

# The Philosopher Napoleon III

THE INFLUENCE OF FICHTE AND HEGEL IN THE WRITINGS OF  
THE FRENCH EMPEROR



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#### Abstract:

Napoleon III and his political career have been closely studied by many historians. Remarkably, his own publications have received little attention from those who tried to understand Napoleon III. In his writings, Napoleon III revealed a philosophical view, determining his view on the world, and forming the basis for his political ambitions, actions and achievements. Being raised and educated in Augsburg, the contemporary German philosophers Fichte and Hegel are strongly present in Napoleon III's view, as their ideas stood central in the German intellectual society during the time that Napoleon III was educated there. His ideas on history, modernity and nationality are extremely similar to those of Fichte and Hegel, as is his use of terminology. Comparing the work of these German philosophers and Napoleon III's own publications, enables us to understand his philosophical view, which is fundamental to fully understand his motivations and actions during his twenty years as a ruler.

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## Introduction

When Louis Napoleon Bonaparte was born on the 20<sup>th</sup> of April 1808, his parents, Louis Bonaparte of Holland, brother of Napoleon Bonaparte, and Hortense de Beauharnois, were no longer together and his father was not there to witness the birth of their third son. They bore each other little love as their marriage had been arranged by Hortense's mother, empress Josephine de Beauharnois. As she had no children with the emperor, Josephine hoped to secure an heir for the empire via her daughter of a previous marriage and the emperor's brother.<sup>1</sup>

This did not mean that Louis Napoleon was first in line of succession, as he had an older brother, Napoléon Charles Bonaparte, and Napoleon Bonaparte had a son himself with his second wife, who was born in 1811. Nonetheless, he was raised with a strong love for the empire, with a devotion from his mother that did not abate after 1815, when the family went in exile after the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte at Waterloo.<sup>2</sup>

Most of his childhood, he spent in Augsburg with his mother. While there, he learned German and received a German education.<sup>3</sup> During the formative years in which Louis Napoleon received his education in Augsburg, the foundations for the German nation were laid by thinkers such as Johann Gotlieb Fichte. Along with Friedrich Hegel, Fichte explained history as a singular development towards an end. Fichte used this idea to defend the concept of the German nation, which they saw as something natural, with its own organic cycle of growth.<sup>4</sup> During his education, Louis Napoleon developed a love for history, liberty and modernity.<sup>5</sup>

After the deaths of his brother and cousin, in respectively 1831 and 1832, Louis Napoleon was the last heir of Napoleon Bonaparte and his empire. Despite the absence of an empire to govern, he started to prepare himself for this task, studying economics and social problems and publishing his own ideas on political topics.<sup>6</sup> Among these were *Des Idées Napoléoniennes*, *the Extinction of Pauperism* and later the *History of Julius Caesar*. When he finally got to power in 1848, first as president and later as emperor Napoleon III in 1852, he sought to bring his ideas of liberty and modernity into practice. He argued for universal male suffrage, fought poverty and built new infrastructure, such as railroads and canals, to support the economy.<sup>7</sup> Being raised in Bavaria, the ideas of the German philosophers resonated in his own works. When Louis Napoleon was staying in London, Queen Victoria

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Strauss-Schom, *The Shadow Emperor: A Biography of Napoleon III* (New York 2018), pp. 9-25.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>4</sup> Hagen Schulze, , *States, Nations and Nationalism*, (Oxford 1996, trans. William E. Yuill), pp.159-231

<sup>5</sup> Strauss-Schlom, *The Shadow Emperor*, p.9-25

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>7</sup> Roger Price, *The French Second Empire: An Anatomy of Power*, (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 210-251

remarked that 'he [Louis Napoléon] is very fond of Germany ... and there is much that is German, and very little—in fact, nothing—markedly French in his character'.<sup>8</sup>

Despite Napoleon III's interests in philosophy and history and his many writings on these topics, he was no great or innovative thinker. He did not create a new school of thought or had particularly insightful comments on other philosophers. Nevertheless, he did create a philosophical view of the world for himself by combining the works of other philosophers, which formed the basis for his writings and political actions. This paper will attempt to answer the question how Fichte and Hegel influenced the philosophical view of Napoleon III and particularly his view on history, nationality and political development.

Napoleon III's philosophical view can be understood through the philosophies of Fichte and Hegel, by analyzing Napoleon III's view and understanding of history as he expresses it in his publications. This focus on history and development is chosen as it is the most prominent present in Napoleon III's publications and show the impact of his education in Germany.

Napoleon III's political career has closely been studied and documented, but there has been little attention for his own publications. The way the political career of Napoleon has been explained was often influenced by the author's own political context and profile, as Scottish historian McMillan points out.<sup>9</sup> Most striking is Victor Hugo, a famous Romanticist novelist, who named Napoleon III 'Napoleon le Petite' and named him a bandit and accused him of owing his success to his name and wealth rather than any particular skills.<sup>10</sup> Another example is the French historian Pierre de la Groce, a catholic conservative who deemed Napoleon III's problem to be that he was a visionary, Utopian and worst of all, an adventurer.<sup>11</sup> A more recent approach is by Welsh Historian Roger Price. He uses power structures such as institutions, political opposition and international relations to explain the reign of Napoleon III.<sup>12</sup> Another approach of Napoleon III is by Roger Lawrence Williams, another American historian, who attempts to understand Napoleon III based on his medical records.<sup>13</sup> Both Rice and Williams use specific theories to interpret Napoleon III, thereby neglecting the understanding of his career that Napoleon III had himself.

An exception to this general neglect is the work of Australian historian Michele Cunningham, who uses correspondence of Napoleon III to understand his motivation for his campaign in Mexico, which will be elaborated in chapter 3. Although Cunningham does not go so far to construct

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<sup>8</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>9</sup> James F. McMillan, *Napoleon III*, (New York, 1991), pp.1-4

<sup>10</sup> Hugo, Victor, *Napoleon the Little*, 1852

<sup>11</sup> McMillan, *Napoleon III*, pp.1-14

<sup>12</sup> Price, *The French Second Empire*, pp.253-402

<sup>13</sup> Roger Lawrence Williams, *The Mortal Napoleon III*, (New Jersey, 2015)

a philosophical view of Napoleon III, she does use his own writings to understand why he did what he did, which is rare in the historiography on Napoleon III.

