City Leaders and the Power of Leadership of Leaders

Michela Pagani, Alessandro Sancino
The Open University

Abstract

Cities are an extraordinary and underrepresented object of enquiry for leadership studies. In cities, leadership is dispersed through several actors, structures and processes (and thus it is inherently collective), even if it still largely depends on Great Individuals (e.g. the Mayors, the CEOs of local government, top politicians, etc.) (e.g. Budd & Sancino, 2016) whom anyway and inevitably struggle to accomplish current complex, tame, wicked, and grand societal challenges (e.g. Acuto, 2016; Grint, 2010). In other words, cities as units of analysis can "tick the box" for more leadership philosophies (e.g. person centric, collective and relational and critical). To be fair, research on leadership in places and cities has bloomed in recent years and seems a developing and promising area of enquiry (Beer et al., 2018; Collinge, Gibney, & Mabey, 2010; Jackson & Parry, 2018; Ropo, Sauer, & Salovaara, 2013). With this study, based on the early analysis of the data collected for an on-going PhD project on City Leadership, we aim to shed a light on an important issue in times of disruptive changes in the social, political, economic and ecological order, namely: who are the city leaders?

This paper is based on a Social Network Analysis (SNA) carried out in 2018 in two cities, Peterborough (UK) and Padova (Italy). The aim of the SNA was to identify the city leaders (intended here as the actors who exercise, implement and/or nurture city leadership) through the leaders' perspectives. In other words, we considered leaders as a sort of followers of other leaders (Kellerman, 2012; Riggio, Chaleff, & Lipman-Blumen, 2008; Uhl-bien, Riggio, Lowe, & Carsten, 2014). In methodological terms, after extensive desk analysis the researchers selected several leaders or key city players in the two cities and asked them to name at least three important leaders in each of the four arenas of city leadership identified by the literature (Budd et al., 2017; Hambleton, 2015): democratic/political; business (profit); community/civic; managerial/professional (public services). The question asked was: Who do you think are the most important leaders in the city? Participants could answer whatever they wanted (name, role, organization, group…), with the only request of being specific and clear so that the named leaders could have been easily identified and, possibly, involved in the study. Data have been collected through an online questionnaire and face-to-face and phone interviews, for a total (partial) of 52 participants (more participants will be involved in September 2018).

From an early analysis of the data collected, city leadership has been mainly recognized in specific Persons, in specific Roles (positions), in Organizations, in established or informal Groups of people/positions and/or in a combination of these four. In part, this is in line with the literature namely that the "who" (and "where" – using Grint's framework) of leadership lies in Persons and Positions (Grint, 2005; Jackson & Parry, 2018),. But where does leadership (and in this case also power) really lies when Organizations or Groups are identified as city leaders? This brings to a second element of reflection. The need of mapping the leaders/players of city leadership (visualization of the network) and of involving the leaders/players named by participants in the study highlighted some leadership-followership and power dynamics in Organizations and, specifically, the role played, on the one hand, by gatekeepers and spokesmen in the exercise and implementation of city leadership, and, on the other hand, by "time" in influencing the recognition of leaders. Thirdly, drawing from Weberian types of authority (Waters & Waters, 2015), our findings reveal the importance of power not only as rational/legal and charismatic, but also in terms of the importance of traditional authority.

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