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# **Political change and Policy change: some notes on the role of leadership as a theoretical and empirical problem**

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Paper presented at the XXI IPSA World Congress of Political Science

12-16 September 2009

*Panel: “The Linkage between Political Change and Policy Change: For an Epistemological Re-Foundation”*

## Abstract

*Leadership is a powerful driver of political and policy change. It is also a specific means by which “agency” matters in political and policy processes. This paper sets out some theoretical questions concerning the problem of why, when and how leadership becomes a fundamental driver of political and policy change, by focusing on the following theoretical problems: 1. The fact that policy leadership is not necessarily an individual mission but often a collective undertaking involving people at various institutional levels and policy stages. In this sense, policy leadership may be viewed as a longitudinal, horizontal dimension of the policy dynamics present throughout the policy process. 2. The situational nature of leadership, i.e. how different leadership styles and structures match contingencies. 3. Policy leadership is not only a rhetorical activity but a political one as well. Coalition-building is a core business of policy leadership.*

## **1. Introduction: leadership as a basis for change**

Change, both in politics and in policy, is a fascinating, never-ending challenge for those scholars interested in understanding and explaining political phenomena. As we all know, it is simpler to understand and explain persistence and stability rather than change. In fact, change is the more challenging of the two topics for the political scientist. The role of individuals or groups in the process of political change is widely recognized in social and political theory, even if the most important macro-theories (rational choice and neo-institutionalisms) often excessively compress agency and interpret it as a direct function of structural dynamics. In political science, the role of agency in political/policy change is interpreted as the role of individual political leaders or policy entrepreneurs. Very often the role of agency is interpreted in terms of the “great man myth”; frequently, agency is seen in terms of “fortuitous” or “random” individual behaviour. It is rather self-evident that agents matter in re-addressing structural and process dynamics, and that change needs to be led. However, too often the role of the agent/leader is considered of secondary importance or as strongly influenced by structural factors. In other words, even if it is generally recognized that agency plays an important role in political/policy change, it is nevertheless given insufficient importance from the theoretical point of view, unlike in other social sciences (in particular, organization and management studies) where the role of agency, and especially that of leadership, represents an accepted field of research and theorization.

Assuming that leadership (defined as the most important form of agency in social and political dynamics) is a fundamental driver of political/policy change, the present essay represents an attempt to sketch certain theoretical problems regarding the possible characteristics, role, nature and dynamics of leadership in political/policy change. Before doing so, a fundamental theoretical premise ought to be presented regarding the concept of change adopted in this present work, and on which the following reflections on leadership will be nested. In sharing the views of those who understand the study of politics to be “by definition, the study of unique events” (Lewis and Steinmo 2007, 38), I am clearly taking a strongly epistemological position. In keeping with this epistemological position, the theoretical perspective of political/policy change assumes that it is characterized by a configurative character, as well each political and policy dynamics. “Configurative” refers to the assumption that changes (as well as dynamics) are produced by a series of circumstantial causes (the presence of a specific cyclical configuration of interrelated factors which influence the dependent

variable through a specific contextual sequence). This implies the following (Capano and Howlett 2009):

- policy/political change is substantially unpredictable in terms of its content, scope, speed and effectiveness, even when the dynamics and the process in question are readily predictable. Small changes in inputs or parameters may produce large changes in behavior; large changes in institutional arrangements may produce small, unimportant policy changes; a great electoral majority may produce irrelevant political and policy change; a strong economic shock may only produce incremental, accommodating changes, while small economic events can be the cause of socio-economic and political revolutions.
- policy dynamics and political processes involve complex systems. This means that over the course of time, cause and effect are subtle phenomena. This implies, for example, that obvious forms of interventions may produce non-obvious consequences, and vice-versa. Given their complexity, the nature of the relationships between the different elements of the configuration of policy dynamics and political process is not yet precisely known. It can only be roughly outlined and then made more specific by the congruent contextualization of the specific phenomena being analyzed.
- researchers cannot look for net causal effects, but only for combinatorial causes. From this point of view, however, one can only focus on specific drivers of change if they are contextualized and if they are handled as INUS causes, that is, as an “insufficient but necessary part of a condition which is itself unnecessary but sufficient for the result” (Mackie 1965, 246).
- Because change is produced by a process, it needs time, so the temporal dimension needs to be taken in account. From this point of view, in order for scholars to understand and explain change, they need to be interested in “describing and explaining the temporal sequence of events” (Van de Ven and Huber 1990, 213).
- change happens and develops because new solutions are seen, exploited, explored, designed, imagined and pursued by individuals or groups; the process of change needs to be led by someone.