A more common denominator of many works on Napoleon III is that his legacy is largely overshadowed by his defeat in the war of 1870. For many, this is cause to remember him as a failure. However, American historian Alan Schlom attempts to break with this view. He portrays Napoleon III as a father of modern France, who reshaped the urban plan of the city Paris, France's infrastructure and economy.<sup>14</sup> He does so by focusing on Napoleon III's person, rather than surrounding circumstances, as many of his predecessors did. Most notably, he points out that 'No one can begin to understand Napoléon III without fully comprehending the significance of that negative father-son relationship'.<sup>15</sup> It is remarkable that while Schlom's biography of Napoleon III is extensive, it pays no more attention to Napoleon III's own writings than his predecessors did. The political and philosophical view, through which Napoleon III viewed the world and which shaped his career as sovereign, has lacked attention from historians. This paper attempts to offer an understanding of Napoleon III's writings and political career through his own view of the world.

In order to see to what extent the German philosophers Fichte and Hegel have influenced Napoleon III and his politics, a number of texts written by Napoleon III will be examined. These include the aforementioned *Des Idées Napoléoniennes*, *the History of Julius Caesar*, and *the Extinction of Pauperism* by Napoleon III himself. For this research, the English translations of these publications will be used, as the undersigned does not read French. The first two publications are historical works, that will be assessed for the teleological view of history as both Fichte and Hegel explained it. In *the Extinction of Pauperism*, Napoleon III explains his ideas for the modernization of France and will be examined for the concept of a destined future, such as both Fichte and Hegel believed to exist.

Firstly, the ideas of Hegel and Fichte, which will be explained to be the foundation of Napoleon III's own writings, will be examined, as well as their presence in Napoleon III's education. Once established, Napoleon III writings will be examined based on this foundation, to see to what extent the German philosophers are present in his own ideas. The final chapter will try to measure whether Napoleon's political actions as a sovereign matched the ideas and ambitions in his writings.

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<sup>14</sup> Strauss-Schlom, "The Shadow Emperor"

<sup>15</sup> Strauss-Schlom, "The Shadow Emperor", p.9-25

## 1. The influence of Fichte and Hegel

Napoleon III studied in Augsburg between 1817 and 1828. During those years, the German intellectual environment was heavily influenced by philosophers Fichte and Hegel, whose ideas on history, modernity and society shaped the schooling systems through the notion of *Bildung*, as defined by Wilhelm von Humboldt.<sup>16</sup> These ideas which Napoleon III was first introduced to during the formative years of his late childhood and youth would greatly shape his views on history, politics and society and are key to understanding his later career and writings. This chapter will look into the philosophies of Fichte and Hegel how they influenced Napoleon III during his education in Germany. Although there is hardly any literature on Napoleon III's time in Augsburg and his education, it is possible to paint a picture. Based on the works of Humboldt and literature on education in Germany during the nineteenth century, an approximation of what Napoleon III's education was like can be made. The presence of Fichte and Hegel's philosophies in Napoleon III's works, as will be elaborated in chapter 2, will be an argument for this approximation.

### Fichte

On Sunday 13 December 1807, the year before Napoleon III was born, Johann Gottlieb Fichte spoke in the Berlin Academy of Sciences. This speech would be the first of a series of fourteen lectures, collectively known as the *Addresses to the German Nation*. This series contained a story of prophecy and determinism, telling the tale of a nation, addressed to that same nation. However, the nation that it was addressed to, was for the larger part unaware that it was indeed a nation.<sup>17</sup>

In the early nineteenth century, German nationalism was virtually non-existent. Prussian nationalism existed, Bavarian nationalism existed, but a common German identity did not yet exist. This did not necessarily mean that there was no German nation. According to Fichte, it had always existed, ever since the Teutonic tribes defeated the Romans. And when he gave his series of lectures, right after the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, he believed the time had come for the Germans to become aware of their shared language, history and identity.<sup>18</sup>

Fichte believed that history consisted of five epochs. The first being the 'State of Innocence', characterized by noble savagery. The second era is that of 'Progressive Sin', for its absolutism and unconditional obedience to authority. The third era is the 'State of Completed Sinfulness'. This era was one of arid intellectualism, empty freedom and unrestrained licentiousness. And according to Fichte, this age had abruptly ended with the French Revolution and chaos of the Napoleonic wars. Thus, at

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<sup>16</sup> Johan Östling, *Humboldt and the Modern German University : An Intellectual History*, (Lund, 2018) p.35-43

<sup>17</sup> Gregory Moore, *Introduction to Fichte: Addresses to the German Nation*, (Cambridge, 2009), pp. Xi-Xxxvi

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem.



that moment in 1807, history stood at the beginning of the fourth epoch, the 'State of Progressive Justification', in which truth would be held in the highest regard, until finally in the fifth epoch, the 'State of Completed Justification and Sanctification', mankind would be conscious, free and build a social order based on these foundations.<sup>19</sup>

The connecting theme throughout these epochs is the nation. The nation is eternal, transcendental and thus a way to give meaning to a temporary life. It is the manifestation of the divine, the natural order in which the world was created, the nation is the kingdom of heaven on earth. Thus, true patriotism is much more than civic pride or constitutional loyalty, it is about the recognition of the eternity of the fatherland. And to successfully enter the fourth epoch of history, people had to become aware of this and become patriots in the true sense of the word. For the fourth epoch has truth as highest value and the nation is truth.<sup>20</sup>

It is clear that Fichte's works have deep Christian inclinations and are eschatological at their core. He sees history moving towards truth, and with truth, towards freedom. This truth is thus followed by a utopia-like final stage of history, much like the Apocalypse reveals ultimate truth before the Kingdom of God arrives.

