'Black Legend'. Decades of building projects brought cleaner water, street lighting, railway stations, grand boulevards and parks lined with new apartment buildings, department stores, theatres, the Paris Opera, the modernisation of the central markets of Les Halles, and the expansion of the Louvre, along with the completion of Eugène Viollet-le-Duc's Notre Dame renovations. This led revisionist scholars to credit Louis-Napoleon for laying the foundations of Paris's cultural dominance in the second half of the century, placing the Second Empire at the core of modern French history.

Louis-Napoleon, revised

As part of this historiographical trend there was a clear move to relativise and reject some of the more extreme character assassinations of Louis-Napoleon that had flourished since 1848. A raft of biographical studies were produced that actively challenged the image of him as a cold, weak, vengeful and tyrannical figure. Accounts indicated that Louis-Napoleon was generally well-liked by those who knew him personally and this was supported by wider evidence of 'softness, a generosity of spirit, [and] a humanitarianism' (Williams 1971, 23). Post-war biographers

transformed him into a ‘warm-hearted’ ‘dreamer’ (Palm 1948, 174) who inspired loyalty and sought to improve the lot of the masses, forgive his enemies and generally avoid war and bloodshed. They painted a picture of ‘the most humane of dictators’ (Gooch 1960, 5), one whose actions as ruler were frequently less bloody than those who preceded and succeeded him.

There was a danger here in moving from a ‘Black Legend’ to a ‘White Legend’ of Louis-Napoleon. Nevertheless, post-war texts, on the whole, offered more plausible explanations for Louis-Napoleon’s personality rooted in his actual words and deeds. Generations of writers had previously asserted his hopeless stupidity and indecision, ascribing his rise to blind luck, the power of his name, the idiocy of the masses, and the destructive scheming of politicians in the Second Republic. Yet, he was also deemed a treacherous, bloodthirsty plotter who manipulated and dominated the French for two decades before single-handedly losing a war to Germany. Revisionist texts identified Louis-Napoleon’s apparent ‘simplicity – if not stupidity’ (Palm 1948, 21) as a calculated manoeuvre that allowed the public to project their hopes onto him; this fooled his enemies, like Hugo and Adolphe Thiers, into underestimating him. Louis-Napoleon displayed ‘political calculation’ (Smith 1996, 8), shaped his own public image and was capable of moments of humanity and brutality as the situation required. This analysis was crucial in moving away from the image of a sphinx-like monster and unlocking important insights into the political ideology and legacy of Louis-Napoleon and the Second Empire.

The ideology of Empire, revised

The key contribution of revisionist scholarship to our understanding of Louis-Napoleon and the Second Empire was recognition of his lasting impact on the historical development of liberal democracy; viewing his rule as peculiarly modern, not a dam against progress or an authoritarian anomaly. This reinterpretation rested on the creation of a new periodisation of the Empire as one of two political halves: first bad, then good.

The ‘bad’ first decade to around 1860 was identified as the period of authoritarian empire. Elements of the ‘Black Legend’ rang true in these years: the violent coup, censorship and a constitution that permitted no serious opposition. There was capitalistic modernisation but the regime and its key figures were authoritarian in tendency and action. Even so, Howard C. Payne concluded that the level of repression in this decade ‘embodied historical continuity’ (1966, 280) more than a totalitarian departure.

Revisionist historians identified 1859-60 as a turning point towards the ‘good’ decade (Williams 1954). This was signposted by increased recognition of parliamentary opposition, relaxation of censorship and the embrace of free-market economic policies, especially the Cobden-Chevalier treaty with Britain. The shift to competitive elections allowed Theodore Zeldin and subsequent historians to note that ‘unlike the empire of Napoleon I, the Second Empire did become more liberal as the years went by’ (Thody 1989, 5). It was reconciled with a liberal, republican narrative of French history and recast as a period of apprenticeship when the French learned how to use universal suffrage.

Zeldin's work (1958; 1963) was crucial in returning scholarly attention to this move towards a 'Liberal Empire'. It marked the redemption of Émile Ollivier, written back into narratives of French history, alongside Louis-Napoleon, as a reformer for his construction of the new 'Liberal' constitution, secured with a plebiscite victory in 1870. This was held up as evidence that Louis-Napoleon had managed to reinvent the regime and retain the support of a good proportion of the country's male voters for over 20 years of rule (Ménager 1988). He was politically popular, the 'undisputed master of a new political game' (Truesdell 1997, 3) involving the manipulation of the mass press and mass suffrage.