On this theoretical basis, the role of agency assumes a central role in studying change. In fact, if change is unpredictable this means that structural factors do not determine it, even if their own specific configuration may be highly influential. So policy-makers and political agents “make” it. More specifically, if normal policy or political dynamics are led by someone, this is, if possible, more necessary in changing

dynamics, where routines and inherited patterns of behavior had to be interrupted, where uncertainty has to be dealt with, where new meanings and values emerge. Consequently, the leadership function is a cornerstone of the process of change.

## **2. Leadership as “embedded functional process” in political and policy change**

All those involved in studying political phenomena are perfectly aware of the role of leadership. The fact that political processes are embedded in an institutional and structural context means that the quality of outputs and outcomes is not guaranteed, as they are clearly influenced by the actions of those who participate in the process, and especially by those who play an important part in leading this process. The relevance of leaders (or rather, of the leadership function, as we shall see below) is, if possible, more prominent when things are undergoing change, that is, when “uncertainty” prevails and stability is threatened.

In political science, the leadership issue has generally been dealt with by focusing on the individualistic dimension. Political leadership, perceived as the role of single individuals (very often the heads of governments or political parties), is the way that this driver of political processes and change is usually considered and empirically observed (Hunt and Larson 1975; Bunce 1981; Blondel 1987; House, Spangler, Woyke 1991; Barber 1991). In the field of public policy, the question of leadership tends to be dealt with by using the concept of “entrepreneurship”. The concept of policy entrepreneur encapsulates that individual behavior capable of advocating new ideas and of setting the agenda (Kingdom 1995), of identifying problems and finding solutions (Polsby 1984), of submitting new ideas to policy and political actors, and of mobilizing public opinion (Eyestone 1978; Cobb and Elder 1981, 1983), of dealing with the substantial policy uncertainty, and of solving the emergent problem of collective coordination (Mintrom and Vergari 1996). Policy entrepreneurs are catalysts for policy innovation (Roberts and King 1991); those subjects who find new venues for policy-making (Baumgartner and Jones 1993).

A closer analysis of the aforesaid definitions leads to two further considerations. The first is that there is a risk of superimposing the meaning of leadership with that of entrepreneurship, that is to use them as synonymous. We therefore need to first clarify the distinction between the two concepts. To this end, I completely agree with those scholars who define entrepreneurship as a specific type of leadership (Czarniawska-Joerges and Wolff 1991; Vecchio 2003). In fact, entrepreneurs possess certain characteristics usually associated with leaders (in particular, the capacity to identify new solutions and convince others to adopt the new ideas); however, they do not possess all

the necessary means with which to control, and thus lead, the process (and in particular, they do not possess the basic means with which to effectively lead, namely 'power'). Thus entrepreneurs are leaders that influence the process but are not necessarily capable of guiding and enforcing it. They are leaders with insufficient power (Roberts and King 1991). We can get a better understanding of entrepreneurial behavior if we consider its most relevant dimension, that is, its ability to focus attention on new ways of perceiving reality; however, it is not enough to simply consider it as a sufficient condition for change or as necessary. Change is the outcome of a complex process involving other actors besides policy entrepreneurs; in order for change to come about, the process of change needs to be guided (at least as far as regards its key elements).

The second consideration concerns the fact that the emphasis on the individualistic side of leadership is a legacy of the nineteenth century notion of the "great man", which was proposed in a more scientific way during the twentieth century, through a continuous development of theories and ideas in psychology, sociology, organization theory and management sciences, in an attempt to get a better understanding of the specific nature of individual leadership. Starting from the so-called 'trait' theory, which emphasized the inbred nature of leadership (Carlyle 1902), a number of different approaches have been developed, and at least five schools of thought have emerged in recent years (Walker 2006):

- behavioral leadership theory, which focuses on leadership style as the strategic factor in leadership effectiveness, and distinguishes between those who are task-oriented, and those who are people-oriented (Lewin, Lippit and White 1939; Kahn and Katz 1953; Bales and Slater 1945);
- the contingency approach, which has focused on the situational context as the independent variable that influences the effectiveness of leadership actions to the greatest degree. Depending on the context, different leadership styles may emerge as being more congruent and better performing on the basis of the leader's perception of the attitudes of his/her potential followers. Consequently, leadership style should be shaped to fit the characteristics of potential followers (Fiedler 1972; Vroom and Yetton 1973; Hersey and Blanchard 1982; Hersey 1984; Wroom and Yago 1988);
- cognitive leadership theory, which places the emphasis on the relationship between leader and followers, based on culturally bound individual views (Green and Mitchell 1979; Calder 1977).
- moral leadership theory, which also focuses on the leader-followers relationship, but does so by placing the emphasis on the moral dimension (Burns 2003);