## Hegel

The idea of history as a development with a direction and end goal as Fichte depicts it was a fashionable one at the time. It would continue to be while Napoleon III was staying in Germany, and long after. In the same year Fichte started his series of lectures, another German philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, published '*Phänomenologie des Geistes*'.<sup>21</sup>

In this monumental work, Hegel explained history as the development of the *Geist*. The *Geist* is an ill-definable sort of spirit or awareness. Hegel distinguishes three forms of the *Geist*. He sees the (1) subjective *Geist*, which is the individual human awareness that strives to freedom and self-awareness; the (2) objective *Geist*, which consists of the social institutions of morality and justice that realizes the free will, and finally the (3) absolute *Geist*, the embodiment of the highest form of self-realization in art, philosophy and religion. Additionally, Hegel speaks of a *Volksgeist*, a *Geist* of a people or a nation, which is the result of the development of the *Geist* in history, aligning his philosophy with that of Fichte.<sup>22</sup> The world we experience is according to Hegel a product of the *Geist*. Because the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>21</sup> Michiel Leezenberg, Gerard De Vries, *Wetenschapsfilosofie voor geesteswetenschappen*, (Amsterdam, 2017), pp.149-153

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem.

Geist develops, the world it has created is no longer the world it aligns with and thus the Geist negates the world until they realign once again and a new cycle begins.

This development of history through the opposing objective world and the Geist is what Hegel calls dialectics.<sup>23</sup> Through dialectics, opposing forms meet and become a new form, which is in turn opposed and so on. The objective world, the status quo, or the thesis, is challenged by the development of the Geist, the antithesis, becoming a new objective world, the synthesis. After which this objective world is in turn also challenged and becomes the new status quo and thus the new thesis and the development of history continuous, every synthesis being a next chapter in history.<sup>24</sup> When eventually the Geist is fully developed, the objective world will align with it definitively. Self-realization, ratio and religion will then be fulfilled, for scientific reasoning will no longer be dependent on external empirical findings and is thus no longer ending and unfree. According to Hegel, this final realization was achieved by his own thinking.<sup>25</sup>

Hegel's and Fichte's philosophies on history have strong similarities. Both explained history as having direction and possessing a goal that it moves towards, and both saw freedom to be central in that end goal. Hegel explained this development to be the result of opposing forces, which he named dialectics. For Fichte, the nation was the central connection throughout history. Although Hegel did see the nation in a similar way, he does not place it as central in his philosophy as Fichte did.

### Napoleon III's education

Few sources are available about Napoleon III's time in Augsburg. His education is a subject that gets little or no treatment in the biographies of Napoleon III. However, there is literature available on education in general in the early nineteenth century in Germany, which makes it possible to construct the contours of the education of Napoleon III.

The ideas of Fichte and Hegel reached the young Napoleon III via the work of another German who was influenced by the ideas of Hegel as well. Wilhelm von Humboldt used Hegel's notion of dialectics as the basis of his concept of *Bildung*. This concept, which lacks a proper English translation, is a pedagogical concept of education, development and self-cultivation. The idea behind this was to break with traditional education curriculums and rather develop what Humboldt called *Humanität*.<sup>26</sup> The realization of the individual potential would take place through a dialectical movement between the self and its surroundings and cultural environment. This also meant that this realization was inherently related to history. Through this dynamic, one could approach what Humboldt imagined to

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<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, p. 165-170

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>26</sup> Östling, *Humboldt and the Modern German University : An Intellectual History*, pp.35-43

be truly human.<sup>27</sup> He attempted to realize his ideas of Bildung when he was involved in the founding of the University of Berlin in 1809.<sup>28</sup>

When Napoleon III started his education in Augsburg in 1817, the ideas of these philosophers stood central in German intellectual society. Fichte addressed his series directly to the most prominent intellectuals of Germany of that time and Hegel's work overshadowed all other philosophers until the 1860s.<sup>29</sup> Humboldt's notion of Bildung would eventually shape universities throughout Europe and the western world for the next two centuries.<sup>30</sup> During the same period, more universities were established in Germany, following the model of the University of Berlin. Rather than focusing on tuition, these universities aimed at combining research and education, preparing their students for both academic life and careers in law and state affairs.<sup>31</sup>

Another signature aspect of German education in the early nineteenth century was the *Gymnasium*. This was designed for the elite class to prepare them for the higher education that the universities offered. Like the universities, it was often run by the state or other local authorities and stood apart of the popular schooling tracks.<sup>32</sup> Although these Gymnasia were in many ways similar to other secondary education throughout Europe, the Gymnasia were characteristic German, for like most secondary education in Europe, it focused on the nation and its teachings were steered by political motives. The Gymnasia were used to create a unified national elite and by doing so, played a vital role in making people aware of their nation in the way Fichte had intended it.<sup>33</sup>

Although Napoleon III and his mother were in Augsburg as exiles, they were still a royal family held in high regard and Napoleon III was educated on the level of the German elites.<sup>34</sup> Although here is little written about his youth in Germany and his education, it is likely that he received an education similar to those given in the German Gymnasia where he was introduced to the ideas of Hegel and Fichte. Even though he was no part of the nation or national elite, it is safe to assume that the concepts of the nation were very present in his lessons, as was the academic fashion of the time. This assumption is further supported by the presence of these ideas in Napoleon III's later writings, as will be seen in chapter 2.

When Napoleon III underwent his education in Augsburg between 1817 and 1828, Fichte and Hegel dominated the intellectual environment of Germany. They offered an explanation for history

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<sup>27</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>28</sup> Gerd Hohendorf, *Wilhelm von Humboldt*, (1993), pp.665-676

<sup>29</sup> Moore, *Introduction to. Fichte: Addresses to the German Nation*, pp. Xi-Xxxvi

<sup>30</sup> Hohendorf, *Wilhelm von Humboldt*

<sup>31</sup> Ulrike Deppe, *World Yearbook of Education* (Abbingdon, 2015), pp.82-95.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Anderson (2004) *The Idea of the Secondary Schoolin Nineteenth-century Europe*, *Paedagogica Historica*, 40:1-2, pp.93-106

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>34</sup> Strauss-Schlom, *"The Shadow Emperor"*, p.9-25

and mankind's current place in it that involved direction, purpose and, in a sense, a sort of destiny. The nation stood central in both the philosophical and political debates of the time. The development of the nation would lead to freedom, fulfillment and self-realization. Through the ideas of Humboldt and his notion of Bildung, these ideas flowed through the educational systems of the time to the students such as Napoleon III. During the formative years of his childhood and youth, when he first came in touch with these concepts and ideas, he developed a strong interest in the central themes of these philosophies and in history. In the next chapters, the influence of these themes and philosophies in his own works will be examined.

