A modern day Caesar? Donald Trump and American Caesarism

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Abstract

This article argues that the American political system under Donald Trump is an example of what Antonio Gramsci dubbed "Caesarism," a situation where a taut balance of warring class forces allows for the emergence of a third force to freeze the antagonism and challenge/usurp established political institutions. To concretise Gramsci's rather abstract formulation and to better illuminate the nature of American Caesarism, this article employs a reading of the Roman poet Lucan's magisterial *Civil War*. Through a close reading of this text, we can explore the origins of Caesarism and study the efficacy of different means of struggle against it. Lucan thus helps us reinvigorate the concept of Caesarism and apply it in the contemporary American context. In particular, it will be demonstrated that whereas Lucan depicts a progressive form of Caesarism with a qualitatively new state form, the Trump administration embodies a regressive form of Caesarism within an old state form.

Introduction

For many observers of American politics, the rise of Donald Trump has been a thoroughly discombobulating experience. A generation of analysts, brought up on a diet of Washington Consensus policies, could be confident that the Republican Party pre-Trump was neoliberal in

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the strict sense. Such an understanding was abundantly confirmed by the fact that the Republicans were always to be found on the hard edge of issues such as financial deregulation, trade liberalisation and the marginalisation of organised labour. Then came Donald Trump. Suddenly, it seemed as if the political certainties and sensibilities that had formed over decades were thrown out the window. Here was a man who, at the rhetorical level at least, abnegated key planks of the Republican platform. In place of free trade, he advocated (and later delivered) tariffs to protect American jobs, particularly in the manufacturing sector (Shelton 2019). He threatened companies who planned to relocate production to other countries (Thielman 2017). He railed against the philosophy of free trade, attacking the North American Free Trade Agreement and withdrawing America from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (Duffy 2017). In its place, and under the influence of key advisor Steve Bannon, he offered "economic nationalism." To complete this confusion, Bannon, appearing in an interview on Australian news programme *Four Corners*, claimed that Trump had prevailed against the Republican establishment in turning the Party 'more into a worker's party' (*Four Corners* 2018). Although right-wing American administrations have always counted on some degree of working-class support (the case of Ronald Regan comes to mind), it seems clear in the case of Trump that quantity is becoming quality in the shape of a powerful new linkage between elements of the working-class and the Republican Party.

One concept which has been invoked to make sense of this muddled situation is "Caesarism." Some commentators have claimed that the populist, nationalist and militarist stylings of Donald Trump are best seen as an American incarnation of Caesarism (see, for example, Ilany 2016, Weiner 2016, Wolf 2016, Kaplan 2017 and Majeske 2018). In the main, however, this largely polemical commentary has not engaged with the most analytically rich conception of Caesarism,

which belongs to Gramsci (1971). This is unfortunate, as Gramsci's Caesarism explicitly captures the constitutive role played by the interaction of class forces. Indeed, on Gramsci's count, Caesarism is only explicable as a class phenomenon.

This article employs the Gramscian vision of Caesarism to explain the current confused, and confusing, American political scene. However, it does so through what might at first appear a most odd vehicle – a reading of the Roman poet Lucan's magisterial *Civil War* (*De Bello Civili*). This epic poem tells the story of one of the pivotal events in world history – the titanic struggle between Julius Caesar and Pompey the Great over the future of the Roman Republic. Given the invocation of ancient Rome and the spectre of Julius Caesar in the aforementioned commentary, the vision Lucan offers of both that time and the person of Caesar is highly illuminating. A close reading of his *magnum opus* thus offers a unique vantage point from which to comprehend the formation and dynamics of the original Caesarism. From this understanding, we can glean two especially important insights that are of direct relevance to the circumstances of American Caesarism today, namely:

1. The origins of Caesarism in profound social upheaval and a balance of class forces;
2. Methods of struggle against it, in particular the limitations of an individualist strategy centred on the virtues of powerful men.

Through such a reading of Lucan we can expand our understanding of the historical dynamics of Caesarism and use them to evaluate contemporary manifestations in the form of Trump. The results promise to simultaneously concretise Gramsci's fairly abstract formulation and produce observations that are of practical political importance in the contemporary struggle against Trump's administration.[i] Thus, in Marx's (1969) terms, the animating historiography of this article is not simply a desire to interpret the modern world through Lucan, but to change it.

Broadly, it will be demonstrated that whereas Lucan depicts a progressive form of Caesarism with a qualitatively new state form, the Trump administration embodies a regressive form of Caesarism within an old state form. Moreover, through Lucan's observations and, just as importantly, his silences, we can reinvigorate our understanding of Caesarism and the means to combat it. To understand the content of these findings, however, it is first necessary to understand just what is meant by the term Caesarism.

Gramsci on Caesarism

Caesarism has a long pedigree in Western political thought (Fontana 2004). Baehr and Richter (2004) suggest that the term initially arose as part of a broader effort to explain the nature of the nineteenth-century French state under both Napoleon Bonaparte and his nephew Louis Napoleon. In particular, proponents of the concept 'insisted upon the resemblances of the governments produced by these episodes to the regime of Julius Caesar or, alternatively, Augustus had created out of the Roman Republic at its close' (Baehr & Richter 2004: 2). Critics on both the left and right (such as Proudhon, Gobineau and Maurras) observed the plebiscitary character of Louis Napoleon's regime, the entry of the "masses" into political life and the dissolution of mediating institutions between the leader and the people (Mosse 1971).

The term remained in widespread use into the twentieth century (along with it more-or-less cognate term "Bonapartism),[ii] although subsequent political-economic developments (in particular the rise of fascist regimes and the Bolshevik state) had seen the term stretched 'far beyond its original referents' (Baehr & Richter 2004: 16). Both Weber and Spengler contributed to this process of evolution (Casper 2007), but, for the purposes of this article, the primary innovator of the Caesarist idea was Gramsci. Given the rich provenance of the term and the fact

that it has never been (and never can be) used uncontroversially (Richter 2005), it is necessary to unfold precisely what Gramsci means by Caesarism.

Fontana (2004: 177) has noted that '[w]hile there has been much debate about various aspects of Gramsci's political thought…for some reason his treatment of Caesarism as a political form has received comparatively little discussion.'[iii] The classic statement, which would be instantly recognisable to political economists more used to the term Bonapartism, is found in *The Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci 1971: 219):

> Caesarism can be said to express a situation in which the forces in conflict balance each other in a catastrophic manner; that is to say, they balance each other in such a way that a continuation of the conflict can only terminate in their reciprocal destruction. When the progressive force A struggles against the reactionary force B, not only may A defeat B or B defeat A, but it may happen that neither A nor B defeats the other – that they bleed each other mutually and then a third force C intervenes from outside, subjugating what is left of both A and B.