- strategic/transactional theory, which points out how the leader-followers relationship is intrinsically based on exchanges and transactions as a result of which, diverse preferences and forms of motivation can be kept together and channeled towards a collective undertaking. Not surprisingly, this approach is the one favoured by the majority of political scientists (see, for example: Frolich, Oppenheimer and Young 1971; Riker 1986; Burns 1978; Hunt and Laresen 1975).

So a considerable amount of research and knowledge has been produced regarding leadership, which is a little surprising for those interested in understanding the relevance and the role of leadership in political/policy dynamics and change, because the theoretical underdeveloped dimension of political science on this topics clearly emerges. In fact, as political scientists, we are perfectly aware of the fact that actors matter, and that individuals can make a difference. Furthermore, we know full well that political and policy processes are led by people in both official and unofficial positions. We know that leadership matters, but too often we treat it as a residual variable, or we passively adopt the “great men” perspective. In doing so, we risk thinking as historians do, or perceiving leadership as a random phenomenon.

The present theoretical reflections assume that by using certain specific empirical findings and theoretical assumptions from sociological and organizational research, we may design a more coherent, more fruitful political scientific approach to the role of leadership in political and policy change (that is, in the overall dynamics of such change).

The first underlying premise of this theoretical approach is that leadership may be defined as an “embedded functional process” of the policy-making and political dynamics. From this point of view, leadership is conceived as a specific form of agency<sup>1</sup> characterized by the fact that a numbers of actors are led to behave in a convergent way. In this sense, leadership is a particular form of agency whereby actors are coordinated towards the completion of a common (political or policy) mission. As Bryman (1986, p. 8) pointed out it: “leadership is a social influence process through which the members of a group are steered towards a goal”. Thanks to the leadership process, it is possible to make sense of what people are doing together (Drath & Palus, 1994); leadership is a powerful means by which collective viewpoints are articulated, shared values are embodied and environments are shaped to accomplish specific aims

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<sup>1</sup> Following Emirbayer and Mische (1998), agency can be defined as “the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problem posed by changing historical situations” (p. 970).

(Richards & Engle, 1986). The embedded, process-based nature of leadership renders it a structural dimension of political and policy processes. This means that these kinds of changes are strongly influenced by the intrinsic features of the leadership structures and by the diachronic forms they take.

As a result of its embedded, process-based nature, the leadership function needs to be theoretically examined in terms of the three following dimensions:

1. The individual/collective problem;
2. The situational, contextual nature of leadership structure and styles.
3. Coalition-consensus building as the core business of the leadership function

### **3. Leadership as individual commitment or collective enterprise.**

If leadership is conceptualized as an embedded process function of political and policy dynamics, then the traditional image of leadership as a strictly individual phenomenon is clearly incomplete and unsatisfactory. As certain important psychological studies have shown, leadership is conferred rather than imposed or taken. It depends on the contextual situation of the group rather than on the intrinsic characteristics of those individuals aspiring to lead. Leadership is strongly associated with a group's identity (and its level of stability), and even if it can manipulate the group's vision and values, its effectiveness in doing so depends on the group's intrinsic characteristics (Turner 1991; Reicher, Haslam and Hopkins 2005). However, as certain other studies have pointed out, not only is individual leadership strictly dependant (in terms of its effectiveness and behavioral style) on the contingent state of the reference group, but it is also often a collective enterprise, involving different individuals at different institutional levels, stages and periods in time (Bryson and Crosby 1992; Mollering 2007).

