

Strong men of straw

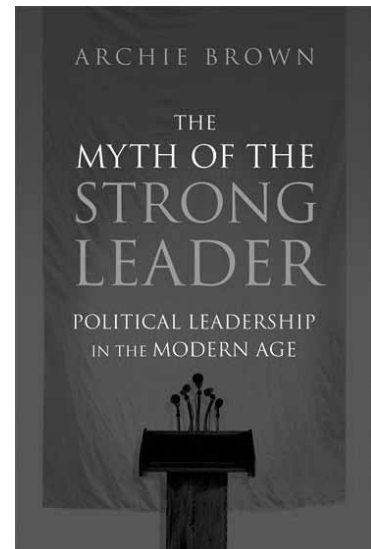
A remarkable study of political leadership

Stephen Mills

THE MYTH OF THE STRONG LEADER:
POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN THE MODERN AGE

by Archie Brown

Bodley Head, \$59.99 hb, 470 pp, 9781847921758



A remarkable feature of the concept of political leadership is its apparently infinite elasticity: it stretches over presidents and prime ministers, dictators and popes, revolutionaries and reformers. Take the concept beyond politics, and its reach effortlessly expands to include business executives, platoon commanders, primary school principals, the captain of the cricket team, and many more. But is it useful, or even accurate, to describe all these figures as 'leaders' given they, and the entities they lead, have almost nothing in common? Are they really comparable as leaders?

Yes. At least according to the mainstream leadership literature, these are all leaders because, despite their personal distinctiveness and contextual diversity, they are engaged in the same process of working with their followers to achieve shared goals. There is not much that leadership scholars do agree on, but there is a broad consensus that leadership must combine those three elements: the personal traits of the leader, the needs and aspirations of the group, and their joint efforts to attain a shared goal. Leaders without followers, as they say, are just having a stroll in the park.

Archie Brown, emeritus professor of politics at Oxford University, has provided a masterly demonstration that leadership is a valid and important framework for understanding politics and political change, through a wide-ranging comparative analysis of leadership in the Western democracies, in authoritarian and totalitarian régimes, and in systems undergoing reformist or revolutionary transition.

Brown has been reading, teaching,

observing, and researching political leadership for more than fifty years, in North America and Europe as well as in the communist and post-communist world. His synoptic eye takes in, among many others, Churchill and Attlee, FDR and LBJ, Pol Pot, Kim Il-sung, de Gaulle and Atatürk.

Nor is this mere travelogue. Brown's comparative sweep makes an important contribution to our understanding of leadership, by clarifying the influential but hoary contrast between 'transactional' and 'transformational' leadership. This binary was devised by the so-called 'father' of leadership studies, James MacGregor Burns, in the late 1970s. Burns saw transactional leadership as a negotiation, built around procedural values of mutual fairness and honesty; think Julia Gillard's negotiations with the independents to secure a governing majority in the hung parliament after the 2010 election. Transformational leadership, by contrast, transcends sectional boundaries to achieve collective change, by invoking universal moral values of justice, freedom, and equality; think Martin Luther King Jr's 'I have a dream' speech to a segregated 1960s America.

For Brown, the spectrum of change-oriented leaders is much broader; he identifies and describes 'transformational', 'inspirational', 'redefining', 'transitional', and 'revolutionary' types; he further distinguishes between authoritarian and totalitarian leadership. For Brown, true transformational leadership is rare. Such leaders make a decisive difference in achieving systemic change – a change for the better – from one set of economic or political

institutions to another. His examples, presented in wonderfully informative portraits, include de Gaulle's creation of the Fifth Republic, Suárez's deft conduct, as Spain's first post-Franco prime minister, in entrenching democracy, Gorbachev's manoeuvring to effect the peaceful demise of the Soviet Union, Deng's far-reaching influence after the chaos of Mao, and Mandela's skills in shifting from the apartheid era to a democratic multiracial democracy in South Africa.

On a different plane are the 'inspirational' leaders, such as Mahatma Gandhi and Aung San Suu Kyi – but not Martin Luther King Jr, of whom Brown is oddly dismissive – who procure systemic change not by wielding executive power but from outside the state as leaders of social movements.