In other words, Caesarism expresses an exceptional form of state that arises in the context of specific historical situations. These situations are defined above all by their class character – indeed, Fontana (2004: 177-178) notes that 'Gramsci, like any Marxist, clearly understands Caesarism as a class phenomenon, and he sees its political forms as products of class and factional strife.' In situations of intense class struggle resulting in a breakdown in the hegemony of a particular bundle of ruling-class groups (known as an 'historical bloc'), a third force can enter the fray and, exploiting the taut balance of social forces, achieve a level of relative autonomy which would be unthinkable in non-crisis periods. The third force, which tends to be a charismatic "great personality" (although it need not be),[iv] 'is entrusted with the task of

"arbitration" over a historico-political situation characterised by an equilibrium of forces heading towards catastrophe' (Gramsci 1971: 219). The purpose of this arbitration 'is to freeze and to redirect the antagonism, certainly the open, political forms of it, in order to prevent the reciprocal destruction' (Fontana 2004: 179). In this way, Caesarism expresses the inability of a hitherto dominant bloc to bind subaltern groups to its hegemonic vision, whilst the latter lack the wherewithal to construct a hegemony of their own.

Depending upon the nature of the third force's intervention and the effect on the state, Caesarism can be, respectively, progressive/regressive and qualitative/quantitative. Regarding the former, Gramsci (1971: 219) notes that:

> 'Caesarism is progressive when its intervention helps the progressive force to triumph, albeit with its victory tempered by certain compromises and limitations. It is reactionary when its intervention helps the reactionary force to triumph – in this case too with certain compromises and limitations, which have, however, a different value, extent and significance than in the former.'

As an illustration, he regards Julius Caesar and Napoleon Bonaparte as examples of progressive Caesars, as they advanced the class interests of the Roman *populares* (of whom we shall have much to discuss) and the French bourgeoisie (De Smet 2016). By contrast, Gramsci cites as regressive Caesars Louis Napoleon and Prussian statesman Otto von Bismarck, who managed the antagonism between workers and various fractions of capital in the interests of the latter.

The qualitative/quantitative dyad refers, by contrast, to the changes which Caesarism makes to the state it inherits. According to Gramsci (1971), Julius Caesar's regime was qualitative in that it forged the historical passage from one type of state (the Roman Republic) to a completely

different one (the Principate). The same could be said of Napoleon Bonaparte. Again, Gramsci (1971) uses by way of comparison the quantitative rule of Louis Napoleon which, despite the re-institution of the role of Emperor, left the fundamental structure of the state relatively unscathed. That is, 'there was no passage from one type of State to another, but only "evolution" of the same type along unbroken lines' (Gramsci 1971: 222).

What these dyads tell us is that Caesarism is a complex and nuanced concept. It is certainly not the argument of this article that there is a transhistorical truth embedded in ancient Roman politics against which modern experience can uncritically be read off. Hobsbawm (2011) wisely warns against such a mistaken historiography. Gramsci does not fall into this error, maintaining that modern forms of Caesarism are much more than a simple re-run of ancient Roman history. Indeed, he is at pains to note that the equilibrium of forces out of which Caesarism grows is 'precisely a generic hypothesis, a sociological schema (convenient for the art of politics)' (Gramsci 1971: 221). This hypothesis needs to be sensitised historically by analysing the mode of production, class forces and political, cultural and economic institutions obtaining in a concrete society.[v] As Gramsci (1971) acknowledges, the nature of these factors is completely different in modern capitalist society than it was in Napoleonic times, let alone ancient Rome. In ascertaining what we can learn about Caesarism in America by analysing *Civil War*, we must keep Gramsci's caution constantly in mind.[vi]

However, with this caveat in mind, we are now armed with an understanding of the abstract circumstances in which Caesarist regimes grow. As a consequence of the arbitral role of the third force and its relative autonomy from warring social forces, we can speak of the tendencies which Caesarist states tend to exhibit. Ertekin (2019: 62) has usefully described some of these characteristics, including the:

> ‘belittling of the parliament that accompanies a political discourse based on popular elections, purging of autonomous power groups within state and society, intolerance towards independent political groups and individuals, and concentration of all sorts of decision-making processes at the hands of a single person.’

To this we should add the important role of the military, ‘both as a bureaucracy and as an organization of violence’ (Fontana 2004: 186) and the centrality of the third force’s “mission” to mediate social antagonism. This lattermost reality is, as we shall see below, expressed in an often intensely nationalist and populist rhetoric and action, with calls for national unity and rebirth linked to the struggles of a vaguely defined “people” (suitably abstracted from the concrete class forces in struggle).[vii]

This bundle of tendencies could be thought of as constituting the abstract features of Caesarism, features which will take on different colours in different historical periods. With this in hand, we are now in a position to take the concept of Caesarism and use it as a tool for analysing modern American politics with the help of Lucan. In particular, we can explore the similarities and divergences between the Caesarism in *Civil War* with that obtaining in America today and, on the basis of a close reading of Lucan’s themes and silences, learn from the ancients in resisting Caesarism today.

It is first necessary, however, to describe in broad terms Lucan’s *magnum opus*.

Lucan’s *Civil War*

Lucan (whose full name was Marcus Annaeus Lucanus) was born into a wealthy family in the Roman province of Hispania Baetica (located in modern-day Spain) in 39 AD. His uncle was the famous Roman philosopher, statesman and dramatist Seneca, who served as a key advisor to the

emperor Nero. For a time Lucan and Nero were close friends, with the latter patronising his poetry. However, the two would fall out, and Lucan went on to be implicated in the so-called Pisonian conspiracy to assassinate Nero. Obliged to commit suicide, he died aged only twenty-five.

The stand out work of his short life was undoubtedly *De Bello Civili,* or *Civil War*. The text (widely considered incomplete) consists of ten separate books detailing the vicious civil war between Julius Caesar and his arch rival, Pompey the Great.[viii] Although Lucan devotes a great deal of time and care in developing his main characters of Caesar, Pompey and Cato the Younger, his focus is not so much on the characters themselves as it is their place in the firmament of late Republican Rome. The text weaves together a sharp (although partisan, as we shall see) appreciation of Roman politics and history with sophisticated philosophic treatments of the roles of fate and fortune in life, the agency of humanity and, above all, the evils of civil strife. *Civil War* illustrates with touching melancholy and appalling violence the turmoil of a dying society. Although the text stops well short of the conclusion of the struggle, Lucan's audience would have known that the harm inflicted by this conflict would be irreparable, with Caesar's triumph resulting in the destruction of the Republic and the foreshadowing of the Principate.

Civil War has been the subject of an immense body of scholarship over many years (see, for example, Ahl 1976, Leigh 1997, Bartsch 2001, Asso 2011, Dinter 2012). This literature is extremely broad-ranging, going from the poetic qualities of the work, the state of its completeness, its ideological, political and philosophical positions, and its value as an insight to the climate of the early Principate. However, *Civil War* has generally not received attention from political-economists, and has certainly not been used as a frame through which to view

Gramsci's Caesarism. As such, this article breaks new ground on Lucan and, in doing so, throws fresh light on Caesarism. It is to this that we now turn.