The denouement of the 'good' Empire was the Franco-Prussian War, military defeat and Parisian revolution. This debacle had been the focal point, along with the coup, for the 'Black Legend', but the new political landscape of the post-war era and successful efforts to integrate other elements of Louis-Napoleon's record opened it to re-evaluation. Despite a recognition that the Second Empire indulged in several disastrous overseas adventures, the notion of Louis-Napoleon as an unpredictable and inept warmonger was challenged and partially overhauled. Kinglake's accusation that his plotting caused the Crimean War was completely debunked; Brison D. Gooch (1956) noted that the diplomatic evidence available suggested a reluctance to place French troops on the ground in the Near East. Conversely, in the Italian peninsula, where Louis-Napoleon's plotting with nationalists was clearly evidenced, revisionists identified a principled foreign policy. Building on the work of Robert Sencourt (1933), it was noted that Louis-Napoleon's guiding lights were popular sovereignty, natural frontiers and respect for nationalities in Europe. His unwillingness to pursue the Crimean and Italian campaigns for too long, and efforts

to convene peace conferences of European powers, was now presented by historians as a genuine effort to enact his vision of a Europe of nations, whose wisdom could finally be appreciated in the second half of the twentieth century (Corley 1961).

This revised view of Louis-Napoleon, the good European, was applied to his dealings with Prussia. His sympathy for Germans' right to self-determination meant that the threat of Prussia was recognised too late and efforts to forge an Anglo-French alliance in 1866 were rebuffed (Mosse 1958). In this revised history the British only had themselves to blame, rejecting an alliance of huge economic and political value, that Louis-Napoleon had consistently advocated since his earliest statement of political beliefs, the 1839 *Idées napoléoniennes* (Bonaparte 1840).

The decision to declare war on Prussia in 1870, long the prime example of Louis-Napoleon's incapacity and even his physical degeneracy (Williams 1971), was also revised in the light of new research into the Liberal Empire and Prussian machinations. The new Constitution moved decision-making beyond the Emperor and made the wider regime more responsive to public opinion. New studies of the road to war (Howard 1961) noted that that Parisian press and opposition politicians were clamouring for a hard line with Prussia on the question of the Hohenzollern candidature for the Spanish throne. Louis-Napoleon was opposed to war without first securing alliances, yet diplomatic failure and the need to show public strength forced the hand of the regime. Some post-war works even blamed the Empress Eugenie for pressing her physically ailing husband into a war that promised to secure the future of the dynasty. If this was questionable, it was established beyond all doubt that

Bismarck's embellishment of the Ems telegram was a calculated move to spark a war (Case 1954). This revised history positioned Louis-Napoleon as dupe of the Machiavellian Bismarck, led astray by his ministers, his wife, politicians and the press. It was a far cry from the impression of a tyrannical warmonger and aligned with other revisionist interpretations that portrayed his foreign policy as a 'tragedy of good intentions' (Williams 1954).

New interpretations

Histories of Louis-Napoleon, revisionist or otherwise, almost exclusively focused on the 'hexagon' and Europe, neglecting the colonial nature of his Second Empire. When this topic was occasionally analysed (Barker 1976), the tendency was either to consider the varied overseas activities as having little significance, or as a bridge to the more sustained republican colonisation of the Third Republic.

However, as Algeria has recently become a key focal point for historians of France, new works have begun to examine the Second Empire's colonial role (Sessions 2016). Of particular interest is Louis-Napoleon's decision in the 1860s to depart from the settler-driven assimilationist model for Algeria and pronounce an 'Arab Kingdom' in which he, as Emperor, would arbitrate between separate but equal religious and ethnic groups in the region. This vision contrasted sharply with subsequent secularist and universalist colonial policies of the Third Republic (Murray-Miller 2018).

Beyond Algeria, David Todd has argued that, far from existing as a mere prefix to French activity under the Third Republic, Louis-Napoleon embraced an 'imperialism of free trade' approach that represented 'the most determined attempt to restore

French global power since the War of American Independence' (2011, 177). This interpretation opens up avenues for comparative analysis, especially in the overlap between Louis-Napoleon's 'Arab Kingdom' and Disraeli's 'British Raj' model for India. It also challenges attempts to integrate the Second Empire into a broadly republican narrative of modern French history, by presenting the colonial policies of Louis-Napoleon as a 'path not taken' (Andrews and Sessions 2015, 7).

