



THE 17TH EDITION OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
EUROPEAN INTEGRATION
REALITIES AND PERSPECTIVES

Interdisciplinary Dimensions of Communication Science

Communication and Leadership.

From Adam Smith to R.G. Collingwood

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Abstract: In this paper, I aim at presenting and commenting on some relevant ideas about leadership belonging to great philosophers such as Adam Smith, John Dewey and R.G. Collingwood, in relation to the problem of communication or language. In this regard, one can state that Adam Smith is a real forerunner, since he proved, almost three centuries ago, the fundamental importance of speech to the art of leadership. At the same time, I will insist on Dewey's view concerning the role of communication in society and, most of all, on Collingwood's useful distinction between "dialectical communication" and "eristical communication" in connection to leadership and politics.

Keywords: philosophy; communication; language; leadership; politics

1. Lately, under various forms, *leadership* (or "the art of leadership") has been talked about more and more. Specialized books have been written and distributed, workshops and training courses have been organized about how to become a successful leader, regardless of the domain of activity. The essence of leadership consists in the *influence* a person (not necessarily an official manager) exercises on his fellows (or "colleagues"): "The true measure of leadership is influence – nothing more, nothing less", as stated by John C. Maxwell (2007, p. 11), a very *en vogue* specialist in leadership. In other words, a leader is someone who inspires the persons around him, the one who motivates his colleagues (or his employees) to make all the efforts in order to meet a common goal. At the same time, the former should make the others aware of the importance of that aim.

1.1. Definitely, not all the things which the promoters of leadership are teaching these days are new. When discovering at John C. Maxwell, among the "irrefutable laws" (recommended to the would-be leader), *the law of navigation*, one may think, unwillingly, of Plato's ancient metaphor of "steering the ship of state". As a matter of fact, the etymology of the verb *to govern* is well known: the respective word comes (via Latin and French) from the Old Greek *kybernao* (also explaining the more recent term *cybernetics*), which means precisely 'to steer a ship'.

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1.2. Similarly, when the necessity for the group or the team to realize the common goal is brought into discussion, the reflections (from 1916) of the philosopher John Dewey may come to our mind: “The parts of a machine work with a maximum of cooperativeness for a common result, but they do not form a community. If, however, they were all cognizant of the common end and all interested in it so that they regulated their specific activity in view of it, then they would form a community. But this would involve communication. Each would have to know what the other was about and would have to have some way of keeping the other informed as to his own purpose and progress. Consensus demands communication. We are thus compelled to recognize that within even the most social group there are many relations which are not as yet social. A large number of human relationships in any social group are still upon the machine-like plane. Individuals use one another so as to get desired results, without reference to the emotional and intellectual disposition and consent of those used.” (Dewey, 2004, p. 5).

1.3. As it can be easily observed, John Dewey highly appreciated the role of communication in such a situation. In my opinion, this aspect has not always been sufficiently emphasized in the recent works devoted to leadership. However, the great thinkers from the past would pay the proper attention to language when discussing the way in which a leader should direct the others. Since the term *leadership* (derived from *leader*)¹ has an English origin, I will refer in what follows to two famous British philosophers: Adam Smith and Robin George Collingwood. I find their ideas important, for they relate the ability or the knowledge of leading to the faculty of speech, considered an essential competence in the area of human relations.

2. Adam Smith (1723-1790), the famous Scottish philosopher, also known as “the Father of Economics”, published in 1759 a treatise entitled *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. In its 6th edition (published in 1790), A. Smith added, in the final section of the book, a series of paragraphs (see Part VII, Section IV, §§ 23-27), including those we are interested in here.

2.1. Starting from the instinctive disposition of children to believe everything they are told, he states that this “credulity” represents, in fact, a tendency specific to grown-ups in general. After some “introductory” reflections, Adam Smith reaches the problem of leaders, which he relates to the faculty of speech: “The desire of being believed, the desire of persuading, of leading and directing other people, seems to be one of the strongest of all our natural desires. It is, perhaps, the instinct upon which is founded *the faculty of speech*, the characteristic faculty of human nature. No other animal possesses this faculty, and we cannot discover in any other animal any desire to lead and direct the judgment and conduct of its fellows. Great ambition, the desire of real superiority, of leading and directing, seems to be altogether peculiar to man, and *speech* is the great instrument of ambition, of real superiority, of leading and directing the judgments and conduct of other people.” (Smith, 1984, p. 336).

2.2. Adam Smith believes that the ability to lead can be spread by the power of example, i.e. it can be learnt: “The man whom we believe is necessarily, in the things concerning which we believe him, our leader and director, and we look up to him with a certain degree of esteem and respect. But as from admiring other people we come to wish to be admired ourselves; so from being led and directed by other

¹ It is an interesting fact that the English dictionaries do not record the word *leadership* before the 19th century.

people we learn to wish to become ourselves leaders and directors.” (Smith, 1984, p. 336). Even if the Scottish scholar does not develop the topic, he deserves to be mentioned, nevertheless, as an illustrious forerunner – thanks to his valuable observations – in the history of this field.

3. One can discover even more captivating elements later, in this regard, at R.G. Collingwood (1889-1943), the original English thinker. In a treatise of political philosophy, *The New Leviathan*, published in 1942, the respective professor of metaphysics from Oxford borrows “a word from the theory of magnetism and electricity” in order to characterize, at some point, a social aspect. Referring to the way in which a leader manages to instill in his employees (or in the other members of society) the energy required for reaching a certain goal, Collingwood resorts to the term *induction* (cf. Munteanu, 2016, pp. 31-32), paralleling the primary definition of the scientific concept and the social signification which he attributes in that context:

(1) “Induction is something whereby a body not charged with electricity or magnetism behaves as if it were so charged, owing to the proximity of a charged body.” (Collingwood, 1971, p. 187);

(2) “The ‘induction’ of which I speak is something whereby a human being incapable of will (or capable only in a low degree) behaves as if he were capable (or capable in a higher degree) owing to the proximity of a being thus capable” (Collingwood, 1971, p. 187).