The origins of Caesarism in *Civil War*

Recall that the fundamental essence of Caesarism is the entry of a third force to mediate and freeze an apparently insuperable conflict between warring class forces that could threaten mutual destruction. An irreducible condition of this crisis is the breakdown in the hitherto ruling bloc's hegemony. Under "normal" conditions the hegemony of this bloc ensures that the domination of ruling classes is maintained and reproduced more through consent than overt domination (despite the fact that coercion is ultimately what guarantees state power). Under what conditions can the hegemony of a ruling bloc be fundamentally disrupted? Gramsci (1971: 210) helpfully tells us that a breakdown of hegemony:

> 'occurs either because the ruling class has failed in some major political undertaking for which it has requested, or forcibly extracted, the consent of the broad masses (war, for example), *or because huge masses (especially of peasants and petit-bourgeois intellectuals) have passed suddenly from a state of political passivity to a certain activity,* and put forward demands which taken together, albeit not organically formulated, add up to a revolution' (emphasis added).

It is very easy to conceive of the last one hundred years of the Roman Republic in these terms. The great change in Roman society in materialist terms was the evolution of the Republic from a predominantly self-sufficient agrarian society to a great commercial hub at the centre of an ever-growing empire. Of key significance in this regard was the influx of vast numbers of slaves,

which, although they may not have changed the techniques of production per se, nevertheless completely altered the social relations of agriculture.

We find an artistic representation of just such a state of affairs throughout *Civil War*. Lucan begins his epic with an account of what he describes as the causes of the conflict. Amidst a fairly orthodox Stoic account of how overweening greatness inevitably rushes to ruin and luxury corrupts virtue, we find a most interesting passage (Lucan 2012: 8):

> '…The nurse of men,
>
> Poverty, fled. Summoned from round the world
>
> came each clan's special plague. They bought up giant
>
> tracts of land – those once furrowed by Camillus'
>
> hardy plowshare, that felt old Curius' shovel –
>
> *for vast estates now worked by foreign tenants*' (emphasis added).

Here Lucan hits upon one of the core causes of the breakdown in the hegemony of the Roman ruling class – the latifundia system. Land expropriated by Roman conquest, the *ager publicus*, was increasingly concentrated in the hands of wealthy Roman politicians and generals. These huge new landed estates were typically worked by slave labour, rather than the free and independent citizen identified as the stalwart of Roman virtue. Meiksins Wood (2012) has explored how this concept of the "citizen," shared with ancient Greek city states such as Athens, both created the conditions for chattel slavery (in that it limited the degree of extra economic exploitation of a free citizenry) and introduced a fundamentally new character to social conflict. Whereas the fundamental struggle in most ancient societies was between rulers and subjects,

ancient Greek and Roman citizens confronted each other 'more directly *as individuals* and *as classes*' (Meiksins Wood 2012: 93). As such, in ancient Rome private property developed to an unprecedented degree and undergirded a full-blooded class struggle.

Nicholas (1962: 8) describes the tremendous impact these developments wrought on the Roman social structure:

> 'It was no longer a country of yeoman farmers…The old compact citizen body has disappeared. There was now a gulf between the wealthy and the poor. Now for the first time there emerged a proletariat. For many of those citizens who had lost their land and who had not migrated drifted to Rome and existed as best they could, often as the "clients", or hangers-on, of a wealthy man.'

As a stern Republican backbone was supplanted, the correspondent rise of this propertyless urban mass introduced a new and destabilising influence into Roman politics. Lucan (2012: 8-9), from an admittedly aristocratic perspective but in terms easily recognisable as a situation of disrupted hegemony, describes the world this new social force found and helped create:

> '…By steel one could gain great honor
>
> and overpower his fatherland. The measure of right
>
> was might. Law won popular votes by coercion,
>
> just order was disturbed by consuls and tribunes.
>
> The rods of office were bought, and the people
>
> auctioned off their favor…
>
> Usury ran rampant and interest, greedy for payments,

rose, and trust shattered: many found profit in war.'

In Gramsci's language, this new social class had passed to a level of political activity that made it more than an inert mass of dispossessed people. Indeed, the attitude the dominant social and political class took to this urban "proletariat" (the term, after all, was derived from a Roman census category referring to those who owned little or no property) informed the central cleavage point in late Republican politics. On the one hand were the *optimates*, conservative aristocrats who insisted on the maintenance of Senatorial authority over instruments of popular power, such as the Plebeian Council and the Tribune of the Plebs. Pompey the Great belonged to this faction. Opposed to the *optimates* were the *populares*, political leaders and generals who sought to improve the position of the common people, particularly through land reform and grain doles. Included amongst this party were the infamous Gracchi brothers Tiberius and Gaius, who as Plebeian Tribunes[ix] radicalised the Roman masses through attempts to pass legislation for land reform. Most significantly, Julius Caesar was also identified as a member of this movement.

It is important to note that the decline of the hegemony of the leading Roman classes Lucan documents was a decline in the complete sense. That is, not only was there a qualitative shift in the behaviour of subaltern classes, but also among the rulers. Coffee (2011) has usefully analysed Lucan's depiction of social relations in *Civil War*, showing how the leading characters generally fail or eschew to observe fundamental Roman aristocratic values of *fides, gratia* and *pietas*.[x] Lucan leaves the honouring of such values to the lower-class soldiers and alien allies of Caesar, Pompey and Cato, who often exhibit them in distorted and malicious forms (such as the willingness of one of Caesar's soldiers to demonstrate *pietas* by killing his parents – Coffee 2011). Given his general hostility and indifference towards "the masses" (as will be explored in

greater detail below), such an attitude can only speak of a world turned upside down, of hegemony fundamentally disrupted.

Before we turn to the American experience of similar processes, it is important to understand, in Gramsci's terms, just what kind of Caesarism we are dealing with in *Civil War.* It will be recalled that Gramsci (1971) distinguished Caesarism along the dual axis progressive/regressive and qualitative/quantitative. Regarding the latter, the strength and force of Lucan's description leaves us in no doubt that the nature of the Caesarism he portrays is qualitative. Although bitterly opposed to what Caesar represents, *Civil War* is rich with images of a fundamentally new Roman state supplanting a dying Republic. On the eve of the battle of Pharsalus, Lucan (2012: 184) tells how:

> '…The day had come that would
>
> establish the fate of human affairs for ages,
>
> and in that clash they were struggling over
>
> what Rome was to be – this was clear to all.'

What Rome was to become under Caesar Lucan had already made clear in his depiction of Caesar's assumption of authority after capturing Rome. Convening a rump Senate, Caesar essentially neuters this central Republican institution:

> 'No sacred benches shine with consul's luster,
>
> and the praetors, next in lawful power, are absent,
>
> their empty ivory chairs are moved from their places.
>
> Everything was Caesar. The Senate assembles as witness

to one man's private interests' (Lucan 2012: 61).

