

Introduction

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In recent decades historiography has moved decisively away from the highly personalized treatments of past events which were once favoured. Not 'great men' but 'labouring men', collective movements, political forces, social and economic development, women's and local history have been the focus of attention. Nowadays, the problem of political leadership is considered primarily in institutional terms, and the emphasis given to personality has correspondingly diminished. With very few exceptions, biography has been relegated to the level of popular narrative. To raise the question of charisma in these circumstances is almost to violate a taboo, to address an embarrassing topic unworthy of scholarly attention. With the exception of the mainly theoretical work of Luciano Cavalli on the origins and permutations of charisma, there have been no sustained attempts to examine comparatively the various cases of charismatic leadership that Italian political life has produced. Thus, partly because charisma has been abandoned as a scholarly topic, it can appear inexplicable, inaccessible to the historical methods used for the study of social and political structures.

The papers given at the conference on 'Charisma and personality cults in modern Italy', organized by ASMI in November 1996 and which form the basis of this issue of *Modern Italy*, aimed to revitalize the debate on charisma among Italian historians and political scientists. As the papers published here indicate, the issue itself cannot so easily be dismissed. For although all of the nineteenth-century writers who considered charisma predicted its demise, modern Italy has continued to witness such a wide variety of forceful, unusual or 'charismatic' leaders that explanations must be offered. The appearance of such leaders in Italy, moreover, has often pointed to, and anticipated, the emergence of broader political trends. Giuseppe Garibaldi, 'the most charismatic and enduring political hero of nineteenth-century Italy', according to Lucy Riall, offered a blueprint for the leadership of popular politics in Italy. This blueprint, Carl Levy argues, continued to inform the activities of socialists and anarchists like Errico Malatesta, whose acclaimed return to Italy in 1919 he describes in detail. Mussolini, Emilio Gentile writes, was the 'prototype of the charismatic dictators who populate the century's history'; by the 1930s, moreover, the authority of a charismatic leader had become 'pivotal to the whole complex organization of the totalitarian regime'. The issue of charisma—and the reaction to the cult of Mussolini—also profoundly affected political life in post-war Italy, producing what Marzia Marsili calls the 'non-cults' of De Gasperi and Togliatti and the

intense glorification of Pope Pius XII, the subject of Oliver Logan's paper. Both Mark Donovan and Richard Barraclough show that vigorous (if not entirely successful) attempts to attain charismatic status remain a prominent feature of political leadership in the 1990s. Emanuela Poli argues that, although the cult of Berlusconi's personality was confined mainly to his company, Fininvest, he manipulated his image to achieve some of the effects of charisma in 1994. Thus, as Stephen Gundle suggests, even if 'genuine' charisma no longer exists, a consideration of its sources, qualities and impact offers a kind of prism for the study of Italian politics in general.

The most convincing general account of charisma remains that of Max Weber. Weber described charisma, with traditional and rational-legal power, as one of three authority types. The charismatic leader, according to Weber, emerges at moments of instability, when the traditional or rational-legal authorities are in crisis. He described charisma itself as a personal quality, possessed by an individual 'by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men'; he is 'treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman or at least exceptional powers or qualities' and, as such, inspires, and is given, absolute devotion by his followers. There are, however, a number of problems with Weber's approach. He ignores the possibility that charisma can take many different forms and, as a result, neglects the importance of institutional charisma. Yet as many of the papers here stress, the fascination and appeal of institutions have played an important role in determining the success and failure of the charismatic leader. During the late nineteenth century, for example, the successful institutional charisma of the Catholic Church was embodied by the figure of Pius IX, whereas the liberal government's inability to attract popular support was mirrored in its failure to establish successful personality cults. In the Fascist period, the personal charisma of Mussolini was constrained by, and sometimes clashed with, the collective charisma of the Fascist party. Even in the atmosphere of hostility towards cults of post-war Italy, Togliatti could rely on the institutional charisma of the Communist Party.