The collective nature of leadership is particularly relevant in the case of political/policy change, because innovation not only needs to be perceived, imagined and created, but it also has to be formally approved and (very importantly) implemented. Since it is not conceivable that only "one man" can trigger this complex process, or can effectively control it, it follows that the leadership function needs to be interpreted in a broader fashion. The pluralistic nature of leadership has already been noted by organization and management studies. For example, Hodgson, Levinson and Zelenzik (1965), studying the management of firms, proposed that the term "leadership role constellation" be used to express the pluralistic nature of the executive leadership function and the need for a division of roles and responsibilities within a leading group. Nancy Roberts has pointed out that empirical findings regarding the reform of



American schools have shown that ‘energy’ is a fundamental resource for radical, effective re-organization, and that ‘collective leadership’ is needed in order to produce that energy (Roberts 1985). Wallis and Dollery (1999) use the concept of “leadership networks”, which refer to the fact that in order to produce effective reforms and to institutionalize them, a collective effort is required; in other words, “a network of policy leaders must be formed which seeks to place its own members in positions of leverage over the agenda-setting, formulation, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation stages of the reform process” (p.116). Chrislip and Larson (1994) have noted how ‘collaborative’ leadership, that is, a form of leadership implemented not only by the leading actors, but also by others, citizens included, is a fundamental requirement if major political and policy changes are to be made.

So, in order to produce effective political and/or policy change, changes in formal institutional rules or the policy agenda are not enough. The new solutions need to touch upon all relevant parts of the political system, and in order to do so, leadership has to be present at different institutional levels. From this perspective, leadership needs to be seen as a longitudinal and inter-institutional dimension of the political/policy process. It is an embedded function present throughout the said process, and is developed as a result of a very strong collective dimension. As Burns clearly pointed out “political leadership is those processes and effects of political power in which a number of actors, varying in their composition and roles from situation to situation, spurred by aspiration, goals, and other motivations, appeal to and respond to the needs and other motives of would-be followers with acts for reciprocal betterment or, in the case of transforming leaders, the achievement of real change in the direction of higher values. ...Political leadership is boarded intended real change. It is a collective purposeful causation” (1978, 434).

Thus placing excessive emphasis on the idea of the highly-reputed leader or of the person gifted with exceptional capabilities, can be very misleading when it comes to analyzing the role of leadership in political/policy change. In fact, if processes need to have a longitudinal leadership function, “normal people” may also act as leaders within their micro-context.

It should be pointed out that this does not mean that “great individuals” do not matter. I am simply trying to show that the leadership function represents a structural prerequisite of political and policy dynamics and change, and that to focus solely on exceptional individuals can be misleading. Individuals are clearly important, given their capacity to perceive new opportunities and imagine a future different from the present and the past. However, without others sharing their vision, individuals invariably fail in their quests. Furthermore, even if individual leaders play a

significant role in initiating the process of change, unless their efforts are institutionalized, nothing will come of them; and in order for this to happen, not only must the new ideas and goals be shared within the specific context in question, but these new ideas should also be pursued and implemented at various different institutional levels, and in the various political and policy arenas. As Bass has pointed out (1990, 658), “Leadership depends on interaction. Interaction depends on physical proximity, social and organizational propinquity, and networks of open channels of communication. And so, not surprisingly, the emergence and success of leadership depend on such physical and social arrangements. Such arrangements may also be possible substitutes for leadership”. Leaders necessarily build and foster social, institutional, political and policy networks with those people involved or interested in their field of action. Thus these networks/constellations of actors become the ‘pro-active implementers’ of the strategy for change, and the fundamental means of action of the leaders in question. In this sense, following the initial phase (which depends on the ability of individual leaders and/or entrepreneurs), the relationship between leaders and followers (assembled in networks/constellations) becomes bi-univocal, based on a strong degree of interdependence, reciprocal support and legitimation.

So what is needed is a process whereby leadership is structured, that is, other individuals not only do what the leaders propose, but they also provide the lead within their own specific environment and field of action.

Finally, it should be said that the individualistic conception of leadership is more significant in radical processes of change (i.e. where there is a clear break with the past) than in adaptive processes whereby radical changes are gradually introduced in the medium-long term. From this point of view, in order to get a more general understanding of leadership, it is a good idea to calibrate our theoretical perspective in a way that enables us to grasp what is really going on.

Researchers interested in the influence of leadership on political policy change need to pay due attention to the structural design of the embedded leadership function in the analyzed process.