It is thus clear that Caesar's usurpation of power is not a continuation of an essentially unchanged state, but rather its qualitative transformation. The question of whether Julius Caesar is an exemplar of progressive Caesarism, as Gramsci (1971) would have it, is rather more difficult to answer on the basis of the text, but can nevertheless be gleaned by a close reading. It is important to remember that Caesar is very much the antagonist of *Civil War.* Lucan's temperament and upbringing is aristocratic, and he is full of scorn for historical and contemporary *populares* figures, such as Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus, Marius, Cinna and most of all Caesar. He is loath to give him anything, and tends to interpret his every act as fundamentally self-interested. However, a revealing passage suggests that Caesar as a third force freezing class antagonism is genuinely for the common people championed by the *populares*. Lucan's hero Cato, in eulogising Pompey (who was treacherously killed in Egypt), declares that:

'Real belief in liberty, with the return of Sulla and Marius,

passed away long ago. With Pompey now removed,

even its figment is dead. Shameless kingship at last,

no pretense of sanction, *no Senate as a screen!*' (Lucan 2012: 256, emphasis added).

Through Cato, Lucan admits more than he means to here. The Senate, as Lucan himself paints in his history of Roman civil strife, had hardly screened the common people from suffering, so who/what is the Senate screening? The answer must be the conservative patrician families and their class privileges. If Caesar threatens this kind of "liberty," it can only be seen as evidence of the progressive nature of the regime he established, as appreciated by Gramsci. In *Civil War* we are thus dealing with a progressive Caesarist regime of a qualitative character, born of the entry

of a new mass urban working class to a level of political activity and the commensurate breakdown of the hegemony of the Roman elite.

The origins of American Caesarism

Now that we understand this revealing illustration of the origin and character of the "original" Caesarism, we can turn our attention to the contemporary American political scene and ascertain whether or not Trump is Caesarist in the Gramscian sense. The first point we must note is that, despite the admittedly vast differences between the system of production in Roman times to modern-day America, there are some quite eerie similarities in terms of a climate of social unrest.[xi] Of greatest importance is the simultaneous immiseration and politicisation of elements of the working class. The former is the subject of a substantial body of literature, and the facets of this immiseration are legion. A few key processes include:

- The stagnation of real earnings for the majority of the workforce over the past three decades (Harvey 2010);
- Relatedly, an intensification of inequality and the concentration of wealth in the hands of a small class of capitalists (Fuchs 2017);
- Declining levels of unionisation, job displacement as a result of automation and offshoring, and a deepening of precarity in the employment relationship, with a staggering 40.4% of workers in non-standard work arrangements (US Government Accountability Office 2015).

While these processes are of a general currency, they are characterised by profound differences in terms of their spatio-temporal manifestations, with certain areas much more affected than others. For example, the disastrous effects of deindustrialization have been much more keenly

felt in the previously prosperous "Rustbelt" states, such as Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin (Clark 2017). Rounds of job losses and plant closures have devastated the predominantly white, working class communities that constitute these places, with increased rates of mortality, suicide and drug and alcohol abuse (Walley 2017). As will be discussed below, this uneven spatiality of working class decline played a central role in the election of Donald Trump.

As is implicit in Gramsci's treatment of Caesarism, however, disaffected subaltern classes are a necessary but not sufficient condition for the creation of a Caesarist state. Also necessary is the breakdown of the hegemony of the hitherto ruling historical bloc and a state of intense class conflict balanced between social forces. It is important to note at this point that a balance of conflicting forces cannot be calculated in a mathematical fashion. Anyone familiar with the fortunes of workers and worker movements in the US over the past four decades would know that it is utterly untenable to suggest that they are at present equally powerful to capital and its organisations. However, to insist on this mechanical equality of forces is to take Gramsci too literally. Keucheyan and Durand (2015), in discussing Caesarism in the European Union, formulate a useful conception. It is worth quoting them at length:

> 'We are not claiming of course that subaltern and dominant classes are equally powerful and thus mutually-neutralising forces in Europe today. Overall, the subalterns are in retreat. However, the deterioration of the socio-economic situation, and the harshness of neoliberal policies, unleashed a significant wave of protests and political backlashes…Thus, bureaucratic Caesarism in Europe today can be seen as a preemptive deprivation of democracy, accepted by dominant classes frightened by the potentially

> destabilizing effects of popular anger, in a context of socio-economic regression' (Keucheyan and Durand 2015: 45).

Mutatis mutandis, this statement captures the state of class struggle in the United States over the past decade. The Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of the late 2000s was a turning point. Although in the aftermath of the crisis the structures of neoliberalism remain more-or-less intact, the system is enervate, increasingly fragile and, perhaps most importantly, lacking the sense of legitimacy and inevitability which had once been its armour: 'dominant but dead', in the words of Smith (2010: 54). The GFC bled directly into the Occupy Wall Street movement, which was a large-scale and explicitly left-wing mobilisation in response to economic inequality and the unequal sharing of the burdens of the crisis. Conservative responses to the movement shared common themes – that the protestors were advocating class warfare, that they were pushing for bigger governments taking a harder line with capital, that they were shiftless and, most provocatively, that they were anti-American (Bingham 2011, Gainor 2011). In the post-GFC context of mediocre growth, stagnant wages and a further degradation in America's status as global hegemon (see, for example, International Labour Office 2015, World Bank 2019), the specter of such widespread dissent has created the conditions for a 'preemptive' Caesarism of the kind Keucheyan and Durand (2015) describe. A profound and qualitatively distinct episode of class struggle has created the situation where a third force could enter the scene and position itself above the conflicting forces. It is the contention of this article that Donald Trump is that third force.

We have already noted that central to Gramsci's conception of Caesarism is the idea that the third force is in a position to "arbitrate" an apparently insoluble conflict. Key to this capacity is the ability to simultaneously appeal to the groups in struggle. As we have seen, Julius Caesar

appealed to the urban poor and soldiery, and was able to cow elites through both force and the knowledge that he stood between them and dangerous subaltern classes. Like Caesar, key to Trump's victory was his capacity to win over large segments of the (white) working class (Clark 2017, Connolly 2017).[xii] As Clark (2017: 242) notes, 'Donald Trump…spoke passionately to them about their most basic fears and concerns – safety, security, and jobs. His rhetoric about the system being "rigged" against working-class Americans and his targeting of straw men who threatened their way of life…rang true to these voters.' In his inauguration speech, Trump (2016b) spoke potently of:

> 'rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation…One by one, the factories shuttered and left our shores, with not even a thought about the millions and millions of American workers that were left behind. The wealth of our middle class has been ripped from their homes and then redistributed all across the world.'

As was mentioned at the beginning of this article, this posture has not been only rhetorical. Trump has indeed taken some concrete steps to aid the plight of these workers, particularly those in the Rustbelt. The imposition of tariffs on certain key industrial products, the threatening of corporations that plan to relocate production with sanctions and the withdrawal from the deeply neoliberal Trans-Pacific Partnership are undeniably pro-worker reforms (for an account of these steps, albeit one that draws different conclusions, see Fuchs 2017).