The papers included here also suggest that charismatic authority is not fully distinguishable from the other two authority types. As the experience of modern Popes shows clearly, the successful charismatic leader is one who uses and has mastered the modern art of mass communication, and who in an age of rational-legal authority also appeals to the immediate emotional needs of the political audience. In this respect, there are a number of 'tools' which the charismatic leader relies on in order to communicate with an audience. Garibaldi evoked a response from contemporary political sensibilities by embodying the romantic hero of popular fiction. The reaction to Malatesta's return in 1919 was also overwhelmingly emotional: as Carl Levy shows, he had become a symbol for revolutionary anarchists of the hardship, dedication and heroism of being a permanent outsider. Mussolini's charismatic appeal adapted to the changing times. He went through, in Gentile's words, 'three distinct phases as a mythical and charismatic figure'; that he succeeded as a leader after 1924 was partly due to his appeal to the new idea of a 'strong man', widely

disseminated in Italy after the First World War. Mussolini's success as a 'strong man' also reflects one of the most obvious and important charismatic qualities, physical appearance and sexuality. Contemporary descriptions of Garibaldi almost invariably refer to his striking physical presence and, indirectly, to his powerful sexuality. The importance of physical appearance can also be seen in the 'burning eyes' and, in a later guise, the virile masculinity of Mussolini, as well as in its antitheses: the bourgeois suits of De Gasperi and Togliatti and the 'diaphanous' figure of Pius XII, 'a perfect foil', in Oliver Logan's words, 'to that of the Duce'. In Bossi and Berlusconi, the respective lack of grooming and the excess of it both communicate powerful if indirect messages about the attitudes and character of the two men.

An important issue which is not addressed fully in this collection of articles is the gender of charisma. All the figures under examination are men, and not by chance; with the possible exception of King Umberto's consort Margherita, it would be difficult to find a single woman who could be said to have exercised any measure of charisma in the political realm in the whole history of modern Italy. The question that needs to be asked is whether this was so simply because the political sphere was dominated by men and there was no female monarch, or whether it was because charisma and masculinity are indivisible. Certainly, the association of charisma with violence and conquest highlighted by Luciano Cavalli would seem to limit it largely to men. Moreover, images of women historically served more general, allegorical purposes than those of men. Women stood for the Nation, the Revolution or the Republic, in other words their sex was symbolically associated with general principles, while men were much more individualized and bound up with specific causes. In other words, women, largely excluded from the realm of the state, symbolized ideas; men carried them out. However, the mystery and allure of the feminine, particularly strong in the gender-divided late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was marked in fields like fashion and the theatre. Few male actors are remembered today from that period, whereas there are numerous studies and biographies of Eleonora Duse. As Gundle argues, the association of the feminine with the theatre, performance and the desire to please meant that a sort of gender shift in the nature of charisma occurred when, for a variety of interlocking political, economic and social reasons, leadership came to rely less on heroic achievement and more on performance. Mussolini might have thought that he was highlighting masculine values by removing his shirt to promote the battle for wheat or prove his toughness on the ski slopes, but by turning himself into a butch pin-up he slipped into a feminine realm. In the case of Berlusconi the combination of masculine and feminine appeals (business and shopping, sport and soap operas) is quite explicit and widely recognized.

Probably the most striking quality of charisma in modern Italy is its religious and, in particular, its Catholic aspect. According to Cavalli, the Catholic Church as an institution, with its strict hierarchy dominated by 'the complex charismatic figure' of the Pope, 'prepared the ground for the full domination by a political charismatic leader' in modern Italy. Catholic culture, largely built around the

figure of Jesus and related personality cults (the Virgin Mary, the saints) also encouraged a popular longing for extraordinary leaders in the sphere of secular politics. Thus, the political iconography of the Risorgimento and after represented a series of charismatic secular leaders in terms which borrowed heavily from Roman Catholicism. Among the most common representations of Garibaldi were of the leader as saviour and a patriot saint; the later adulation of Malatesta owed a great deal not only to Risorgimento practices but also indirectly to religious tradition. Perhaps most notably, the success of a leader like Mussolini cannot be separated from the emergence of a 'civic religion', which relied on Catholic notions of the sacred. Good Fascists, Gentile points out, were driven by the sense of a religious mission; they considered themselves 'The apostles of a faith, the soldiers of an idea'. Moreover, as the papers of both Marsili and Logan suggest, both in dramatizing the moment of dying and in the organization of funerals, the secular authorities had a great deal in common with the symbols and rituals of the Catholic Church.