Primarily, the focus should be on discovering and describing the inter-institutional and diachronic constellation of the actors involved in the leadership network. This mapping operation will involve the gathering of information and data about the individuals involved, their formal positions, and their roles, their reciprocal relationships. The resulting map enables the researcher to observe how different individuals behave and, in the presence of individual leaders or entrepreneurs, which behavioral styles they adopt, how they are connected to one another, and their respective importance in building up and structuring the leadership network. At the

same time, empirical mapping, especially when viewed from a diachronic perspective, is a useful heuristic tool for identifying and observing the characteristics of the leadership constellation/network, for establishing if and how the latter has gradually expanded, which institutional levels it has involved, etc. The two dimensions of the leadership function - the individualistic level and the processual/collective one - need to be carefully considered when studying political and policy change. Both dimensions tell us something about the role of agency/leadership in influencing the process of change. Considering both the dimensions from an integrated perspective is the best way to get a real understanding not only of how agency works, but also of the very role that individual leaders play in the process of change, and the degree of effectiveness of change (the greater the leadership constellation, the more it acts in a longitudinal way, and the greater the possibility of the intensity of change).

The analysis of the two dimensions of leadership may also be improved by attempting to grasp the possible variety of both. Studies have proposed several classifications of individual leadership, but have failed to provide sufficient reflection on the more important founding principles of the collective leadership constellation.

Many ideal-types of leader have been proposed: 'charismatic', 'participative', 'situational', 'transactional', 'transformative', 'quiet', 'servant'. However, for my purposes the most interesting ones are those which are capable of differentiating between the different forms of empirical behavior of individual leaders. From this point of view, the most important classifications for political scientists are those proposed by Kahn and Katz (1953) and by Graham Little (1988). Kahn and Katz proposed a task-oriented vs. people-oriented leadership dichotomy<sup>2</sup>. Graham Little (1988) suggested that leadership can be "inspirational" (which is another way of saying 'charismatic'), "strong" (the style exhibited by leaders who prefer to implement ideas rather than debate them), and "group" (where solidarity, consultation and empathy characterize the leader-followers relationship). Theoretically, real leaders should be able to use different styles according to their specific requirements (as we shall see below).

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<sup>2</sup> Task-oriented leadership focuses exclusively on what has to be done, and very often is characterized by an autocratic style: the leader defines the goals and the roles of followers, and organizes everything, without paying enough attention to the emotional state of followers. The people-oriented leader is exactly the opposite. He or she is totally focused on organizing, supporting and developing the people in the leader's team. The style is collaborative and participative. He/she is more interested in the well-being of followers than in the effectiveness of those actions taken and the strategy adopted.

Compared to the abundance of theories on leadership styles, very little has been written about the possible characteristics of the leadership constellation. This shortcoming could be resolved by assuming that each possible constellation is influenced by the style of the individual leaders. However, this solution would be unsatisfactory since it would reduce the structural and longitudinal dimensions of the constellation of actors to individual leaders' styles (and thus merely to the kind of relationship between leader and followers). Furthermore, greater theoretical attention should be paid to the possible structural configuration of the leadership constellation. With regard to this, I only wish to focus on three dimensions which may help furnish a more in-depth analysis here.

1. The first important dimension is that of the formal position of power. The more the members of a leadership constellation are in charge of formal institutional positions (and these are distributed at all those institutional levels involved in the political and policy process), the greater the chance of success of the process of change. Power matters in the leadership process, especially if it is widely distributed but not dispersed, and its employment is duly coordinated.
2. The second dimension is that of the variety of goals pursued by the members of the leadership constellation: the less their individual goals are diversified, the greater the coherence and effectiveness of collective actions will be. Here lies the problem of collective leadership. There is no problem if there is a convergence of interests, but if they are highly diversified then the real role of individual leaders will be that of integrating them to the necessary degree. At this point there are two possible paths of action: the first is to build up a vision capable of exalting the similarities rather than the differences; the other is to create a consensus strategy based on transactions and bargaining (see the fifth section for further details).
3. The third dimension concerns the capacity to mobilize support and to engender external legitimation. External legitimation is a fundamental resource of leadership in the process of political and policy change. In the field of public policy, policy reformers in specific policy fields often try to involve public opinion in order to overcome internal opposition to their ideas and proposals. With regard to political change, for example, democratization studies show how internal political actors use their relationships with other (democratic) States or international institutions to increase their internal legitimation.

Obviously, the analysis of the structuring of leadership networks/constellations could be substantially aided by the many studies available on policy networks. What is important here, however, is that the structuring of the leadership constellation is a process: analysts should therefore focus their attention both on the constitutive features of the constellation and (above all, I would say) on the dynamics of their institutionalization. In other words, by tracing the process by which the leadership constellation is created, we can get a better understanding not only of the characteristics of leadership action, but also of its effectiveness. So, from this point of view, the tracing of the formation of the collective dimension can be considered another way of studying the political/policy change process.