Does this then mean, in Gramsci's terms, that Trump is a progressive Caesar? The presence of a handful of worker-friendly policies, whilst noteworthy, is not in itself sufficient to answer this question. Remember, Gramsci's (1971) formulation of the progressive/regressive dyad notes that both forms require compromises and limitations. On this score, a regressive Caesarism is quite

capable of instituting pro-worker reforms (a good example being Bismarck's Prussian state). The pivot delineating the distinction between the two types is the word "triumph." Taking a macro-view, the question is whether or not Trump's administration more organically represents the interests of workers or of capital under the threat of social dislocation.

It is the contention of this article that, taking this viewpoint, modern American Caesarism is fundamentally regressive. Standing against a comparatively small basket of explicitly pro-worker reforms are developments that go in the opposite direction. In this context one might cite:

- Sweeping tax reforms that barely benefitted workers but cut the corporate tax rate from 35% to 21%. Business interests were fundamental in driving this agenda (Cary and Holmes 2019);
- A very hostile attitude towards federal employees, with Trump issuing executive orders to institute 'a pay freeze, a target of getting rid of 10% of all federal workers, arbitrary moves of agencies out of D.C. – giving workers a sudden choice of move or quit…' (Gruenberg 2019).
- The appointment of exceptionally wealthy individuals to key Cabinet roles, often in areas where they have a demonstrated neoliberal record (Fuchs 2017). Key examples include Steve Mnuchin (Secretary of the Treasury), Wilbur Ross (Secretary of Commerce) and Betsy DeVos (Secretary of Education).
- The recent elevation of pro-business, anti-worker figure Eugene Scalia to the role of US Secretary of Labor. This appointment should be construed in the context of a conservative network of influence within the administration that, despite Trump's courting of blue-collar unions, 'are less ambivalent, pushing hard to undermine unions'

ability to bargain collectively, raise dues and exert political power' (Scheiber and Thrush 2019).

- Perhaps most significantly, Trump's brand of divisive politics fragments the working class. His well-documented exploitation of distinctions based on gender, ethnicity, nationality and religion degrades the ability of the class to exercise power collectively.

Taking a broad view, it is thus clear that, whilst bound by Gramsci's (1971: 219) 'compromises and limitations' to the workers who were partly responsible for his election, Trump's regime ultimately freezes the struggle between labour and capital in favour of the latter. Thus, unlike the case with Julius Caesar, we are dealing here with a regressive Caesarism.

Regarding the second of Gramsci's dyads, Trump's administration is at the present point in time a quantitative Caesarism. Whereas Lucan's Caesar was able to recast Republican institutions and usher in the era of a fundamentally different form of state, Trump has as of yet been incapable of a similar subversion of American political institutions. These remain essentially unchanged in form and viable in terms of their operation. A case in point is the furore over the so-called "Muslim ban," an executive order revolving around travel restrictions on people from several Muslim-majority countries including Iran, Libya, Somalia and Yemen. Whilst the idea itself paid homage to the aforementioned politics of division, the implementation of the original order (Executive Order 13769) was stymied by a number of legal challenges and only partial enforcement. In the event, this order was superseded by another (Executive Order 13780), the legality of which has been upheld by the US Supreme Court in a narrow decision. However, the point is that, despite loud protestations, Trump was nevertheless forced to respect the extant juridical structure. His Caesarism, therefore, is currently of a quantitative cast, implying more-or-less incremental evolution rather than radical changes in the fabric of the state.

The reasons for this fundamental difference call to mind Gramsci's (1971) aforementioned call to historicise the Caesarist concept to different historical epochs, with their combinations of distinct economic, political and cultural relations. Meiksins Wood (2012) has argued that, contrary to popular perception, the late Roman Republic represented in essence a period of pronounced "under-government." Republican government was largely an amateur affair, with a poorly developed framework for managing the demands of empire and dependent upon cooperation between a land-hungry and property-obsessed aristocracy. In the face of the fundamental social conflicts between *optimates* and *populares*, between members of the aristocracy themselves, and also between Rome and colonised provinces, the machinery of Republican government had reached the end of its useful lifespan. The Caesarism depicted in *Civil War* was qualitative as it had to be; only a new form of autocratic imperial state could simultaneously govern a growing empire and hold in check mutually destructive conflict.

In the American case, however, Trump has inherited not a constrained and amateur government overseeing a system of direct empire. Instead, he operates in the context of a state with extremely well-developed, long-lived and professionalised legislative and judicial institutions. The capacity to radically assail these institutions would require an enormous amount of political capital, quite apart from the material consideration of whether or not American capitalism could actually handle fundamental transformations in the state. This difficulty, of course, does not preclude a change in the future towards a more open and radical attempt to subvert, sideline or indeed abolish traditional political institutions. However, at present we can quite confidently contrast the progressive and qualitative nature of Caesar's regime (a fact recognised by both Lucan and Gramsci) with the regressive and quantitative regime that is modern American Caesarism.

Whatever the differences in emphasis, however, there are features common to all forms of Caesarism, and we thus see definite similarities between the regimes Lucan's Caesar and Trump respectively head. As mentioned previously, a key feature of Caesarism is the growth in the role and status of the military in the political life of the community. This growth is more than just an increase in the physical presence of the military; additionally, the Caesarist state often tries to create for itself a social basis in military institutions, lubricated by increased funding. In a dramatic scene in *Civil War*, Caesar loots the Roman treasury, filled with the rewards of past conquest, to pay his soldiers, an act seen as a fundamental violation of Republican institutions. Trump also seeks to garner the support of the military through funding, with his proposed 2017 budget featuring an increase in spending on the Departments of Defense and Veteran Affairs of 10.1% and 5.8% respectively (Krieg and Mullery 2017). Beyond material support, Trump (2016c: 47) extols the value of military strength as part of a national character, stating that '[e]verything begins with a strong military. Everything. We will have the strongest military in our history, and our people will be equipped with the best weaponry and protection available.' These authoritarian and nationalist stylings resonated with military officials, 88 high-ranking members of whom took the very significant step of publicly endorsing Trump in the 2016 campaign. It is worth quoting their conclusions: '…we support Donald Trump and his commitment to rebuild our military, to secure our borders, to defeat our Islamic supremacist adversaries and restore law and order domestically' (Bell et al 2016).

This sentiment passes neatly into another characteristic feature of Caesarism; the tendency of the third-force to market itself as a force for unity and harmony in the face of insoluble social conflict. In *Civil War* we see a particularly dramatic representation of this reality. In the

climactic Book VII, Caesar addresses his troops on the cusp of Pharsalus, seductively describing his vision of the purpose of this civil strife:

> 'This struggle is not for me, but so that the lot of you
>
> might be free, hold power over all nations,
>
> that's my prayer. For me, I long to return
>
> to private life, wear a toga of the people
>
> and be a modest citizen. Just so long as you
>
> are free to do all things, I will not object
>
> to having no position. You can be king!' (Lucan 2012: 189).

Additionally, Caesar trades on a patriotic image of being the true guardian of the essence of Rome, protecting her from internal foes. When confronted by the incorporeal spirit of Rome as he prepares to cross the Rubicon River, he assures it that he is 'always and even now your solider' (Lucan 2012: 9). Such messages help provide a common focal point *away* from the insuperable conflict that gives rise to Caesar in the first place.

