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Review of 'The Myth of the Strong Leader' by Archie Brown

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Archie Brown is Emeritus Professor of Politics at the University of Oxford and a prolific author, particularly on the political culture of the Soviet Union and Russia. In this volume he makes the bold claim at the outset that: ‘This is an argumentative book’ which sets out to disabuse ‘the notion that strong leaders in the conventional sense of leaders who get their way, dominate their colleagues, and concentrate decision-making in their hands, are the most successful’ (p vii). Essentially it is a survey of political leadership throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, focussing on the West, the Soviet Block/Russia and China but also including analysis of Cuba, South Africa, Brazil, Mexico, Turkey, Vietnam, North and South Korea, Egypt and Iraq. Religion is well referenced but not discussed in detail.

Brown identifies a formidable list of leadership characteristics (‘integrity, intelligence, articulateness, collegiality, shrewd judgement, a questioning mind, willingness to seek disparate views, ability to absorb information, flexibility, good memory, courage, vision, empathy and boundless energy’) before adding that: ‘We should hardly expect most leaders to embody all of those qualities’ (pp 1-2). Over four detailed chapters he elaborates and discusses four types of political leader – those that are redefining (e.g. Franklin D. Roosevelt, Margaret Thatcher, Konrad Adenauer, F. W. de Klerk); transformational (e.g. Charles de Gaulle, Adolfo Suárez, Mikhail Gorbachev, Deng Xiaoping, Nelson Mandela); revolutionary(e.g. Ataturk, Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, Ho Chi Min, Fidel Castro, ‘leaderless’ revolutions in Iran and the Arab Spring); and totalitarian (e.g. Josif Stalin, Mao Zedong, Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler).

His final two chapters begin to distil some conclusions about good leadership drawn from his historical and political summaries. For instance, he is highly critical of the way in which the Bush/Blair invasion of Iraq was enabled by ‘premature cognitive closure’ of evidence and options amongst the US and UK political leadership (p 341). Significantly Brown believes it is easier define effective rather than good or great leadership and agrees with Michael A. Hogg that: ‘the most effective leader in a given context is the group member who is best equipped to assist the group in achieving its objectives’ (p 354). He concludes that in parliamentary democracies there is a tendency to believe that the top leader counts for more than he or she actually does. Instead, he argues that political leadership is essentially a shared enterprise and those leaders who forget this believing that they have the right to dominate decision-making ‘deserve not followers, but critics’ (p 362).

Brown’s book is not written from the perspective of organization or leadership theory, rather it is an historical analysis of modern political leadership, which provides some sharp and helpful insights into how leadership has (or has not) been exercised in one key area of human culture. Nevertheless his guiding insight that leadership is a collaborative project rather than an individual endeavour is one that chimes well with contemporary work on this subject by such as Keith Grint, David K. Hirst, Donna Ladkin and Margaret J. Wheatley.
Vaughan S. Roberts is Team Rector of Warwick and a contributor to Michal Izak, Linda Hitchin & David Anderson (eds) Untold Stories in Organizations (Guilford Press, 2014)