In liberal Western democracies, Brown argues, systemic change is not normally necessary. But some democratic leaders achieve game-changing, enduring reform in policies, political practice, and constitutional norms; they 'redefine' what is thought to be politically possible. Presidents Roosevelt and Johnson, with a question mark over Reagan, along with British governments led by Asquith, Attlee, and Thatcher, all qualify, as do German Chancellors Adenauer, Brandt, and Kohl. A particular subset of redefining leaders are the 'transitional' ones who pave the way for later transformation; Brown nominates Brazil's Cardoso, South Africa's de

Klerk, and Taiwan's Chiang Ching-kuo.

In all this, Brown is dealing only with change 'for the better' – leaders who reconstruct the system to create something qualitatively better than what has gone before. Revolutionary leaders – Lenin, Mao – are thus not 'transformational' because, while they do achieve radical systemic change, they employ duress and oppression to do so. Not all revolutions, moreover, are led – at least not on the spot or necessarily by a single person; think the mass spontaneous uprising of the post-Shah Iranian revolution or the more recent Arab Spring. Brown completes his overview with the totalitarian dictators Mussolini, Hitler, and Stalin who concentrated power in their own hands and thus stand apart from the merely authoritarian régimes which operate with some form of collective leadership such as, in the case of contemporary China, what he calls 'consultative authoritarianism'.

Brown has thus erected a robust framework of national leadership with rich corroborative detail spanning different countries and systems from the start of the twentieth century to the present day. In tracing a trajectory from parliamentary democracy to the gulag, Brown pursues a central theme about the dangers and errors that arise from untrammelled political leadership. Whether it is by a cabinet or political party in liberal democracies, or by an oligarchy or Politburo in authoritarian régimes, collective institutions must act as restraints on leadership.

Unfortunately, Brown takes this theme into a pseudo-controversy about 'the myth of the strong leader'. The superstructure of Brown's book – its title and preface – claims to expose what he calls the dangerous but widespread illusion that strong leaders are necessarily successful and admirable leaders, and that collegiality is a weakness. 'Huge power amassed by an individual leader paves the way for important errors at best and disaster and massive bloodshed at worst,' he asserts.

But this exposé is hardly news. The strong man is in reality a straw man; leadership studies have long since abandoned Carlyle-like hero-worship of the

'great man'. And in being argumentative, Brown risks making the mistake, familiar from the business branch of leadership literature, of confusing organisational 'power' with personal 'authority'. As a source of a leader's influence over followers, the former is useful but the latter is essential; hence Mandela, utterly powerless in a prison cell on Robben Island, remained a leader of immense personal authority, while Gillard, as formally powerful as any other prime minister, still lacked the personal authority necessary to govern effectively.

Regrettably, Brown seems determined to 'deal with' Tony Blair, who emerges from this book almost as a caricature. Where Blair claims credit for winning three elections, Brown

denies him; where Blair claims a policy achievement, Brown dismisses it (not even placing the architect of New Labour among the 'redefiners'). Brown argues that Asquith was tougher than Blair on the media tycoons of their day; and he flays him for Iraq. For Brown, any description of Blair as a 'strong' leader is to be resisted and exposed. It is a flaw in an otherwise remarkable and important book. ■

Stephen Mills teaches Public Sector Leadership at the Graduate School of Government at the University of Sydney. He is the author of *The Professionals: Strategy, Money and the Rise of the Political Campaigner in Australia* (2014). See: www.stephen-mills.com.au ❖

Moth

Digging in the garden I found a moth
albinoed on a piece of bark by the fence.
Those were my radiation days; it was good
to lay down the spade and kneel in the soil.

I took off my gloves. My fingernails were dirty,
my shoulder ached, the plants from the nursery
stood sentinel in their patient black pots.
I scooped the moth, laid it in my right hand.

But life must have just gone –
only the featherest movement, the colour
of milk, stirred something in me.
And the powder of those wings.

Behind me waited the spade, waited the plants.
The sun inched its shadows, the small black eye,
the folded segments now vacant.
I set the pale scrap where I had found it.

At night, Bach brings you back to me.
In the dark, I wish I had honoured you more.

Debi Hamilton

Debi Hamilton's first collection of poetry, *Being Alone*, was published in 2013