The importance of political credibility today
by Guido Gili and Massimiliano Panarari, Edizioni Marsilio, Venezia, 2020, 205 pp., €12.50, ISBN 978882970545 0

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To cite this article: Francesco Petricone (2020) The importance of political credibility today, Church, Communication and Culture, 5:2, 288-291, DOI: 10.1080/23753234.2020.1766364

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2020.1766364
The importance of political credibility today

La credibilità politica: Radici, forme, prospettive di un concetto inattuale [Political credibility – Roots, forms, perspectives of an outdated concept], by Guido Gili and Massimiliano Panarari, Edizioni Marsilio, Venezia, 2020, 205 pp., €12.50, ISBN 978882970545 0

Prologue

Everyone is looking for it. Many complain of its absence. It is credibility, the cornerstone of political life and of the democratic system which is as much praised as neglected. What is credibility? Who is credible and why? What are the roots and forms of political credibility? How does it circulate within society? What risks is it subject to and what pathologies do they derive from? What can be called upon to restore credibility to politics?

These questions are answered by sociologists Guido Gili and Massimiliano Panarari, in a clear, concise, compendious … not to mention credible … book that explains how to overcome the current crisis of credibility, which some even consider irreversible, not only in Italy.

Theories are effective and prove to be correct if they travel beyond the tools that create them: the theories of Gili and Panarari prove to be such, above all in the current situation in which – no doubt unexpectedly for the authors! – the emergency that the planet is living with the Corona Virus, or Covid-19 is a real test case.

At the basis of these theories is the problem of accelerating the process of circulation of political elites, of the real consumption of leadership as the authors write, which leads us to ask: what is credibility really? And what does it mean to be credible?

Credibility as a relationship

Many, very many quotations in the book – beginning with that from Aristotle’s Rhetoric (A 2, 1356a 1–20), in which he claims that we believe more easily in honest people, adding that this is even more so regarding questions that do not involve certainty, but doubt – recall how, both for the Philosopher and in the common feeling, credibility appears as a personal quality. In reality one is not credible in general and in the abstract, but for someone. It can be a few people or millions of people, but always someone and not in the abstract. Credibility is therefore a relationship, a risky bet, which leads us to ask ourselves what is credible and what are the characteristics and virtues that are preferably associated with a political entity perceived as credible.

The authors distinguish between credibility of the role and credibility in the role; someone is believed because he knows and for what he knows. This is typically the credibility of the expert, the scientist, that is one who has a well-founded knowledge of the facts and problems, which means that he can speak, as the authors say, ‘with good reason’ or ‘with knowledge of the facts’. How to blame them? Just think of the historical period in which we live: the whole world has relied on experts, scientists, or better still scientific committees, with national governments taking decisions in consequence of their findings.
In politics, as in other professions – but perhaps to a greater extent that in others – it is crucial both to know how to and to be able to act. It is even more more necessary to know how to communicate well the decisions taken. In this sense, the authors define dramaturgical competence as the ability to know how to keep the scene, the ability to use the media, the asymmetry (or complementarity) of positions between those who know (or know more) and those who don’t know (or know less). This asymmetry should allow those who occupy the lower position to recognize that those who occupy the higher position have a greater endowment of knowledge resources and capacity for action. In all these cases, credibility is therefore based on a difference in resources and in the relationship between a political leader and the citizens: the latter give credit to a politician if they rate his skills and competences higher than those they feel that they themselves possess.

But is it always like this?

In this necessary fiduciary relationship between those who claim to be credible and those who are considered as such, in which personal values can be summarized in the concepts of ‘virtue’ or ‘integrity’ and include honesty, seriousness, self-control, ability to assume responsibility and to respect commitments, politics must be understood as a service, and Gili and Panarari know it well. That’s why they underline that to govern means to serve, because ‘In the house of the just’ – as St. Augustine observes – those who command are at the service of those who seem the commanded. Indeed, it is not out of passion for domination that they command, but out of desire to give oneself; not out of pride in being leaders, but out of concern to provide for everyone’ (St. Augustine 1973, XIX. 14).

**Shorten the distance between leaders and citizens; credibility, yes, but mutual credibility**

The authors, over the course of 205 pages, divided into five chapters, highlight the importance of affective roots and sympathy in politics, illustrated by the new image strategies of political leaders, which are also based on the reduction of distance and the growing exhibition of private life. Very important, although perhaps too concise, is the reference to Italian transformism, perhaps one of the main causes of inefficiency of the Italian political system (but not exclusively the Italian one), certainly the first element of breaking the relationship of loyalty between the elected and the elector.