The presence of the Catholic Church can throw light not only on the forms of charismatic leadership in modern Italy, but also on the remarkable proliferation of charismatic leaders. However, the relationship between the religious and the secular in modern Italy is not necessarily straightforward. Logan shows that the popular cult of Pius XII borrowed from—and 'interchanged' with—Fascist rhetoric, and continued to do so after the fall of Mussolini. This structure of meaning has largely ceased to have any influence on contemporary politics, although it was not without significance that in 1994 Berlusconi presented himself in the guise of a saviour, even if the promised land he offered Italians was the already familiar one of television quiz shows and prosperity for all.

In the course of the twentieth century both religious and secular leaders have had to contend with, and adapt to, the arrival of a new competitor: the stars of the mass media, and of the cinema in particular. Film stars created expectations of beauty, charm and general appeal that were rather different from those of earlier charismatic leaders. At the same time, they were at once typical and exceptional, they were like anyone else yet, on screen, they could do exceptional things and solve any problem. Political leaders had adapted to radio but cinema presented a new set of problems. The arrival of television further complicated matters, by placing the emphasis on intimate, quasi-one-to-one communication that almost entirely eclipsed the stump oratory of the past. It may be, as Gundle argues, that the mastering of mass marketing techniques to package contemporary politicians as charismatic leaders has, by rendering them familiar, destroyed the popular longing for political heroes. If so, the tradition invented by Garibaldi may have come to a close (in more ways than one) with Bossi and Berlusconi.

However, Donovan makes the point that the institutional and electoral reform of recent years has tended to favour both bipolarism and personalization. The direct election of mayors, the division of the party system into two loose coalitions and, possibly, the future direct election of the head of state, all offer opportunities for would-be leaders, although these are likely to take on charismatic properties only at times of crisis and uncertainty.

There is one aspect of the communication of leadership that is unlikely to change. It is striking that both Riall and Poli stress the importance of narrative to perceptions of Garibaldi and Berlusconi. Each figure in his own way was at the centre of a collective story which involved people and in some way inspired them. Garibaldi wove his own legend, which was embroidered and perpetuated by others; this drew on popular literature and the more general taste for adventure and heroism. Berlusconi was tireless in repeating his personal story as a self-made man who founded his own business and created an empire from nothing. The tale was supposed to confirm his leadership qualities and justify their transfer into the political realm. No leader with a mission, it would seem, can inspire hope without narrative support of this type, regardless of the particular political conjuncture and communications environment.

In conclusion, it is worth reflecting on probably the most enduring feature of political charisma in Italy, namely that it has been most successful when in opposition to the existing political order. With the (only partial) exception of Mussolini, the most effective charismatic leaders discussed here—Garibaldi, Malatesta, Pius IX, Pius XII, even Umberto Bossi—emerged as alternatives to the government representatives of the day. By contrast, official attempts to establish personality cults have rarely evoked the desired response. This is not to argue that the charisma quality is necessarily innate and personal, a 'gift of Grace', but that to be successful, the charismatic leader must appear to reflect the demands and concerns of his followers—a feat rarely achieved by modern Italy's official leaders. Even the loose cult that surrounded Berlusconi dissolved shortly after he became Prime Minister. Charisma cannot be entirely invented nor, as the case of Mussolini shows, can it be indefinitely manipulated. In terms of establishing an approach to the study of charisma, this suggests that the history of 'great men' and the history of 'labouring men' should not be separated. To be able to explain the rise and presence of the charismatic leader in modern Italy, in other words, the historian must look not just at the qualities of individual political figures but also at such issues as the popular attitudes to politics and at the culture and traditions of political opposition. The context which gives rise to, or which favours, strong leaders is a vital component of their success. Charisma may not necessarily be positive or healthy, but it does denote the existence of a functioning political relationship and, as such, it merits study in all its facets.