#### **4. The situational and contextual nature of leadership structures and styles**

If leadership is an embedded function of political and policy dynamics and change, political scientists are called on to reflect on how this function works. My assumption here is twofold. Firstly, I assume that leadership is situational (Fiedler 1972; Vroom and Yetton 1973). Secondly, I assume that leadership is influenced (but not determined) by context. These two attributes of leadership need to be briefly described before proceeding any further.

Situational leadership simply means that the ways of leading are contingent upon the situation (that is, upon the skills, interests and emotional state of potential followers). Following contingency theory, this definition of leadership as dependent upon the “situation” of the followers means that effective leaders will choose the leadership style that is best suited to the specific situation of their followers. So, good leaders are those who are capable of making an instrumental choice when it comes to their leadership style. This perspective, which was developed in organizational studies, is also very interesting for political scientists. For example, one of the most highly-reputed typologies of situational leadership - that of Hersey and Blanchard (1982) - sets out four leadership styles: directing, coaching, supporting/participating and delegating. These four types could be applied when analyzing political and policy individual leadership. The directing style is typical of those political/policy leaders who are capable of defining the roles and tasks of their followers, and of controlling them and the working of the related constellation. This is the style traditionally attributed to “great men”, that is, to those considered to be charismatic leaders capable of totally involving their followers in their own vision. Coaching leaders are those whose behaviour complies with a more reciprocal relationship with their followers. Such leaders establish roles and tasks, but are ready to accept

suggestions about how to perform such tasks . This type fits in well with the leadership style of contemporary democratic leaders who are perfectly aware of the general goals they want to achieve, but are not very confident about, or skilled in, the strategies and instruments to be adopted. The supporting/participating style leaves everyday policy making in the hands of the followers (the members of the leadership constellations). In this case, leaders are facilitators of the process, even though it is clear that they act as gate-keepers, and are only really interested in any shifts from the common political/policy strategy. Delegating leaders are those who choose to leave the entire process in the hands of their followers, by assuming that the latter will ask for the leaders' intervention should any problematic situations arise (that is when followers need for further resources – power, legitimation, communication, public visibility).

From the political/policy change perspective, the abovementioned types of leadership could work, although they are clearly best suited to certain specific situations. It is clear, for example, that the first style seems to be well-suited to situations of considerable uncertainty, crisis management, radical change; on the other hand, the latter three types are better suited to the normal dynamics of politics and policy-making, and to incremental processes of changes. Further research is necessary here, but it is clear that the type of ongoing change (and the type of political/policy context) influences the kind of leadership style that one would expect.

As far as concerns the problem of context, it should be said that political scientific studies are very ambivalent on this question. On the one hand, there are those scholars who argue how institutional constraints and historical context strictly determine the behaviour of leaders, thus leaving little room for autonomous leadership (Cooper and Brady 1981; Lowi 1985, Sinclair 1999). On the other hand, there are those who point out that leaders, and in particular those who hold institutional positions, are capable of discerning those opportunities (offered by the contemporary socio-political context) to take advantage of new variations in the inherited political and policy legacy, or at times to explore new radical shifts from the inherited praxis (Burke and Greenstein 1989; Doig and Hargrove 1987, Peters 1990; Strahan, Moscardelli, Haspel, and Wike 2000). Furthermore, policy studies traditionally place the role of policy entrepreneurs into context, and their success is closely linked to the specific characteristics (institutional, political and economic) of the existing contingency. Thus the question of context is shrouded in a certain confusion, due to the presence of various different, rather surprising theoretical and empirical findings.

The problem here is that the role of the context depends on the epistemological and methodological choice of researchers. In fact, from a structuralist or rigid neo-institutionalist theoretical perspective, applied through a macro-analysis, agency

does not matter and thus the leadership role is simply a direct consequence of the political structure, or of the institutional arrangements. From a more constructivist perspective, or from a more moderate structuralist perspective, applied through a micro-meso research design, the role of agency is more important and autonomous. As usual, the meaning of reality is a problem of epistemological choice and research design. From my point of view, however, the role of leadership can only be understood if analyzed from a micro-meso perspective, and then the possibility that agency actually matters has to be left open as an empirical question. It is clear that if leadership is embedded in the political and policy process, its effectiveness is strictly related to the state of the situation. So it is clear that revolutions or radical changes do not ensue from one individual leader's action, but as a result of a long process of maturation of all those conditions required for radical change. In such cases, leaders are interpreters of the situation, and as such cannot be considered the source of radical reform, but only as intervenient variables. In this sense, I completely share what Jean Blondel pointed out more than twenty years ago: "Leaders and environment are related in a 'systemic' manner; thus, what has to be assessed is how far a leader is able, given the nature of the demands of the polity that he or she rules, to alter to some extent the character of the demands, by accelerating or slowing down movements of opinion that exist in society" (1987, 202).