This new approach to colonial history has allowed Pamela Pilbeam (2015) and Todd to highlight the intellectual and practical contribution of former Saint-Simonians such as Michel Chevalier and Thomas Urbain to the Second Empire. These figures advocated an interventionist, free-trading, technology-led, non-secular, utopian imperialism that Louis-Napoleon's regime partly embraced. Their vision of a French role in 'raising up' other peoples and cultures rested on a fundamentally different conception of French imperialism than that offered by republicans in the late nineteenth century. This other imperialism, consisting of romantic, transformational infrastructure projects, military interventionism and debates around the most effective political management of culturally and ethnically diverse societies, is clearly worthy of further study.

Breaking free of the tendency to see the Second Empire as first a 'gap' and then as an apprenticeship to the Third Republic has also sparked renewed interest in the political history of the regime. This includes a willingness to recognise the originality and dynamism of a regime that was one of the first to manage universal male suffrage and the rise of mass society in an industrialising nation state. Central to this approach was the work of Sudhir Hazareesingh (1998; 2004) exploring the Empire's

creativity in its liberalisation and decentralisation of political power to manage the demands of a changing society. Even more important was the renewed focus Hazareesingh brought to the electoral record of Louis-Napoleon. He identified 'two simple historical truths' (2004, 131) that have to be asserted to gain an understanding of the significance of Louis-Napoleon in French political history: the Second Republic restricted universal male suffrage and the coup d'état restored it. This presented an open challenge to the idea that the Second Empire represented a temporary dictatorial scaffold for a more modern, more stable, democratic republican system. To Hazareesingh, it is clear that Louis-Napoleon's regime was not destined to be dismantled and was no more a mess of contradictions than any other that faced a similar confluence of economic, social and political conditions.

Historians in the last 25 years have utilised this revelation to reflect upon the ways in which corruption, censorship, propaganda, populism, plebiscites, demagoguery, neglect for the rule of law, utopianism, romanticism and authoritarianism have all been at the heart of mass democracy from its beginnings in the Second Republic (Truesdell 1997; Anceau 2008; Gunn 2008; Cuchet and Milbach 2012; Rogachevsky 2013; O'Brien 2015; Villette 2015; Guyver 2016; Lagouyette 2016). The study of Louis-Napoleon's rule reveals that they are a feature, not a bug, of democratic practice in nation states. It offers a strong and clear historical base from which to challenge and move beyond assumptions, derived from modernisation theory, which hold that regimes which display these elements are flawed, contradictory and temporary, destined to be replaced with something 'better'.

Most critical commentators who were first to analyse the rise of Louis-Napoleon were infected by a mistrust, misunderstanding or outright dislike of the masses, who in the middle of the nineteenth century were largely peasants, assumed to be in need of 'civilisation'. Their specific conclusions about Louis-Napoleon have been revised but the only chance to move beyond a modernisation theory rooted in these missteps is to return to the electoral history of the Second Republic and Second Empire afresh. Who voted, how they voted, what they voted for, and why? Studies like those of Malcolm Crook (2015a; 2015b) build on the pioneering work of Zeldin and Hazareesingh to shine a light on the supposed mystery of Louis-Napoleon's popularity. This can help us to produce comparative analyses to confront the popularity of authoritarian democrats in our own era without the comfort blanket of modernisation theory to deceive us.

To study Louis-Napoleon and the Second Empire now is an opportunity to engage in the dismantling of a highly partial historical narrative, tied to wrongheaded ideas of the nature of history. Under Louis-Napoleon, the defeat or marginalisation of 'liberal' republicanism was a very real possibility even whilst many of the conditions of 'modernisation' were being fulfilled. Many of the elements in Louis-Napoleon's rise that Hugo found so perplexing remain perplexing to us: Why do republics fail? Why do the corrupt, the selfish, the violent, the seemingly talentless prosper? Now we recognise they do and there is no historically-derived model suggesting that they will cease to do so in future, it is beholden upon historians to look beyond the comforting myths present in many historical accounts and question why the Louis-Napoleons and Second Empires of this world are still with us.

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