Consequently, when a weak will is inspired by a stronger one, we deal with an “induction”, which has nothing coercive in itself – it is all about the power of example (Collingwood, 1971, p. 188).

3.1. Giving the impression that he is in agreement with the ideas stated once by Adam Smith (see *supra*), Collingwood links leadership to education: “This ‘induction’ is not radically different from education. The inductive process often repeated is an important part of all education. Response to good leadership is part of becoming a good leader. And conversely a good leader is always teaching his followers to become leaders in their turn” (Collingwood, 1971, pp. 188-189).

3.2. Before examining the manner in which R.G. Collingwood treats leadership in relation to communication, allow me to make a brief digression. At the end of Petre Botezatu’s *Introducere în logică* (‘Introduction to Logic’), readers will find, instead of the normal conclusion, a *Fals tratat de logică* (‘False Treatise on Logic’; only 3 pages long), made up of impactful sentences, aphorisms-like (quite frequently). Here are two of them, which come one after another: “You convinced me, therefore I was in agreement [with you]. I convinced you, therefore I defeated you” (Botezatu, 1997, p. 275). There is no paradox or contradiction here. The two reply-sentences emphasize two different points of view, two different ways of having a discussion. In order to better understand what Petre Botezatu had in mind, we should return to Collingwood.

3.3. In chapter XXIV of the same book, *The New Leviathan*, R.G. Collingwood resorts to an old distinction, which he will resume frequently, with numerous variations: “All logic is concerned with discussions; but Plato distinguished two kinds of discussions, ‘eristical’ and ‘dialectical’ (*Meno*, 75 c-d). What Plato calls an eristic discussion is one in which each party tries to prove that he was right and the other wrong. In a dialectical discussion you aim at showing that your own view is one with which

your opponent really agrees, even if at one time he denied it; or conversely that it was yourself and not your opponent who began by denying a view with which you really agree” (Collingwood, 1971, p. 181)¹.

3.4. Let us also remark the fact that the English philosopher does not envisage the delivery of (longer) speeches / discourses, in which case he could have appealed to another distinction made by Plato, namely between *the bad rhetoric* (criticized in the dialogue *Gorgias*) and *the good rhetoric* (praised in the dialogue *Phaidros*). Collingwood probably considers that consensus can be reached only through dialogue, through authentic debate, through discussions in which interlocutors support their ideas and beliefs in good faith².

3.5. Taking as a point of departure the opposition *eristical discussion* vs. *dialectical discussion*, Collingwood derives two other antagonistic concepts: *eristical way of life* vs. *dialectical way of life*. Only the dialectical way of life is desirable in a community, since it is the only way to create de real communion (cf. Dewey, *supra*) (Collingwood, 1971, p. 306). The civilized man is differentiated from the uncivilized one in the same manner: “*Being civilized* means *living, so far as possible, dialectically*, that is, in constant endeavour to convert every occasion of non-agreement into an occasion of agreement” (Collingwood, 1971, p. 326).

4. What is more, a healthy political life is possible only when the (most important) parties in a state are in a relation of dialectical opposition, and not in an eristical one (Collingwood, 1971, pp. 210-211); in other words, only when the leaders or the representatives of the political groups discuss in a dialectical manner, despite their possible differences in doctrine. Otherwise, when rulers do not understand or accomplish their mission, the result can be catastrophic. In this regard, Collingwood launches a warning, which I find appropriate to be reproduced here instead of other conclusions: “A community whose rulers quarrel, especially if they are so childish as to let their quarrels lead to violence, is an ill-governed community, unable to provide a life of peace and plenty for its members at home and unable to make itself respected abroad” (Collingwood, 1971, p. 337).

¹ As known, the opposition between *the sophistic eristics* and *the Socratic dialectics* is emphasized and illustrated by Plato mainly in the dialogue *Euthydemus*. The fragment (from *Meno*, to which Collingwood refers) is the following: “The truth, from me; and if my questioner were a professor of the eristic and contentious sort [καὶ εἰ μὲν γε τῶν σοφῶν τις εἶη καὶ ἐριστικῶν τε καὶ ἀγωνιστικῶν ὁ ἐρόμενος], I should say to him: [75d] ‘I have made my statement; if it is wrong, your business is to examine and refute it’. But if, like you and me on this occasion, we were friends and chose to have a discussion together [εἰ δὲ ὥσπερ ἐγὼ τε καὶ σὺ νυνὶ φίλοι ὄντες βούλοιντο ἀλλήλοις διαλέγεσθαι], I should have to reply in some milder tone more suited to dialectic. The more dialectical way [ἔστι δὲ ἴσως τὸ διαλεκτικώτερον], I suppose, is not merely to answer what is true, but also to make use of those points which the questioned person acknowledges he knows. And this is the way in which I shall now try to argue with you.” (Plato, 1967; for the original Greek version, see Plato, 1903).

² We learnt from H.P. Grice how important (and necessary) *the principle of cooperation* is in communication. There is no doubt that the effects of cooperation are perceived in our daily conversations. However, as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson proved in their already classic work from 1980, *Metaphors We Live By*, one of “the conceptual metaphors” (also) specific to our culture is *argument is war*, and not *argument is cooperation* (see Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 4).

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