## 2. Napoleon III and his writings

In 1839, nearly a decade before Napoleon III came to power, he wrote *Des Idées Napoléoniennes*.<sup>35</sup> In this book, he turned Bonapartism from a nostalgic memory of the days of Napoleon Bonaparte into a political ideology. He elaborates why Napoleon Bonaparte was destined to rule France and why he himself is destined to succeed his uncle.<sup>36</sup> He prepared himself for this historical task and in 1847, a year before he would be elected president, he publishes his essay *Extinction Du Paupérisme*, in which he gives his view on the economic situation of France and how to better it.<sup>37</sup> After he had once more turned France into an empire in 1852, he writes a history of Julius Caesar which was published in 1865.<sup>38</sup> In this historical work, he explains a parallel between the Roman Empire and his contemporary France and uses the legacy of Julius Caesar to legitimate his own rule.<sup>39</sup>

These writings of Napoleon III are not a major theme in historical debates. In *The French Second Empire* by Roger Price, only Napoleon III's work on pauperism is mentioned once and Schlom's *Shadow Emperor* only betters that by an additional single mention of *The history of Julius Caesar*. This *History of Julius Caesar* is on itself part of a historical debate on the legacy of Caesar, but rarely discussed in the context of Napoleon III's philosophy.<sup>40</sup>

Of course, there is an argument to be made to pay little attention to Napoleon III's writings. Although he was very interested in history and philosophy and put many of his thoughts on paper, he was neither particularly insightful nor innovative. This would seem to make it a legitimate choice to pay the philosopher Napoleon III little attention and focus on the ruler Napoleon III instead. However, even if Napoleon III added little depth to existing ideas, it is still interesting to see which contemporary ideas he used as the basis for his political career. The philosopher Napoleon III and the politician Napoleon III are inseparable, even if they were not equally successful. Therefore, understanding the politician Napoleon III, means understanding the philosophy of Napoleon III.

In this chapter the argument will be made that Napoleon III's philosophical view, the fundament for his political ideas and career, was founded on the ideas of Fichte and Hegel as explained in chapter 1. In order to do so, the works of Napoleon III will be compared to the philosophical

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<sup>35</sup> Napoleon III, *Des Idées Napoléoniennes*, (Brussels, 1859, trans. James A. Dorr

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>37</sup> Napoleon III, *Extinction of Pauperism*, (London, 1847)

<sup>38</sup> Napoleon III, *History of Julius Caesar*, (London, 1865, trans. Petter Cassell)

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>40</sup> Richardson, E. (2016) "The Emperor's Caesar: Napoleon III, Karl Marx and the History of Julius Caesar", in *Graeco-Roman antiquity and the idea of nationalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: case studies*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Richter, Melvin. "A family of political concepts: tyranny, despotism, bonapartism, caesarism, dictatorship, 1750-1917." *European Journal of Political Theory* 4.3 (2005): 221-248

foundations elaborated in the previous chapter. Firstly, the common understanding of both Fichte and Hegel that history has direction and an end goal will be discussed in this context, secondly, the development of this direction through dialectics as explained by Hegel, and finally, the role of the nation in this development as explained by Fichte.

### A direction in history

A common notion of both Fichte and Hegel is the direction of history. This concept is strongly present throughout the works of Napoleon III as well. He believes society to be marching ever onwards, regardless of obstacles, continuing without intermission. In his *Des Idées Napoléoniennes*, he quotes Blaise Pascal who stated that 'The human race is a man who never dies, and always advances towards perfection', which he remarks to be a 'Sublime image of profound truth'.<sup>41</sup> That this advancement or progress is indeed an eternal process becomes clear when looking at history, according to Napoleon III. He refers to the road of civilization, which is laid by the great men, the milestones in history, who each surpass one another towards the end. He points out that Caesar followed Alexander, Constantine followed Caesar, Charlemagne followed Constantine and finally Napoleon Bonaparte followed Charlemagne.<sup>42</sup>

As history has direction, it cannot be shaped by coincidence. Napoleon III states in his preface of *the History of Julius Caesar* that a great effect is always due to a great cause. An accident or other insignificant act cannot lead to any result of importance without a pre-existing greater cause, a development long in the making.<sup>43</sup> These pre-existing causes, epochs in history, are shaped by the great men of history, such as the aforementioned Alexander, Caesar, Constantine, Charlemagne and Napoleon Bonaparte.<sup>44</sup>

He then states that the direction in which history is to develop, the path mankind has to follow, is laid out by these great men: great geniuses of history brand a new era in history. It is therefore regrettable, Napoleon III states, that so many historians have tried to diminish the genius of these great men of history and ascribe their accomplishments to all kinds of surrounding circumstances rather than acknowledging their geniuses that shape the course of history.<sup>45</sup>

This division of history into chapters or eras or epochs, which Napoleon III uses, but does not elaborate on, is strikingly similar to the terminology used by both Hegel and Fichte. It is also a common use of discourse in Napoleon III's writings. The term 'epoch' is reoccurring in all works here discussed,

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<sup>41</sup> Napoleon III, *Des Idées Napoléoniennes*

<sup>42</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>43</sup> Napoleon III, *History of Julius Caesar*

<sup>44</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>45</sup> Ibidem.

with the exception of his work on pauperism. This use of terminology highlights the influence of the German philosophy.

