



Book Review

King of the Mountain: The Nature of Political Leadership by Arnold M. Ludwig.
Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, (2002). ISBN 0813122333.

Reviewed by Bojan Todosijević

It is not accidental that political leaders occasionally remind us of chimpanzees, gorillas and baboons, and vice versa, argues Arnold Ludwig in his *King of the Mountain*. This is because both humans and non-human primates are motivated by the same evolutionarily-shaped desire to achieve a dominant status within their social entities: "the drive to be the alpha male provides the basic impetus for the dominance hierarchy, which [...] seems to govern most social interactions among higher primates" (p. 8). Thus, the key to understanding political leadership is to be found within the evolutionary theory. By establishing a number of similarities between "the primate model of ruling" and characteristics of human political leaders on the basis of a detailed survey of the 20th century political leaders, Ludwig argues that "in essentially all of their major relationships with others – their relationship with their family, their relationship with society, and their relationship with God – most humans have been socially, psychologically, and biologically programmed with the need for a single dominant male figure to govern their communal lives. And this programming corresponds closely to how almost all anthropoid primate societies are run." (p. 9).

Evidence provided in support of these claims shows that political leadership in many respects indeed resembles social hierarchy among primates. Thus, for example, political leaders are almost universally males, they tend to have greater access to sexual partners and have larger number of offspring, there are no special skills or abilities necessary for being a leader although demonstration of physical prowess, and readiness to fight helps achieving and maintaining the leader's position.

Although "ruling is a very dangerous activity" (p. 13), in a sense that rulers are disproportionately likely to die because of non-natural causes, i.e., by activities of their political challengers, the actual and would-be leaders tend to approach these risks in a rather irrational manner. "[T]he reason is once the hypothalamus of male primates becomes activated and stimulates their testicles to manufacture testosterone and other androgens, which increase their sexual libido, aggressiveness, and competitiveness, they are inducted into the struggle for dominance and lose all sense of perspective and rationality. [...] they assume a role on behalf of their species that they are genetically programmed to play, regardless of the rationalizations they give for their decisions" (p. 16).

The principal theoretical claim is clear and simple: both human and other primate communities need a single leader, therefore a particular drive for social dominance evolved to ensure the survival of the community. In the author's words, "Nature exploits this urge for dominance as a surefire way to ensure leadership within a community and, in the case of humans, sometimes over other communities as well." (p. 364). The argumentation is based on finding plausible parallels between social hierarchy in non-human primates, and the characteristics of human political leadership.

The book is based on an impressive and unique data set. Namely, the author assembled biographical information about *all* 20th century rulers (1941 rulers from 199 countries), utilizing a wide variety of sources, including published biographies, magazine and newspaper articles, books, encyclopedia entries, and internet sources. More in-depth analysis is focused on 377 leaders with sufficiently detailed biographical information. In the author's words, "this sample of rulers included virtually all the rulers in the world over the last century who had a major impact on their countries" (p. xi). Rulers are then classified into six categories in order "to show how certain kinds of people are drawn to certain kinds of rule and how these certain kinds of rule reciprocally shape their characters" (p. 32). Thus, in dictatorial group, there are monarchs (e.g., King Farouk, Leopold II), tyrants and despots (e.g., Bokassa, Duvalier, Saddam Hussein), authoritarian rulers (e.g., Peron, Admiral Horthy, Pinochet), and visionaries or social engineers (e.g., Mao, Ataturk, Mussolini), while democratic leaders belong either to established (e.g., Churchill, de Gaulle, J. F. Kennedy) or emerging/transitional democracies (e.g., Kenyatta, Adenauer). Besides statistical comparisons of these six types, a large portion of the book concerns the wealth of anecdotes about the rulers intended to illustrate and emphasize particular points. Details of the methodological procedure and statistical results are given in appendix.

The book has a clear and transparent structure. The introductory chapter presents the basic theoretical argument in a nutshell, while the following chapters present supportive evidence assembled in several key themes. First, Ludwig shows that ruling is "a man's world", namely that out of nearly two thousand 20th century rulers only 1.4 percent were females, and among those few a significant portion gained power through their husbands or fathers. Moreover, the evidence shows that the character of even those very few women who gained political power on their own was rarely described in particularly feminine attributes. Next, the author finds parallels between various benefits rulers enjoy, both in human and primate societies. Thus, while dominant males among monkeys and apes enjoy greater access to and a larger number of females, have more offspring, have greater access to food and shelter, and receive deference by subordinate males, human rulers tend to have more extramarital affairs and indulge in polygamous relationships, have more offspring, have more opportunities for acquiring greater wealth, and command deference and respect from their subjects. Moreover, the greater power a leader enjoys, the greater advantages he acquires along all these dimensions. For example, sexual promiscuity is greatest among monarchs and tyrants, and lowest (but still above the population average) among democratic leaders.

