

Richard Lachmann

Archie Brown, "The Myth of the Strong Leader. Political Leadership in the Modern Age". New York: Basic Books, 2014, 480 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/80401)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 1, gennaio-aprile 2015

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.
Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

L'articolo è messo a disposizione dell'utente in licenza per uso esclusivamente privato e personale, senza scopo di lucro e senza fini direttamente o indirettamente commerciali. Salvo quanto espressamente previsto dalla licenza d'uso Rivisteweb, è fatto divieto di riprodurre, trasmettere, distribuire o altrimenti utilizzare l'articolo, per qualsiasi scopo o fine. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Book Review

Archie Brown, *The Myth of the Strong Leader. Political Leadership in the Modern Age*. New York: Basic Books, 2014, 480 pp.

doi: 10.2383/80401

This lengthy book makes an important argument, but the author's contribution gets lost in a welter of secondary arguments and a mass of historical detail. Archie Brown convincingly demonstrates that most heads of government are not strong leaders in that they have only limited influence over their governments' policies and end their time in office with only minor or even insignificant accomplishments. The book begins promisingly with a wonderful takedown of Tony Blair's arrogant assertions that he singlehandedly won three elections. Brown shows that in fact few elected leaders matter to electoral outcomes. Voters mainly select among and have loyalty to parties. Only in rare instances do prime ministers (who in most cases are selected by parliamentarians of the dominant party rather than by voters directly) cause their parties to outperform the percentage that underlying factors would produce. Brown is less certain about the electoral influence of U.S. presidential candidates; however even that personality-driven electoral system supports Brown's overall argument. Brown could have relied on the extensive work done by American political scientists and economists, which shows that presidential vote totals are almost entirely predicted by underlying economic conditions, with the main disruptions to those fundamentals caused by wars rather than candidates' personal qualities.

The bulk of the book focuses on leaders' accomplishments while in office. Brown offers a typology of leaders: the most significant are transformational leaders, followed by redefining leaders. Brown considers revolutionary and totalitarian and authoritarian leaders in separate chapters since they are outside of electoral politics. These chapters, which fill two-thirds of the book, are far less successful than are the opening chapters. Brown tells the story of one head of government after another, offering ad hoc explanations for why Lyndon Johnson was a more powerful president than Jimmy Carter, for example. Unfortunately, the reasoning often is circular. Johnson is powerful because he was able to use the inherent power of the presidency plus his personal qualities of deviousness and intimidation to force significant changes through Congress. At no point does Brown offer any sort of rubric or standard for measuring the significance of a leader's accomplishments. Thus, Reagan is less significant than Johnson "because he did not make things happen in the way that Johnson did" [p. 110.] Brown goes into somewhat more detail in his review of all the twentieth century British prime ministers. Yet, even here where he presumably has his firmest base of knowledge, we get mainly lists of what each did without much indication of how long the major reforms lasted or what effect they had on the subsequent trajectory of politics and policy.

The chapter on revolutionary leaders is perhaps the weakest. One of the most frustrating aspects of this book is that Brown pays little attention to the findings and arguments of the many scholars who already have grappled with these issues. There is a long literature on revolutions. The finest works go far in explaining why some revolutionary leaders transformed their societies while most did not. Historians and social scientists also have examined the relationship between leaders and parties and social movements.

Brown has a place in those debates, but he doesn't bother to acknowledge past work and thereby position himself in an ongoing intellectual project that is broader than his ad hoc conclusions based on partial and brief summaries of key cases.

A virtue of this book is that American and British leaders are compared (or to be more accurate, juxtaposed) to ones from other countries. Brown offers evaluations of French and German elected leaders and of Mandela and de Klerk in South Africa, Cardoso in Brazil, and of Russian, Chinese unelected leaders and of revolutionaries from various other countries. However, Brown doesn't leverage the analytic power of those comparisons. Thus, one of his generalizations reads: "the more power is concentrated in the office, the greater the potential significance of the change of leader occupying it" [p. 45.] But throughout the book, we read of leaders who were significant in part because they expanded the institutional power of their office and of the government that they led. Brown doesn't resolve which way the causation flows, nor does he specify conditions under which the direction of causation could change. Many of the most significant leaders, as Brown accurately notes, did not hold office or had their main effect (like Mandela) before they held office. Similarly, he argues that television increased the importance of the party leader's personality in elections, although he suggests (without offering any evidence) that television is losing influence to the Internet. Both observations have been by many others. Brown could have leveraged his many cases to go beyond those truisms to show how television and the Internet have varying effects under different political systems, but he never makes the effort to do so.

The final chapters are more prescriptive and make the case for weak leadership. In the penultimate chapter, Brown shows how leaders who self-deluded themselves into thinking they were strong and that their judgment was good made disastrous foreign policy decisions: Hitler of course is the exemplar of such poor judgment, but Stalin's decision to support North Korea's invasion of the south, which led to a U.S. worldwide military buildup that stymied the Soviets ever after, is another prime case of leadership hubris. Brown sees British Prime Minister Anthony Eden's invasion of Suez and Tony Blair's support for Bush's Iraq war as moments when leaders ignored sage advice from cabinet colleagues and underlings. Both prime ministers led their nations into military failure and in so doing eventually destroyed their political careers.

Brown draws a lesson from his review of the failures of strong leaders. He sees efforts to exert control at the top as subversive of democracy. When strong leaders emerge in transitional states democracy fails to be consolidated. When leaders attempt to override party and to challenge institutional checks on a president or prime minister's power, politics becomes personality driven and it is harder to achieve programmatic changes. Such assertions of leadership weaken parties and thereby reduce the most effective mechanisms for translating citizens' ideological preferences and programmatic desires into actual policies.

This book offers sage advice to politicians and to the citizens, historians and journalists who evaluate them. Brown certainly marshals enough cases to show that most leaders are not as strong as they think they are, and that those who really are strong more often do harm than good. However, Brown missed a real opportunity to analyse his many cases systematically and use that analytic leverage to offer more precise theories of (1) the institutional and historical conditions under which leaders are able to exert power,

(2) the institutional and historical conditions under which leaders are blocked in their exercise of power, (3) the factors that determine how power is translated into domestic or foreign policy accomplishments, and (4) the institutional and situational forces that determine the extent to which leaders can win elections, take power and institute policy independent of political parties. He also missed the chance to engage with the many authors who have addressed these issues previously. Readers will be left guessing how Brown's findings are original and where he challenges scholars as well as arrogant politicians. This book is a missed opportunity for the author and readers will be frustrated when they finish with so many unanswered questions.

Richard Lachmann
University of Albany