Credibility therefore no longer concerns only political competence or discursive ability, but the totality of the personal characteristics of the politician, in creating an affective/emotional relationship between leaders and citizens: why should I vote for him? The old Hegelian principle, which says that nobody is a great man for his waiter, returns, so that political leaders, accepting and often seeking the challenge of politics, must be aware of being at the mercy of millions of waiters, the electors.

The book is full of interesting references to national and international political experience to endorse the theses supported. It is recalled, for example how Ronald Reagan was perhaps the first president to systematically use the strategy of perennial media visibility – inaugurating a school, participating in a veterans’ rally, kicking off a sporting event, providing a particularly unexpected statement in an informal context – an example that was then followed by the offices that manage White House communication, for Clinton, Obama, Trump (Brivio 1992).

A particular intuition in the book, simple but not simplistic, is the account of a relationship of credibility in the concrete and not in the abstract, of the necessary reciprocity in the relationship of credibility between citizens and leaders. The recognition that the political leader asks of citizens must be accompanied by the ability of the leader to recognize the
requests, or better, the requests and needs of those who have placed their trust in him. And this is not always the case, on the contrary. It is not simply a matter of indulging the drives or tendencies of the masses in order to ingratiate oneself with them, but of encouraging and growing the processes of listening, feedback and participation at all levels. It is even more evident that credibility is a relationship that works only if it operates in both directions, bearing in mind that in democratic countries political credibility – which has always been very precarious – seems to have declined further in recent decades.

In search of lost social approval: think of the next generations and not of the upcoming elections

James Freeman Clarke affirmed the principle, later proposed by Churchill and De Gasperi, according to which a politician thinks of the next elections, while a statesman thinks of the next generation. This should be the guiding motto of political action. Instead, often – not to say always – politicians and rulers are dazzled by the light of the polls that creates distorting optical effects. The public opinion expressed in the polls, in fact, although presented as a source of legitimacy for governments and democratic institutions, has different times and rhythms than these institutions. It is ephemeral, changeable, unstable, it can vary daily while governments and political institutions require stability, planning, long times. Politicians, in turn, can guide and direct public opinion only if they assume a mimetic attitude, adapt to it and, literally, chase it. They can direct it to the extent that they follow or, better, are attached to, the image that polls and media return of public opinion. In an era in which populisms and their dangers are continually and disproportionately spoken about, the authors correctly express their amazement that few consider the fact that, as Daniel Innerarity (2008, 50) has observed, the massive use of the survey as a source of legitimation or delegitimization is a pervasive form of populism, one could say of methodological populism.

Epilogue: political credibility is possible but in a community of shared values

Political credibility is not just an analysis of credibility in politics, as the authors themselves write. After the season of personal parties and those formed around a leader, there has been a break-up and rapid consumption of intermittent leadership, which may last only one morning. These are leaderships gained, more and more frequently, on social networks, with an eternal return to oscillating and cyclical dynamics, a format that proves to be incessantly present in political history. In the age of permanent election campaigns and the postmodernization of politics, that format is intertwined with the processes of personalization (for which the strong man is also a brand) and of mediatization.

Mutual recognition assumes a fundamental importance where it is seen as the ability to guide and govern others by assuming all the responsibilities and risks that this entails, while encouraging and promoting real processes of listening, participation and active involvement of citizens at all the levels and in all phases of (democratic) political life.

It is the reference to that concept of community well known to sociologists. When the word community is evoked in political discourse, however, it does not only denote an identity based on territorial roots, that is, the strength of small homelands; it denotes instead a particular type of bond between people. The community relationship, starting from the teaching of Tönnies (1963), is characterized by the centrality of the aspect of cohesion and
common feeling, that is consensus, for which its value lies in the particular quality of the bond that is created between people.

The question then is: is the community compatible with open and pluralistic society? The most convincing answer – to the authors, as to the writer of this review – is that not only is the community compatible with a pluralistic society, but, as William Kornhauser (1959) has shown, it is a constitutive element of it. A truly democratic society is founded on a plurality of communities and associations, different in purposes, structure and orientations, of which people can freely and non-exclusively and totally belong. Pluralistic democracy needs certain social groups that are proud of their identity, at the same time open and capable of welcoming and understanding the reasons that emerge from life experiences and from different points of view.

The merit of the study by Gili and Panarari is undoubtedly having drawn attention to issues that could never be more current and appropriate than in this period.

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