Similarly, the discourse of the development of history can be found repeatedly in Napoleon III's works. In his essay on pauperism, he writes 'It is a great and holy mission and worthy of man's highest ambition (...) by accelerating that future which civilization will sooner or later usher in.'<sup>46</sup> In his historical fragment on the British Glorious Revolution of 1688, he writes 'there is a general cause which regulates events, and which makes them really dependent on each other.'<sup>47</sup>

Another sign of Napoleon III's perception of time and history containing a direction is his belief in destiny. In many of his writings, he refers to his own destiny, the destiny of France, of all nations or civilization in general.<sup>48</sup> That destiny is indeed a driving force of history, working towards a specific goal he expresses in *Julius Caesar*: 'It is well worthy of our attention that, when destiny is driving a state of things towards an aim, there is, by a law of fate, a concurrence of all forces in the same direction'.<sup>49</sup> This faith in destiny derives from Fichte and Hegel's notion of a direction and end goal in history. Destiny is the path towards that end goal in Napoleon III's works.

The idea of history that both Fichte and Hegel believed to exist, that it has direction and a goal, is thoroughly present in the writings of Napoleon III. He uses the terminology that is unmistakably similar to that of the German philosophers, not just considering the development of history, but also in dividing history into separate chapters or epochs. The role of these German philosophers, and thus his German education, becomes clear through this use of terminology.

## Dialectics

Another recurring theme in Napoleon III's writings is Hegel's notion of dialectics. Various problems in society that he distinguishes, he attributes to opposing forces. He states that life has two natures or instincts, 'one divine, which tends towards perfection, the other mortal, which tends towards corruption.'<sup>50</sup> Napoleon III saw this as a common denominator in all nations, each one instinctively strives towards improvement, but has, what he calls, a disease which paralyses its efforts. He sees this dialectic reoccurring time and again as the two sides of the same coin. He states: 'When the panorama of history is unrolled before our eyes, we find there always these two great

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<sup>46</sup> Napoleon III, *Extinction of Pauperism*

<sup>47</sup> Napoleon III, *Political and Historical Works of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, President of the French Republic. Now First Collected. With an Original Memoir of His Life, Brought Down to the Promulgation of the Constitution of 1852; and Occasional Notes*, (1852), pp. 397

<sup>48</sup> Napoleon III, *Des Idees Napoléoniennes* pp.11, 15, 22, 35, 117, 131

Napoleon III, *Political and Historical Works of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte* pp.21, 403, 411, 417, 413, 433, 435

Napoleon III, *History of Julius Caesar*, pp.25,397,415,

<sup>49</sup> Napoleon III, *History of Julius Caesar*, pp.397

<sup>50</sup> Napoleon III, *Des Idees Napoléoniennes*, pp.16

phenomena'.<sup>51</sup> According to Napoleon III it is the role of governments to overcome the second phenomena, the paralyzing disease, and to advance its society through the stages of history.<sup>52</sup> Or as he puts it in *Extinction of Pauperism*, 'To govern, means no longer to rule the people by violence and physical force, but the art of conducting them towards a more glorious future'.<sup>53</sup> It are therefore the great men of history who open the new chapters in history as they lead their governments in overcoming this disease, as he writes in *Julius Caesar*: 'when Providence raises up such men as Caesar, Charlemagne, and Napoleon, it is to trace out to peoples the path they ought to follow'.<sup>54</sup>

This distinction between the divine and the mortal is very similar to Hegel's distinction between the Geist and the world we experience. The Geist is ever-developing, just like the divine phenomenon that Napoleon III sees ever tends towards perfection. And it is ever opposed by the experienced world, like the divine phenomenon is opposed by the mortal nature or disease.<sup>55</sup>

The use of Hegel's terminology becomes even clearer when Napoleon III gives his thought on the French Revolution and the following period in *Des Idées Napoléoniennes*. He names the *Ancient Regime* the Old, challenged by the new ideas of the French Revolution, which easily translates to the Hegelian thesis and antithesis. This clash of opposing forces leads to chaos 'until at length Napoleon appeared, cleared up the chaos (...) and reduced to synthesis, all those great principles'.<sup>56</sup> This explanation of the French Revolution was very similar to the way both Fichte and Hegel explained it and Napoleon III uses the same terminology explicitly. However, Napoleon III sees a role for himself in this development of history as well.

After the French Revolution, it had befallen to Napoleon Bonaparte to spread this synthesis, the deepest truth of the Revolution, among the European nations. It was then to be expected that he was met with severe resistance, leading to the Napoleonic wars until 1815. The defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte had left the responsibility to spread this new truth to Napoleon III. Napoleon III saw this resistance as inevitable: 'The common lot of every new risen truth is to alarm rather than persuade, to wound rather than convince. This is because it projects itself with greater force, as it has been longer restrained; because, having obstacles to overcome, it must contend and overthrow, until, understood and adopted by the general mass, it becomes the basis of a new social order'.<sup>57</sup>

In other words, the conflict of opposing forces leads to a new foundation for society, a new status quo. The synthesis becomes the new thesis for the next cycle. His view of the Revolution and

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<sup>51</sup> Ibidem p.17

<sup>52</sup> Ibidem p.16-21

<sup>53</sup> Napoleon III, *Extinction of Pauperism*

<sup>54</sup> Napoleon III, *History of Julius Caesar*, pp.xiv

<sup>55</sup> Leezenberg, De Vries, *Wetenschapsfilosofie voor geesteswetenschappen*

<sup>56</sup> Napoleon III, *Des Idées Napoléoniennes*, pp.23

<sup>57</sup> Ibidem p.24



his own role in it perfectly fits the development of history as described by Hegel. Understanding this motivation of Napoleon III's desire to take the next step in the development of history shaped his political ambitions for France, as will be elaborated in chapter 3.

### The nation

The ideas of Fichte regarding the nation strongly resonate in Napoleon III's writings. When giving his thoughts on government in his *Idees Napoléoniennes* he refers to the nation as a naturally given presence. It is not something that must be created or even protected, as the nation is an eternal fact, the nation should merely be organized.<sup>58</sup>

The presence of Fichte's ideas are even more evident in Napoleon III's works on Roman history. *The History of Julius Caesar* was a symbolic statement with national and imperial intention. He mingled nineteenth-century nationalism with the ancient world in order to solidify the legacy of France and the role of his own imperial position.<sup>59</sup> The work fitted well in the -German- fashion of the time, as in the second half of the nineteenth century *Caesarism* became a popular topic among scholars and historians<sup>60</sup>. With this work, Napoleon III tied the legacy of Julius Caesar to that of his uncle and his own and tied Caesarism to Bonapartism.<sup>61</sup> But the connection he laid in his work was not merely between Julius Caesar and himself, but also between the Roman Empire and France, or more specifically, the French Empire. This connection is not limited to his historical writings, but is present throughout his reign. When he welcomed back home returning soldiers from the Crimean war, he said: 'Soldiers, – I come to meet you, as the Roman Senate of old came to the gates of Rome to meet their victorious legions'.<sup>62</sup> By saying so, he pointed out the continuation of the Roman Empire into the French Second Empire, a continuation through the eternal nature of the nation.