So if styles are situational and context does not strictly determine leadership agency, what can political scientists do? Obviously we can do something. First of all, we should be careful about searching for linear causality and reducing the role of agency to what structural factors seem to permit. In fact, we can take into consideration all the significant institutional constraints preventing change and preventing or to limiting the role of leadership in the process of political and policy change, namely: institutional arrangements, the structure and dynamics of the party-system, economic trends, social stratification, etc. Even if all structural and institutional factors are considered, the role of agency and the process of structuring possible leadership constellations are very difficult to foresee and (more importantly) to explain on the basis of a very demanding theory. We need to accept the fact that the role of agency in political and policy change, and especially the role of leadership, can only be understood and explained using a general framework containing the most significant elements for analysis (the different situational styles, the different contextual elements, the temporal dimension, etc.). From this point of view, we must focus on concrete behavior. Agency has to be observed, not deduced from rules, institutional arrangements or combinations of macro-factors. As a result of the situational and contextual nature of leadership, situation and context must be radically reconstructed and described in depth. It is during the day-to-day

political/policy processes that the embedded function of leadership works, transforms itself, produces new ideas, forces new individuals to exploit existing opportunities or to foresee new solutions. Because of its intrinsic situational, contextual nature, leadership should be discovered by treating each political/policy change process as a unique, separate event.

#### **5. Between transformation and transaction. Coalition-consensus building as the core business of leadership**

Efforts to produce political/policy change are not only based on communication, symbols or rhetoric. All too often, the cliché that leaders simply convince people to do things prevails. Leadership is not only story-telling, reframing, persuasion, but is also a process by means of which new ideas are set out and accepted, and also interests are satisfied. So the fundamental business of the leadership function is to create a consensus regarding new political goals or new policy strategies (Doig & Hargrove, 1987). Thus the leadership process, even in the normal day-to-day political and policy process, intrinsically consists of strategic behaviour, transactions, material exchanges among actors, etc. (Burns 1978; Riker 1986; Lake and Powell 1999). This is particularly relevant when political and policy changes are at stake. In such cases, the issues of group interests and power distribution cannot be set aside. So how is consensus created during the leadership process?

This is the point at which I would like to refer to the seminal work of James MacGregor Burns, which distinguishes between transformative and transactional leadership. These two ideal-types of leadership are interesting because they focus on the two most relevant dimensions of the leadership process. In fact, if leadership is perceived as the capacity to persuade people to behave towards a renewed common achievement, the two types proposed by Burn effectively encapsulate how consensus is built up during the leadership process, albeit in an ideal-typized way.

As we all know, transformative leadership is characterized by profound engagement, a strong visionary proposal, a fusion of individual purposes, a radical change in the perceptions, ideas, values and interests of followers who deeply trust the new vision. Transformative leadership is characterized by a moral dimension and a normative commitment. From my point of view, the transformative nature of leadership represents the ideational part of the leadership process. Change requires new ideas capable of redesigning one's perception of followers (people involved in the process) compared to one's own interests. So transformative leadership is based on a vision and a moral commitment which represent a very powerful means of integrating people's



minds and wills, and of reconstructing our perception of individual interests. Transformative leadership address the process of change by working on the ideational and emotional aspects of potential followers. Leaders are very important for their ability to gain trust, respect and admiration from their followers (Bass 1985). Vision-sharing is the binding element in the leadership constellation and the means by which consensus is solidly constructed and guaranteed. This is clearly the case of revolutionary or reformist leaders, of those who have been, and are, able to offer a new agenda and a new perspective for the transformation of the inherited features of the political system. This way of building consensus with regard to those changes to be pursued is based, first and foremost, on the skills and capacities of potential leaders. However, because leadership is situational, it is clear that it can only be effective within a context in which potential followers are ready to follow that lead. So it is clear that transformative leadership works in the presence of political or policy crisis, that is, where uncertainty makes people and stakeholders very worry about the future and where social and political uncertainty prevails. At the same time, the problem of how political manipulation is to be used to construct a collective perception of critical situations.