Like Caesar, Trump appeals to visions of national unity and past glory as his unifying message, most aptly summed up by his campaign slogan of "Make America Great Again." To this vision he allies the uniquely American virtue of "the art of the deal" (the title of his 1987 best-selling book), with Trump at pains to present himself as an experienced deal-maker capable of resolving any and all contradictions through the application of business acumen. In his own words, he states that 'Deals are my art form…I like making deals, preferably big deals. That's how I get my kicks' (Trump 1988). Whether or not this is an accurate reflection of his mentality, it

nevertheless is a peculiarly American twist to Gramsci's conception of a Caesarist third-force arbitrating social conflict and presenting itself as a solution to society's ills.

Lastly, and relatedly, direct appeals to a vaguely defined "people" set against traditional political institutions is an irreducible feature of Caesarism. As explored above, it was a potent tool in Caesar's hands, and Trump is no different. It has already been argued that Trump specifically courted disaffected elements of the working class. Importantly, Trump has leveraged this support into intense distrust and hostility towards institutions such as Congress, the judicial system and the media, loosely grouped together as "elites." When a nominee for the Republican presidential ticket, Trump (2016a) penned a letter in the *Wall Street Journal* that demonstrates *par excellence* this approach:

> 'I, for one, am not interested in defending a system that for decades has served the interest of political parties at the expense of the people. Members of the club—the consultants, the pollsters, the politicians, the pundits and the special interests—grow rich and powerful while the American people grow poorer and more isolated…The only antidote to decades of ruinous rule by a small handful of elites is a bold infusion of popular will. On every major issue affecting this country, the people are right and the governing elite are wrong. The elites are wrong on taxes, on the size of government, on trade, on immigration, on foreign policy.'

Whilst Caesar has the benefit of an altogether much smaller political structure to navigate, Trump has the modern advantage of a social media system that allows him, through the vehicle of limited character Tweets, to directly communicate with the people he claims to represent. In a sense, this is an intensified form of the plebiscitary character of the Bonapartist regimes of the nineteenth century, in that social media provides a solid and durable line of communication

between the ruler and the ruled. Re-tweeting, sharing, liking, commenting – all can create a sense of connection and articulation between someone like Trump and the people outside of traditional political channels. That Trump has been so willing to exploit this new technology for this purpose is a testament to the fundamentally Caesarist nature of the administration that he heads.[xiii]

The struggle against Caesarism

We have established that the vivid scenes created by Lucan are representations of a situation that is Caesarist in the Gramscian sense – a catastrophic conflict between the warring *optimate* and *populares* factions, and their correlates in the aristocracy and the urban proletariat, was in the process of being suspended and arbitrated by the third force that is Julius Caesar. We have also established that Donald Trump is at the head of a form of modern American Caesarism which, despite the obvious differences with Lucan's world, shares many similarities. In the comparison between the two, we can concretise and enliven Gramsci's rather abstract formulation of Caesarism. Given the invocation of the term Caesarism and the spectre of Julius Caesar in describing Trump, this reading of Lucan is valuable. However, it is the contention of this article that Lucan is useful in a deeper sense. As mentioned previously, the point of Marxist analysis is not to simply interpret the world, but to change it. For those intent on the latter, Lucan can give back to the Caesarist idea, enriching and reinvigorating it both as a concept and also as a frame for organising modern political action. In particular, by drawing upon Lucan's themes and (just as importantly) his silences, we can understand means of struggle against Caesarism that are of utility today.

It is significant to note that, despite the fact that Pompey the Great is Caesar's supposed arch-enemy, he is often portrayed by Lucan in a less than flattering light. Against the force of nature

that is Caesar, Pompey appears tired, worn-out and keen to trade on a legacy of past achievement that no longer animates people in the here and now (see, for example, Lucan 2012: 7). Lucan's virtuous hero is instead Cato the Younger, a stern and uncompromising aristocrat implacably opposed to Caesar. Cato is utterly selfless and upright in his dedication to virtue and, through it, the Roman Republic. He declares to Brutus (who would later be a key player in Caesar's assassination):

> 'As enemy ranks overcame Decius self-sacrificed,
>
> may both armies stab me, let barbarous hordes
>
> aim at me their Rhineland lances, may I be pierced
>
> by every spear and, standing in the middle, take
>
> the blows of the entire war. May this blood redeem
>
> whole peoples, and this sacrifice make good in kind
>
> whatever debt hangs over Romans and their ways' (Lucan 2012: 39).

There is no doubting Cato's sincerity in this. Lucan displays his personal courage in leading troops through the snake-riddled Libyan desert. The historian Plutarch recounts in graphic detail Cato's suicide, who refused to live in a world ruled by Caesar (Lucan's own suicide and the resultant incompleteness of *Civil War* is almost certainly the reason this episode is omitted from the text). However, through his hero, Lucan unwittingly shows us the limits of the struggle of the virtuous individual against Caesarism. The point is that, Cato's struggle notwithstanding, Caesar *did* end up ruling the world. Cato's suicide was as necessary as it was brave. That is to say,

something more than an incorruptible sense of individual moral behaviour is necessary if a Caesarist demagogue is to be stopped.

In the US we had something of a demonstration of just this method of struggle in the person of Republican senator John McCain. Whilst by no means as morally stern and uncompromising as Cato, McCain resembled him in ultimately refusing to trim his sails to the winds of Trump and acting on the basis of a personal set of political convictions (seen most poignantly in his deciding vote against the Republican bill to repeal Obamacare). Such behaviour is commendable. However, through Lucan's silences as to the efficacy of Cato's behaviour, and the historical reality that his sacrifice was *not* enough to 'redeem' the Roman people, we can conclude that such actions in and of themselves cannot destroy the kind of politics that Caesar and Trump epitomise.

Gramsci, of course, would be utterly unsurprised by this contention, given his location of Caesarism in the foundation of class struggle and class politics. The answer to Caesarism must be a collectivist, class response, deepening and intensifying the political life of the broad mass of working people. This answer, ironically, is one that Lucan is incapable of grasping, and it is here that his silences speak volumes.

As a part of the Roman aristocratic elite, Lucan was dismissive of "the mob" whom the *populares* appealed to. His sense of a rigid class hierarchy, and disgust at those who transgress it, is made clear in his description of the aftermath of Pharsalus, where:

> 'Plebeian soldiers take their rest
>
> impiously on patricians' costs, couches spread
>
> for kings have foul men lying on them, criminals

relax their limbs on the beds of fathers and brothers' (Lucan 2012: 206).

To the extent they ever warrant his direct attention, ordinary people are shown as forming an amorphous, animalistic mass that is easily bought by Caesar (notwithstanding Coffee's (2011) earlier observation of the lower classes being the only to honour, in a distorted way, traditional social values) . This is best seen in a passage where Caesar has despatched his lieutenant Curio to Sicily to secure grain supplies:

'…what ruse

would best arouse the people's capricious favour…

he is well aware that the main cause of anger or praise

is the annual grain supply. Only hunger frees cities.