That Napoleon III did not hesitate to reshape history for his own purposes becomes apparent from the fact that not just Caesar, but also his adversary Vercingetorix was presented as a hero of the French nation. In 1865, the same year *Julius Caesar* was published, a statue, over ten meters tall, of Vercingetorix was erected on the site of the Battle of Alesia of 52 B.C., where he was defeated by Caesar, in what is called Caesar's greatest military victory.<sup>63</sup> On the base of the statue, which bore a striking similarity to Napoleon III himself, stood the lines '*La Gaule unie, formant une seule nation, animée d'un même esprit, peut défier l'univers*', which translates to 'A united Gaul, forming a single

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<sup>58</sup> Napoleon III, *Des Idees Napoléoniennes*

<sup>59</sup> Richardson, "The Emperor's Caesar: Napoleon III, Karl Marx and the History of Julius Caesar", pp.113-114

<sup>60</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>61</sup> Richter, Melving, "A Family of Political Concepts Tyranny, Despotism, Bonapartism, Caesarism, Dictatorship, 1750–1917", New York 2005

<sup>62</sup> Richardson, E.(2016) "The Emperor's Caesar: Napoleon III, Karl Marx and the History of Julius Caesar", p.116

<sup>63</sup> John Sadler, Rosie Serdiville, *Caesar's Greatest Victory: The Battle of Alesia, Gaul 52 B.*, (Casemate, 2016)

nation, animated by the same spirit, can challenge the universe'.<sup>64</sup> The implication of the single nation that is both the Gaul of Vercingetorix and the Second Empire of Napoleon III is a clear example of Fichte's notion of the eternal nation.

This connection between two empires separated by eighteen hundred years, was only possible because of the nation. Much like Fichte explained the nation to be the transcendental connection throughout history, Napoleon III uses the eternal presence of the nation to connect himself to Vercingetorix and Julius Caesar and his empire. The connection is therefore much more than a symbolic one that was made, to Napoleon III, it was an ontological one that was explained.

That Napoleon III did indeed consider the nation an ontological fact is apparent from the way he uses the term in his *Idees Napoléoniennes*. Every time he refers to the nation, he does so as if it is something that is and has to be dealt with. This is particularly obvious when he describes Napoleon Bonaparte's method of governing: 'The Emperor Napoleon did not commit the fault of many statesmen - that of desiring to subject the nation to an abstract theory, which becomes, in such case, for a country a bed of Procrustes; he studied, on the contrary, with care, the character of the French people, their wants, and their present condition'.<sup>65</sup> The nation is, and it is to the government or sovereign to shape itself after the nation. 'A constitution should be framed specially for the nation to which it is to be adapted', he states.<sup>66</sup> The nation exists and cannot be made to fit a rulers or governments preferences. The nation is eternal and the governments are temporal, thus it befalls to the government to adjust to nation and not the other way around. This also implicated that a leader that fully understood the nation, was no subject to political disagreements and discussion, which fitted his own role as emperor.<sup>67</sup>

The three most prominent aspects of the philosophies of Fichte and Hegel, the development of history in a certain direction, the dialectics driving this development and the role of the nation throughout history, are central in the philosophical view of Napoleon III as well. Their works have largely influenced Napoleon III's writings and the way he perceives history and his own role in it. In the next chapter, the influence of this view, and Napoleon III's convictions about history, on his political career will be examined.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibidem 118-120

<sup>65</sup> Napoleon III, "Des Idees Napoléoniennes" p.87-88

<sup>66</sup> Ibidem p.86-87

<sup>67</sup> Ibidem.

### 3. Philosophy put into practice

Unlike Napoleon III's writings, his political actions have been studied extensively. His motivations have been explained in various ways, but rarely as a result of his own convictions. For example, historian Roger Price uses power relations between Napoleon III and his political opponents to explain the actions of Napoleon III.<sup>68</sup> Like many historians, he pays little attention to Napoleon III's publications in his analysis. Therefore, he ignores the convictions of Napoleon III regarding politics and his own role in history. Without paying attention to the writings of Napoleon III, his convictions, and his ambitions derived from those convictions, his actions cannot be properly interpreted. It is impossible to fully understand Napoleon III's motives for his actions without the understanding of his view of the world as elaborated in the previous chapters. In this chapter, the actions and achievements of Napoleon III during his political career will be examined based on the philosophical view as established in chapter 1 and 2. Firstly, his economic plan and his reform plan for Paris will be looked at, secondly his colonial policy and finally his ambitions for a united Europe.

#### Domestic changes

In 1853, Georges Haussmann took office as Prefect of the Seine. As soon as he was installed, Napoleon III handed him a map of Paris, color coded for what to build and rebuild. This map, the work of Napoleon III himself, became the basic plan for the enormous transformation that the city would undergo for the next two decades.<sup>69</sup> Many considered large scale renovation of the city to be highly necessary. In many aspects, the city was a medieval one, with narrow streets, decaying houses and poor transport possibilities. Almost a century before the project started, Voltaire already wrote: 'the center of the city dark, confined, frightful ... the public markets established in narrow streets, parading squalor, spreading infection, and causing continual disorder'.<sup>70</sup> The city of Paris as it is known these days resulted from this project of Napoleon III. The famous street plan, spreading from the roundabout surrounding the Arc de Triomphe, was put in place in during these years.

