

Italy and leadership: psychopathology or culture of a nation?

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Abstract

Leadership is a rapidly evolving field of study blending together often distant perspectives and disciplines. Italy, with its history and socio-cultural complexity, offers a paradigmatic case which display, in their full force, leadership paradoxes and apparent conceptual intricacies. While approaching Italian leadership from an historical perspective, this essay aims at raising questions on national favorite leadership characteristics: whether they are psychological or cultural. Showing the paradoxes of Italian leadership the essay concludes that while on the surface Italian leadership seems to be a kind a national psychopathology, on the contrary, it stems out from deep and historical cultural factors that have shaped a nation still in its adolescence.

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The Peculiarity of Italian Leadership

Italy has a long history; it is the place in which imperialism started – with the Roman Empire – but also a land placed in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea which made the “bella peninsula” a place subject to continuous foreign invasions. Along two thousand years history, Italy experienced time by time the Greek, Arab, Turkish, French, Spanish, Austrian, German and Anglo-American invasions that have culturally molded the country.

Earlier studies of leadership discuss Italy lifestyle and its leaders’ lifestyle; Plato, indeed, in his *The Seventh Letter*, warns leaders to perform a “highly social networked” life: ‘With these thoughts in my mind I came to Italy and Sicily on my first visit. My first impressions on arrival were those of strong disapproval-disapproval of the kind of life which was there called the life of happiness, stuffed full as it was with the banquets of the Italian Greeks and Syracusans, who ate to repletion twice every day, and were never without a partner for the night; and disapproval of the habits which this manner of life produces. For with these habits formed early in life, no man under heaven could possibly attain to wisdom-human nature is not capable of such an extraordinary combination. Temperance also is out of the question for such a man; and the same applies to virtue generally. No city could remain in a state of tranquility under any laws whatsoever, when men think it right to squander all their property in extravagant, and consider it a duty to be idle in everything else except eating and drinking and the laborious prosecution of debauchery’ (Plato, 7L, 326b-c).

The price to pay for such lifestyle is indeed political instability and a continuous, dramatic change in constitutional laws: ‘It follows necessarily that the constitutions of such cities must be constantly changing, tyr-

annies, oligarchies and democracies succeeding one another, while those who hold the power cannot so much as endure the name of any form of government which maintains justice and equality of rights’ (Id., 326d).

Fellini’s movie, *La Dolce Vita* (1960) was the most important witness of what Plato criticized before, and still present in the Italian social tissue. Such a movie is widely considered as one of the great achievements in world cinema and has set the contemporary standard idea of Italian lifestyle. On the contrary, the so called Italian-style comedy, that is a set of movies having some common traits like satire of manners and a prevailing middle-class setting, often characterized by a substantial background of sadness that would dilute the comic contents managed to criticize Italian life-style. Mario Monicelli – one of the fathers of this film stream – who has never made any secret of his “faith” in the Italian Comedy, has claimed this genre as the one, more than any other, that could show to Italians their vices, dispel myths and taboos and therefore play a social and educational role (d’Amico M., 2008).

Twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize and philosopher Ervin Laszlo suggests, indeed, that contemporary Italians are too individualistic - almost anarchical - and Italy has a very diverse inner culture; in Italy, he continues, there coexists so many regional cultures that make this country a highly culturally complex society (reflected in its gastronomy, too), which cannot give raise to a homogeneous national leadership style (Laszlo E. and Marturano A., 2013). Giovanni Giolitti (1901), one of the first post-union Italian Prime ministers have exacerbated this idea with a famous motto: “Ruling the Italians is not impossible, is just useless” (Giovanelli M., 2015). The motto, then apparently, taken up by the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini (Ludwig E., 1933), is the symbol of such Italian peculiarity (already expressed

by the Renaissance writer and politician Francesco Gucciardini or in the famous Italian poet Dante (1320) in *The Divine Comedy, Purgatory*, VI chant “Ah slavish Italy! thou inn of grief, Vessel without a pilot in loud storm, Lady no longer of fair provinces, But brothel-house impure!”): the lack of implementation of an effective leadership in the Italian social fabric.

On the other side, Italy has had an amazing fabric of leaders and ideas on leadership even before the Romans: indeed, Italy not only provided all kinds of leaders (from Machiavellian-amoralist leaders, to saint and value-centered leaders), but also many Italian scholars have helped us to think about leadership. From stoic Marc Aurelius, Machiavelli and Gramsci to Agamben today, Italian scholars have provided tools with which to understand leadership phenomena (Maturano, 2012). Notably, Gramsci offered the notion of hegemony that, far from becoming an obsolete concept in post-communist societies, represents a crucial concept to understand how leading forces in organizations keep control over followers. Capitalism, Gramsci suggested, maintains control not just through violence and political and economic coercion, but also ideologically, through a hegemonic culture in which the values of the bourgeoisie became the ‘common sense’ values of all. Thus a consensus culture developed in which people in the working-class identified their own good with the good of the bourgeoisie, and helped to maintain the status quo rather than revolt against it (Bullock A. and Trombley S., 1999).