Transformative leadership is therefore very interesting, since it is the simplest, but also the most problematic, form to analyze. It is simple because it seems to be very self-evident. Transformative leadership, in fact, implies the presence of a charismatic or visionary leader who emotionally involves potential followers. It is also the most problematic, because a 'vision' needs to be implemented, and the sharing of the same vision requires more than a guarantee it will actually, and effectively, be enforced. This is especially true in the case of policy change, where even the sharing of a common vision, new policy ideas and a commitment to radical reform, do not guarantee that such will be successful. Foreseen radical policy reforms take time to reveal their effects (especially in the fields of social welfare, education and the environment). So, the medium-long term is a counter-factor in the case of transformative leadership. At this point, further research would be needed in order to establish how transformative leadership institutionalizes its own new vision of things.

Transactional leadership is the 'normal' way of leading the political and policy process, and thus of building a consensus about policy and political decisions and eventually change. Transactional leadership is based on an exchange of valued things and bargaining. Collective purpose is not unitary or unified, but based on a negotiated aggregation of preferences. Because there is no common vision, but a simple interest in staying together, there is no strong motivation to cooperate towards the pursuit of a collective aim, except for the issue at stake or except for the terms and conditions of the negotiated pact. Transactional leadership means that leaders construct relationships with

potential followers on the basis of selective incentives and by inducing commitment among those followers (Olson 1965). Leaders search for credit, as followers search for incentives (possibly selected) and commitment. This approach to building up leadership in political and policy dynamics and change, is very usual for political scientists for two reasons. Firstly because incremental changes are very often based on small shifts in institutionalized transactions. Here the variations are limitless. For example, policy drift, layering and conversion (Thelen 2003; Hacker 2002) are ways of incrementally changing institutions (that is, political arrangements, policy paradigms); these changes are obtained through small variations in the existing institutionalized arrangements, thanks to re-negotiations between those actors involved. Secondly, because the intrinsic 'rational' motivation which also those scholars who do not share the ideas of rational choice theory generally attribute to leaders and followers. From this point of view, the exchange perspective (the fact that actors involved in political and policy dynamics exchange something in order to behave and essentially to coordinate their behaviour) prevails in political science. This means that very often, leadership is analyzed by focusing on the exchange dimension and on the ways in which leaders build up and institutionalize leadership constellations and networks using selected incentives and also 'selected' commitments.

Transactional leadership works within existing institutional culture and arrangements, while transformative leadership directly attempts to radically change them. Transactional leadership tries to capitalize on the existing equilibrium in order to slowly shift it. Also, in this case the situational and context-influenced nature of leadership is important. In fact, leaders may adopt different bargaining styles, depending on the emotional and cognitive state of their potential followers. At the same time, contextual features may also influence them. The personal skills of leaders still matter however. In fact, even in an institutional context characterized by several veto-holders, the leader may choose to invest his energies in the pursuit of a stronger bargaining position compared to what would reasonably (and rationally) be expected, simply because of his/her greater propensity towards risk-taking.

Thus also in the case of the transactional approach to building consensus regarding political and policy change, there is significant room for a form autonomous agency that is not completely foreseeable by an instrumental-rational or structural perspective

## **6. Conclusions**

Dealing with leadership in political and policy change is a difficult, 'slippery' task. However, it is also challenging from both the theoretical and the empirical points of

view. Leadership is one of the most significant forms of agency, and as such deserves greater theoretical and empirical attention. In mainstream political science, the explanatory emphasis on macro-structural factors, institutional rules, institutionalized routines and patterns of behaviour have consolidated a kind of 'structural bias' which tends to undervalue agency. So leadership is something residual, exceptional and very difficult to grasp, and thus put aside as an 'irregular' event. However, agency exists and so does leadership. In this paper I have tried to formulate a number of theoretical considerations regarding a possible way of including leadership analysis to a greater degree in political science and public policy studies. Assuming that political and policy change are the more suitable empirical object which to analyze the role of leadership (also because change means actors behave in a different way compared to the past and so it is simpler to observe their behavior and the impact of it), I have tried to show how leadership is an embedded function of political and policy processes; how it is double-faceted (being at one and the same time an individual task and a collective enterprise), how it works through the building up of consensus (reached by different styles and structural dynamics), and how the micro-meso level perspective and sequence-tracing are the best methodological ways of resolving the leadership puzzle.

This is only an initial attempt (perhaps rather rough) to initiate a debate which deserves greater theoretical reflection and empirical research.

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