Napoleon III had planned to renovate Paris long before he had come to power. When he was in prison for a failed coup attempt in 1840, he wrote 'I want to be a second Augustus, because Augustus made Rome a city of marble'.<sup>71</sup> Again, the link between the Roman Empire and the French second empire is made explicit by Napoleon III, but the renovation of Paris also fits both Fichte's and Hegel's understanding of history. Both Fichte and Hegel understood the French Revolution to be the beginning

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<sup>68</sup> Price, *"The French Second Empire: An Anatomy of Power"*

<sup>69</sup> Pinkney, David, H., "Napoleon III's transformation of Paris: the origins and development of the idea", *The Journal of Modern History*, The University of Chicago Press, Jun., 1955, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Jun., 1955), pp. 125-134,

<sup>70</sup> Pinkney, David, H., "Napoleon III's transformation of Paris: the origins and development of the idea"

<sup>71</sup> Pinkney, David H. "Napoleon III and the Rebuilding of Paris", Princeton University Press, 2019, p.3

of a new epoch in history, as did Napoleon III.<sup>72</sup> Napoleon III also understood that it had been his uncle, Napoleon Bonaparte, who had been one of the great men of history, who opened a new chapter in history. However, the Congress of Vienna had frustrated Bonaparte's attempt to lead France into this new epoch. This task had therefore befallen to Napoleon Bonaparte's successor, none other than Napoleon III himself.<sup>73</sup> His project to rebuild Paris, almost from the ground up, was the physical embodiment of entering the next epoch in history. The medieval city was left behind in the past and a new and modern metropole emerged.

Similarly, Napoleon III's transformation on France's transport was a key aspect in the modernization of France that he had intended. When he was still president in 1851, France had a railway network of little more than 3000 kilometers. In 1870 it had over 17.000 kilometers.<sup>74</sup> And while this fits in an international pattern, historian Roger Price points out that it is mostly due to government inspired efforts. The railways marked a significant change in the French economy and society, a break with the past.<sup>75</sup> It was one of the most concrete ways in which Napoleon III intended to enter a new epoch in history.

But the rebuilding of Paris was a means of entering a new epoch in history in another way as well. Napoleon III believed France's economy to be failing dramatically when he came to power. He intended to lead, what he considered an eighteenth century economy, into the new epoch of history.<sup>76</sup> In order to do so, he wanted to put France's working class to work. In his essay on pauperism he wrote 'They possess no wealth save in their arms. We must employ these, so as to make them useful to all'.<sup>77</sup> The rebuilding of Paris put the laborless arms of the working class to use, changing the economy for the next chapter in history.<sup>78</sup>

### Colonial policy

This idea for the use of the working class is also present in Napoleon III's early colonial policy. As Emperor, he had an ambitious plan for Algeria to regenerate what he perceived to be a fallen Arab nationality and create a Franco-Muslim homeland in Africa, open to both Europeans and Muslims. But even before he had come to power, he foresaw a role for France's colonies in improving France's economy. In *Extinction of Pauperism* he states that 'All the poor, all who were out of work, would find

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<sup>72</sup> Leezenberg, M., De Vries, G., *Wetenschapsfilosofie voor geesteswetenschappen*,

<sup>72</sup> Moore, *Introduction to. Fichte: Addresses to the German Nation*

<sup>73</sup> Napoleon III, *Des Idées Napoléoniennes*

<sup>74</sup> Roger Price, *Napoleon III and the Second Empire*, (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 26

<sup>75</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>76</sup> Strauss-Schlom, *The Shadow Emperor*,

<sup>77</sup> Napoleon III, *Extinction of Pauperism*

<sup>78</sup> Jordan, David P. "THE CITY: Baron Haussmann and Modern Paris." *The American Scholar* 61.1 (1992), pp.99-106.

in these colonies means of employing mind and body for the benefit of the entire community'.<sup>79</sup> Helping the working class to put themselves to use was vital for Napoleon III to prepare the economy of France for the next epoch of history.

But his vision for this Arab nation was not merely focused on the French working class. In 1863, Napoleon III declared that Algeria was not 'a colony properly said, but rather an Arab Kingdom'.<sup>80</sup> Later in 1865, he gave a speech in which he stated that France 'did not come to destroy the nationality of a people but, on the contrary, to elevate this people from an old oppression'.<sup>81</sup>

He speaks of the Arab nation in the same way he writes about the French nation, in the sense that it simply is. By speaking of a fallen Arab nationality, he assumes the existence of this nationality, even though its people are unaware of it. Again, the similarity with Fichte's notion of the eternal nation is obvious. And like Fichte believed that with the entering of the fourth epoch of history, the time had come for people to become aware of their nation, Napoleon III intended to make the Arabs aware of their own nation.<sup>82</sup>

In order to achieve this, Algiers, the capitol of the Arab Kingdom, underwent a change similar to that of Paris. The inner city was largely destroyed to make place for modern buildings, squares and avenues.<sup>83</sup> While the Muslim identity of the city was preserved, the city got a European modernized outlook, aligning the Arab Kingdom with Napoleon III's general vision for modernity and preparing it for the next chapter in history.<sup>84</sup> The maintaining of the local identity and the participation of the Arab population in the reforming of the nation was vital for Napoleon III, as he truly considered it a nation rather than a colony. To enter the next epoch of history, people had to become aware of their nation, and thus it needed to be freed of the old oppression and colonial policy that had ruled before Napoleon III.<sup>85</sup> Napoleon III's policy for Algeria was his ambition to develop history as Fichte had explained to be necessary.