On the other hand, Caesars, the Church, the Renaissance, the Mafia, Mussolini and Fascism, leftist movements in the 1970s, the Agnelli Family - the creators of the Italian automobile industry - and today’s Berlusconi provide key features useful to understanding leadership, leadership culture, followership and leaders’ behaviours.

Italian approaches to Leadership

The role of ethics in leadership, for example, went through different periods in which its weight in leadership practice continuously changed. In Marc Aurelius - the stoic Roman Emperor - ethics and responsibility was a fundamental ingredient for a would-be leader; while in Machiavelli - the most important Renaissance political scientist - apparently, amorality was a fundamental characteristic for a leader whose only aim was to keep governing a nation.

In more recent times Italian political individuals such as “il Divo” Giulio Andreotti, whom has dominated the political and cultural Italian scenery for about 50 years, or, in the field of business, founder of Eni (the most important Italian Oil company) Enrico Mattei, based their leadership performances on crude cynicism (Scalfari E. and Turani G., 1998, 45), though they were living in a society based on a welfare state economy. Moreover, in the recent climate, the rise of Berlusconi (understood as a leadership model in both business and politics based on the ideal of the self-made man) is accompanied by a leadership crisis in parties of the left and in alternative (that is, based on different values) leadership models in business. Berlusconi led to today stream of political leaders from both sides of the political wings: Renzi, past leader of the left wing party and Salvini, leader of the right populist and sovereignist wing, both attended, while in different occasions, in Berlusconi’s TV popular quiz shows: it seems to me it demonstrates how Berlusconi’s introduction of commercial TV was a Trojan horse for the introduction of marketing communication methodologies in the political scenery (Mazzoleni G., 1993) and then a radical change in the way in which politics was produced. Indeed, media were, since their birth, strong producers of leadership and shaped the way in which leadership is consumed. Impression management is a powerful technique for a leader to exercise his or her hegemony over the group; Benito Mussolini built his image through media such as cinema and radio, Silvio Berlusconi has built his image through television. Grillo, the leader of a new Italian

populist party (Movement 5 Stars) is also exploiting the potential of the Internet, and paved the way to Salvini's leadership. All of them created a popular and a personalistic consensus around themselves.

From this point of view, while Italian rulers are well aware of Italians' repulsion for being lead - which in turn has produced the populist stream - the Italian ruling class never did its best to reverse this state of affairs, on the contrary, most of the Italian rulers both in politics and in entrepreneurship concentrated just on their own business, even exploiting the Italian state and population. The Agnelli family, which famously runs the automobile brand FIAT, not only in times of crisis often asked the State for financial support (Mucchetti M., 2010) in order to keep their own automobile industry alive and competitive. Such a trend continued along the decades and even was stressed with Silvio Berlusconi as Prime Minister. Silvio Berlusconi is one of the last Italian tycoons, owner of Mediaset firm which has monopoly over most Italian information economy: from TV (by the ownership of the most important TV channels and advertising) to printing press and Europe giant publisher Mondadori. Berlusconi's raise to power had many motives, one of the most important is to keeping legislative control over his own media business, which had been threatened by the possibility of an anti monopoly legislation in the media. In other words Italian business leaders are quite allergic to business risk, a milestone concept in liberal economics, while asking for more economic liberalism when it comes to maximizing their own profits.

Two contrasting leadership phenomenon

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Organizations such as the Catholic Church and the Mafia have provided contradictory examples of leadership phenomena. Based in the Vatican, the world's smallest country, the Church itself provides complex instances of leadership processes that have contributed to the development and institutionalization of many leadership practices and concepts such as charisma since St. Paul. The Church

On the other hand the Mafia is the archetypal secret organization: not only because of its hidden membership and its still ancestral initiation rites and secrecy laws (such as *omertà* or code of silence), but also because Mafia own hidden and variable hierarchical structure enables it to create merciless and eccentric leaders. The Godfather or The Sopranos provide a fictional characterization of Mafia leaders' authoritarian style and personal characteristics. French media social scientist G. Debord (1988, XXIII) claims that Mafia is not an outsider in the world; it is perfectly at home in it. Mafia, in fact, reigns as the model for all the advanced commercial enterprises.

Ironically, the Church and the Mafia, display two apparently divergent leadership trajectories: the Church, which Christian roots are imbued with high moral values, has tried along the centuries to instill such values worldwide in the social fabric. The mafia, on the contrary, was just interested to exercising power both economically and politically of a small group of people weaving dangerous liaisons together with the most important dominant groups not only in Italy, but also abroad, regardless of any treacherous behavior. The Church and the Mafia, finally, are ideally at the extremes of the leadership spectrum as it was exercised in Italy over the centuries which display, so to speak, a sort of bipolar disorder (Johnson and Johnson, 2014) in the Italian social fabric.

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