Respect is bought when men in power feed

the lazy mob. Starving masses know no fear' (Lucan 2012: 59).

Ironically enough, here Lucan is in complete agreement with the villain of his epic. Lucan's Caesar operates on the basis of a cynical conception of "the mob," a conception which Lucan, despite his political differences, wholly subscribes to. The *optimates* as a group, and Caesar as a debased *populares* leader, share this fundamental view of the common people; the differences between the two camps comes down to the techniques of power one takes vis-à-vis this group, with the former seeking to exclude them from the extant political process, the latter exploiting their power to break that process. In both cases, however, there is no thought of expanding and deepening institutions for popular political power. Lucan's Caesar, for all his rhetoric, does not

seek to genuinely empower the subaltern classes he supposedly represents; rather, he intends to leverage this support in favour of autocracy.

Given Lucan's aristocratic loyalties, we should be cautious at adopting wholesale his portrayal of Caesar. However, the colour of this portrayal has a value all of its own, and is illustrative of two central points which cannot be ignored in the struggle against modern American Caesarism. Firstly, like Caesar, Trump does not, and cannot, offer a pathway to a progressive populism that legitimately expands the ambit of popular power. Even if Trump's Caesarism was more progressive, it remains the case that this would not provide the foundations for a higher plane of working class struggle. As De Smet (2016: 101) notes, '[f]rom a subjectivist perspective, it is clear that "subaltern Caesarism" cannot function as an adequate programme for proletarian action, as political substitutionism is the antithesis of self-emancipation.'

Secondly, and relatedly, only through engaging an explicitly class politics that expands the ambit of popular power can a populist politics avoid a pathway that ends in demagoguery. Lucan was incapable of grasping this, held captive by a conservative aristocratic suspicion of the plebeians. Such a suspicion leads to two, dialectically intertwined outcomes – the rule of the demagogue and the suicide (both literal and symbolic) of the virtuous individual. In Lucan we see the limits to a struggle against Caesarism that does not engage the subaltern classes that are, at least in part, its basis.

Such an understanding is not simply a matter of historical interest. Rather, we see the same mistakes being committed by scholars, activists and progressive observers of American politics today. All too often the disenfranchised workers that turned to Trump are conceived as irredeemably racist, conservative and motivated by hatred. Perhaps the best example of this comes from no-less-a-source than Trump's Democratic presidential opponent Hillary Clinton,

who infamously declared that 'you can put half of Trump's supporters into what I call the basket of deplorables…they're racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic - you name it' (BBC News 2016). There are of course elements of truth here, but, as was explored previously, a key part of Trump's victory was the swing amongst sections of the working class in key rustbelt states that had previously voted for Barack Obama (Walley 2017). These are workers who have borne the brunt of economic dislocation and deindustrialisation and have seen little but a stultifying neoliberal consensus at the party political level (Mitchell and Fazi 2017). Large sections of this disenfranchised, predominantly white, working class voted for Trump, effectively ceded to him because of 'the relative dearth of vibrant voices on the democratic Left who have spoken to its grievances' (Connolly 2017: 32). To dismiss them is to fall into Lucan's folly, of disregarding the one social force that can break the fetters of Caesarism and found a progressive politics. To do this, however, a new class politics, including many of those disenfranchised workers who voted for Trump, is needed. In Gramsci's terms, an intense organising effort is needed so that an electorate increasingly dissatisfied with neoliberalism can pass to a new level of political activity. As Walley (2017: 235) notes:

> 'Winning the war of interpretation over growing economic inequality requires a resurgence of civic debate that links such inequality back to its origins in neoliberal ideology and policies. Doing so depends on countering the hatred and divisiveness Trump has fostered by working across racial, ethnic, gender, religious, and other lines, as many progressives suggest, in order to create an explicitly multiracial form of class politics.'

Conclusion

In this article we have explored the origins of, and means of struggle against, Caesarism through comparing the world created in Lucan's *Civil War* with the modern American political scene. Through Gramsci, we can see that in both, a period of intense conflict between social classes and a breakdown in hegemony has resulted in the threat of mutually destructive conflict. Amidst a balance in this struggle, third-forces in the shape of Julius Caesar and Donald Trump entered the scene, marketing themselves as capable of surmounting the antagonism and heralding national rebirth. The struggle is in a sense "frozen" by a leader who manages to obtain a degree of autonomy from traditional forces and institutions that would be unthinkable in a period of relatively stable hegemony of an historical bloc.

Through a close analysis of both cases, we were better able to concretise the abstract distinction Gramsci (1971) makes between progressive/regressive and qualitative/quantitative Caesarism. In particular, whereas Lucan's work speaks of a progressive and qualitative Caesarism, Trump's Caesarism is of a regressive and quantitative character. As such, and being cognisant of the enormous differences in the production system underpinning both societies, it is clear that Trump is not Caesar and the current situation in America is not a simple re-run of a transhistorical Roman experience.

However, this understanding should not blind us to important similarities. In both cases, an authoritarian leader speaks to a "people" that have been excluded from the political processes of the ruling class. An important segment amongst this people is an impoverished and disaffected working class, to which Caesar and Trump directly appeal. The support thus gained is directed against established political institutions, and goes hand in hand with an intensification of the role of the military in political life. These developments form part of the essential character of Gramsci's concept; in the absence of these features, we cannot meaningfully speak of Caesarism.

Rooted in the Marxist idea that the point of historical study is not merely to interpret the world but to change it, the article paid special attention to what Lucan can give back to the Caesarist concept, in particular through focusing on the limitations of his methods of struggle against Caesarism. As a member of a wealthy aristocratic family, Lucan is naturally drawn toward the heroic struggle of the virtuous individual against Caesar's depredations, captured best in his hero Cato the Younger. However, the latter's eventual suicide in a world conquered by Caesar demonstrates the futility of a struggle revolving on this axis. Lucan is ultimately incapable of understanding the necessity of collective class struggle against Caesarist regimes. His failure on this score should sound a warning bell against contemporary attempts to discredit or vilify the working class forces required to tackle American Caesarism. Only through lifting this class into new levels of political activity (in Gramsci's terms) can the Caesarist stalemate be broken and the still inchoate and malleable mould of American Caesarism be broken.

Postscript

As this article goes to press, the political situation in the United States of America has drastically shifted. More than 100,000 Americans have been killed by COVID-19 in a once-in-a-century pandemic. Widespread protests have erupted in American cities in response to the killing of George Floyd, yet another African American victim of police brutality. It isn't too much to say that the very fabric of American society appears to be breaking down.