### A united Europe

Napoleon III was passionate about the idea of a European confederation and believed it to be its destined future. For Napoleon III, a European confederation was what history was developing towards. He had the conviction that the fulfillment of European nations would lead to such a

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<sup>79</sup> Napoleon III, *Extinction of Pauperism*

<sup>80</sup> Murray-Miller, Gavin. "A Conflicted Sense of Nationality: Napoleon III's Arab Kingdom and the Paradoxes of French Multiculturalism." *French Colonial History* 15 (2014), pp.1-38

<sup>81</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>82</sup> Moore, *Introduction to. Fichte: Addresses to the German Nation*

<sup>83</sup> Osama Abi-Mershed, *Apostles of Modernity : Saint-Simonians and the Civilizing Mission in Algeria*, (Stanford, 2010) pp.159-200

<sup>84</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>85</sup> Ibidem.

confederation, for which Napoleon Bonaparte had laid a fundament during his campaigns throughout Europe. He saw the European nations to be natural brothers, but to realize this, the states of nature of the European nations had to be replaced by the social states.<sup>86</sup> It was through this realization that the European society would step into a new epoch of history. This faith in a future confederation of European nations shaped Napoleon III's foreign policy. His main focus for Europe was therefore peace, for which an alliance with the greatest European military power England was vital.<sup>87</sup> This focus becomes clear when he reluctantly went to battle with Russia in the Crimean War of 1853. To his ambassador in London, he instructs 'I do want peace if it is at all possible, but whatever I decide on, it must be fully in conjunction with England'.<sup>88</sup>

The same motive drives Napoleon III to his campaign in Mexico, between 1862 and 1867. Many considered this participation in the Mexican civil war a hopeless cause and both contemporaries and historians have wondered why Napoleon III made the effort.<sup>89</sup> The answer cannot be found in strategic or economic reasons, for none of those justify the costs of the campaign. However, it did offer Napoleon III an opportunity to form an alliance with both England and Spain and thus to develop the European relations and pursue his projected future of a European confederation.<sup>90</sup> And by doing so, lead Europe into the new stage of history.

Viewing the actions and accomplishments of Napoleon III through his own philosophical view offers an understanding of those actions that cannot be achieved through theories based on circumstances or dynamics. Although theories of power relations, for example, can offer a useful insight, it does not explain the motivation that Napoleon III derived from his view on history and modernity. Through his faith in destiny, modernity and his own role in history, he formed ambitions for France, Algeria and Europe which directly inspired his policies on these matters. To fully understand his policies, his ambitions and fundamental philosophical view need to be understood first.

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<sup>86</sup> Napoleon III, *Des Idées Napoléoniennes* pp.136-146

<sup>87</sup> Michele Cunningham, *Mexico and the foreign policy of Napoleon III*, (Springer, 2001), pp.1-20

<sup>88</sup> Strauss-Schlom, *The Shadow Emperor*, pp.123

<sup>89</sup> Cunningham, *Mexico and the foreign policy of Napoleon III*, pp.1-20

<sup>90</sup> Ibidem.

## Conclusion

For well over a century, Napoleon III's most important legacy was the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian war. In more recent historiography, this image has started to shift and his achievements of almost twenty years of ruling are increasingly acknowledged. Most notably is the biography of Strauss-Schlom, *The Shadow Emperor*, in which he portrays Napoleon III as a father of modern France.<sup>91</sup> It is then remarkable that this shift was not paralleled by a new interest in the writings of Napoleon III, as they offer an insight in Napoleon III's view on the world.

Napoleon III took great interest in history, philosophy and social problems. He published his ideas in several books and applied his ideas when he came to power. Although he was no great innovative thinker, he did have a defined philosophical view from which his actions emerged. To properly understand Napoleon III as a ruler, one has to understand him as a philosopher, a task in which historians have surprisingly fallen short, given the accessibility of Napoleon III's written works. This thesis has attempted to answer the question how Fichte and Hegel influenced the philosophical view of Napoleon III and particularly his view on history and political development

Being educated in Germany, the most prominent German philosophers of that time made a big impact on the philosophical view of Napoleon III. The ideas presented by Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel are present throughout all of Napoleon III's writings. Both Fichte and Hegel believed history to be developing with a direction and a final goal. This belief resonates strongly in the ideas written down by Napoleon III as well. And like Fichte and Hegel, Napoleon III ordered history into chapters or epochs and all three of them saw the French Revolution as a breaking point between two epochs. Like Hegel used dialectics to explain this development of history, Napoleon III used this same concept to explain phenomena and problems he saw in society. And like Fichte saw the nation as an eternal ontological phenomenon, Napoleon III refers to the nation as something that is, rather than needs to be constructed. He is merely concerned with organizing the nation, because it needs not be created, it has always existed and links the Roman Empire to the French Second Empire. Napoleon III's political career as president and emperor and his ambitions, endeavors and achievements can only be fully understood through this philosophical view. And as Napoleon III did not create an entire new school of thought, understanding his works means understanding those who influenced him.

It needs to be mentioned that the ideas of these German philosophers were widespread during the nineteenth century, making it easy to diminish Napoleon III's knowledge of their works and merely

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<sup>91</sup> James F. McMillan, *Napoleon III*, pp.1-4  
Strauss-Schlom, *The Shadow Emperor*  
Price, *"The French Second Empire: An Anatomy of Power"*

portray him as a product of his time. However, doing so would both ignore the strongly similar use of terminology of these German philosophers and Napoleon III and the contemporary critique Napoleon III suffered. For example, famous novelist and romanticist Victor Hugo expressed his aversion of Napoleon III in his book *Napoleon le petite* and lamented the loss of the old center of Paris and Karl Marx named him a farce and rejected his role in history.<sup>92</sup>

Although Napoleon III gives an extensive elaboration of his convictions in his publications, a more comprehensive understanding of his philosophy could be constructed. A study of primary sources of his time in Augsburg could offer further insight in other inspirations in his work and the influence of French philosophers and movements, such as the Saint-Simonians could offer further understanding of Napoleon III's philosophical view.<sup>93</sup> Analyzing his other written works, such as his correspondence and official documents, would also allow future research to give a more in-depth explanation of specific events from the perspective of Napoleon III's own philosophical view.

Napoleon III based his philosophical paradigm on the works of Fichte and Hegel and used their concepts of history and the nation to give understanding to the world. He shared his understanding in his literary legacy, which ought to be the start for historians to understanding the motives and actions of Napoleon III throughout his reign.

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<sup>92</sup> Hugo, *Napoleon the Little*,

Jordan, 'The City: Baron Haussmann and modern Paris'

Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, *Die Revolution, 1852*, (New York, 1869, trans. Saul K. Padover)

<sup>93</sup> Abi-Mershed, *Apostles of Modernity : Saint-Simonians and the Civilizing Mission in Algeria*, pp.159-200



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