These developments indicate that American Caesarism is at a cross-roads. Given that Caesarism is predicated upon the ability of a third force to mediate and arbitrate social antagonism, we can say that the current political turmoil is evidence of Trump's failing in this role. In the midst of a

rapidly evolving situation, potential solutions to an apparently insoluble state of crisis must necessarily be somewhat speculative. That being said, it is the author's contention that two possible routes of escape present themselves:

1. **An intensification of American Caesarism**, **up to and including a shift in its character towards a more qualitative bent.** This would entail the Trump administration more radically assailing the extant political and juridical structure. There are already some early troubling indications on this front, foremost amongst them Trump's threat to deploy the military to quell the protest movement. It is important to recall the point made above – Caesarism not only strengthens the military, but attempts to institutionalise it as part and parcel of the daily political life of the community. A widespread use of the military to crack down on protests and abnegate core constitutional rights, such as the rights to free speech, peaceful assembly and a free press (all of which are already suffering at the hands of the police), might solve the current crisis through transforming the American state into an openly authoritarian one. Such a development could be considered the creation of a more qualitative Caesarist state, an outcome the author considered unlikely at the time of writing the original article. These events necessarily qualify that assertion.
2. **A mass social movement that neuters the Trump presidency.** What we are seeing on American streets today is the further development of what Gramsci (1971) noted as a necessary condition of Caesarism – the entry of large masses drawn from subaltern social classes onto a new plane of political activity. The core of the protest movement is working class African Americans that are rebelling against a police apparatus that routinely kills them with apparent impunity. However, allies to this movement are

> appearing from many different quarters, including other sections of the working class, university students and high-profile supporters in the arts and entertainment industry. There is the potential for this movement to cohere as the new form of multi-racial class politics Walley (2017) observed was necessary to combat and defeat Trump. At a bare minimum this movement could organise to elect a new president in November, but to minimise the damage Trump and his administration can cause between now and then, it must be willing to directly confront the President and actively seek to stymie his efforts at creating a more authoritarian state.

Which of these two outcomes is more likely currently hangs in the balance. Those who would seek to combat Caesarism must fight to realise the second. In any event, Lucan's words, which so powerfully captured the spirit of his age, come back to both haunt and inspire us today:

> '…The day had come that would
>
> establish the fate of human affairs for ages,
>
> and in that clash they were struggling over
>
> what Rome [*America*] was to be – this was clear to all' (Lucan 2012: 184, text added).

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[i] Such a reading of Lucan, whilst important on its own terms, also has a very real proximate significance to the modern academy. At present, Australian universities are grappling with an explicit attempt by the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation to establish degrees in Western civilisation. The prospective degrees are styled as "great books" courses, centred on key works of the Western canon (of which Lucan is undoubtedly part). The political orientation of the Centre was made clear by board member and former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott, who declared that the Centre is 'not merely about Western civilisation but in favour of it' (Abbott 2018). It is thus clear that the canonical works of the so-called Western tradition stand to assume fresh political importance.

[ii] "Bonapartism" also arose as part of the attempt to conceptualise the character of the states of the two Bonapartes. It is a term with some standing in Marxist work, beginning with Marx's

(2001) incisive *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. It also assumed central importance in Trotsky's work, particularly in his analysis of the class character of Stalin's regime (see, for example, Trotsky 1972). The two terms are often used interchangeably, with Keucheyan and Durand (2015: 30) noting that 'Gramsci himself establishes this link, as he uses several times the phrase "Caesarism or Bonapartism" in the *Prison Notebooks*.' Ultimately, this article employs the term Caesarism for two reasons, one conceptual, the other a matter of the author's taste. Regarding the former, it has been noted that Gramsci's Caesarism 'introduces significant theoretical innovations into the Marxist tradition' (Keucheyan and Durand 2015: 30). Using the term Caesarism in this strict sense thus foregrounds Gramsci's unique contribution. Concerning the latter reason, it seems appropriate to use the term Caesarism when interrogating a text that was concerned with the rise of the original Caesar.

[iii] For some welcome exceptions, see Fontana (2004), Keucheyan and Durand (2015), De Smet (2016) and Ertekin (2019). There is a considerable body of non-English work which, due to the limitations of the author, are not dealt with here. For a representative sample, see Fontana (2004).

[iv] Indeed, Gramsci (1971: 220) notes that '[a] Caesarist solution can exist even without a Caesar, without any great, "heroic" and representative personality.' In this context he discusses the operation of the parliamentary system and coalition governments. This understanding has been developed by Keucheyan and Durand (2015) into their concept of "bureaucratic Caesarism."

[v] Gramsci's use of the term Caesarism is in a sense evidence of this method, with De Smet (2016: 98) noting that it was 'an ironic appropriation of the comparison made by Fascists between Mussolini and Julius Caesar.'

[vi] For more on Gramsci's method of historicising concepts, see Morton (2007).

[vii] It is clear that fascist regimes exhibit these features also. Fascism can regarded as a distinctive form of regressive Caesarism that qualitatively forges a new state form. In this sense, all fascist regimes are Caesarist but not all Caesarist states are fascist. This means that the arguments made in this article can be read alongside those invoking the idea of twenty-first century fascism (see, for example, Robinson 2019) regardless of whether or not one would actually label Trump's America as fascist (and the author does not).

[viii] In terms of the actual history covered, *Civil War* opens with the beginning of the conflict, before tracing Caesar's march through Italy and Pompey's flight, the war in Spain and the climactic battle at Pharsalus. The text concludes with Pompey's suicide, the march of Cato through the desert, and Caesar's Alexandrian campaign.

[ix] Contrary to popular conceptions of the Roman political system, the Senate did not have a monopoly of political power. Technically speaking, it lacked a legislative capacity (although in practice it exercised something resembling this). Direct legislative power rested with the assemblies, which included the Plebeian Council. The Council operated as a direct democracy, and all free Roman citizens who were commoners belonged. The body elected two magistrates annually, known as the Tribunes of the Plebs. This office wielded immense power, including a veto right over other political bodies. The radicalisation of this office under the Gracchi played a great role in the destabilisation of the late Republic, and is completely comprehensible in Gramsci's terminology of the masses passing from a period of quiescence into political activity.

[x] Coffee (2011: 418) describes these values thus: 'An individual showed *pietas* if he or she carried out duties toward family, community, and the gods. *Fides* was the sense of loyalty and trust that led one to fulfill such obligations. *Gratia* was the generous good will that affirmed existing relationships and initiated new ones.'

[xi] Given the aforementioned description Meiksins Wood (2012) makes about the explicitly class-based character of Roman social struggle, we can further specify that these processes are not just superficially similar. Both have as their pivot the struggle between distinct classes.

[xii] It is worth noting at this point that African-Americans, whose socio-economic indicators are worse at the macro-level than white Americans, overwhelmingly voted Democrat. This reality tells us that there is a racial fragmentation of working-class votes. Due to space constraints we cannot explore this further beyond observing that such cleavages in the class structure do not invalidate the class basis of Caesarism, but complexify it. Indeed, in the manner of Poulantzas (2000), it emphasises the necessity of understanding class fractions and the political constellations they can form.

[xiii] It is beyond the scope of this article to explore his intensive use of this platform. For a useful overview, see Fuchs (2017).