The following chapter illustrates various dangers rulers face both before and after reaching the top position. Thus, "during their climb up the mountain, they are likely to risk torture, imprisonment, exile, and death when they try to displace the reigning leader", while incumbent rulers have to face "crises such as public riots, uprisings, assassination attempts, mental breakdowns, coups, imprisonment, banishment, or execution" (p. 80). Tyrants and authoritarian rulers are especially likely to suffer various "bad outcomes" of their rules, such as coups (50 percent probability in case of tyrants), or executions/assassinations. While leaders of es-

tablished democracies are most likely to leave their office by peaceful means, leading a transitional democracy is considerably more dangerous activity since 18 percent of them end up assassinated or executed, while additional 16 percent are deposed by a coup.

The reason why aspiring rulers are so willing to endure such hardships is allegedly the need to "prove their manhood and establish their dominance" (p. 81). Entering into competition for the "alpha male" status changes the usual standards of reasoning. i.e., "induces them to override their normal instincts for self-preservation to fulfil a broader social function" (p. 82)

According to Ludwig's findings, two conclusions can be made about the childhood and the youth of the rulers in general. The first is that different types of leaders tend to come from different backgrounds and display different characteristics in their early age. Monarchs, for example, were the least likely to be rebellious, and among the most likely to have temper outbursts. They, together with tyrants, also tend to be below general average educational achievements, while authoritarians and democrats exhibit the best performance in school. Tyrants generally come from lower social strata, and their early experiences are often marked by traumatic events such as the loss of parents. Early signs of exceptional gifts in various areas, including leadership ability, are most often found among visionaries, but also among transitional and democratic rulers. However interesting these findings are, their connection with the evolutionary argument remained unclear. The second conclusion the author makes in this chapter, namely that "a large portion of these future leaders were relatively ordinary as youths" (p. 169), is given more theoretical weight through the claim that this shows that ruling is based on hidden evolution-shaped forces.

Examination of social-psychological features of the leaders in their adulthood corroborates differences between the types of leaders

exhibited in their childhood. Monarchs, for example, tend to be much more religious than the other types of leaders. They also tend to be less sociable or show interest in any creative activities. Tyrants do not display much interest in creative outlets either, moreover, the lowest rate of any exceptional mental abilities is found in this category, yet they excel in moodiness and capriciousness. Visionaries are marked especially by their antagonism toward authorities (of course, before they themselves become the authority) and social-non-conformism, but also by their charismatic personality. This chapter also contains an important point concerning the tendency found in many leaders to identify their nations with themselves. According to the author, this expansion of the self "represents a marvelous way for the ruler to fulfil his sociobiological role—as head of the body politics. Just as the male monkeys, chimps, or apes automatically begin to assume more responsibility for their particular community once they attain the dominant status of alpha male, human rulers begin to do so as well" (p. 172).

Examination of the incidence rate of drug-abuse, alcoholism, and mental illness, shows that it is often higher among the rulers than in the general population. Tyrants are especially inclined towards alcoholism and drug abuse. Mental illnesses, however, show more varied distribution among the different types of leaders. For example, apart from tyrants all other ruler types show above average lifetime rate of depression. Lifetime rate of mania is even much higher among the leaders than in general population, but especially among tyrants and visionaries. The latter two categories are also likely to suffer from paranoid conditions. Moreover, mental impairment is not infrequent among the leaders, especially among visionaries. Authoritarian leaders appeared as the most mentally stable category. The author draws several conclusions from these findings. The most important are that "mental illness is no bar to ruling", and that "different kinds of rulers seem more susceptible to particular kinds of mental distur-

bances than others" (p. 270). However, the exact relevance of the findings for the evolutionary theory of leadership is not fully spelled out here either, except that, for example, paranoia may be functional in keeping a leader alert for potential challengers.

The 8th chapter describes the author's construction of the Political Greatness Scale. Indicators included in the scale are, for example, whether a ruler lost or gained new territory, how long he stayed in power, whether he lost or won wars, whether he engaged in social engineering, improved or worsened a country's economy, created original ideology, or served as a moral exemplar to his subjects. Each of the 377 rulers from the focused subsample was assigned a particular score on this scale. The subsequent chapter examines which personal attributes predict rulers' total scores on the Political Greatness Scale. The findings revealed "seven pillars of political greatness", i.e., seven clusters of traits that separate the great from non-great rulers. These are: (1) an overwhelming desire for social dominance and leadership, (2) contrariness, rebellion against the existing authority, (3) personal charisma, (4) change agency, initiation of large scale social change, (5) vanity, self-confidence, (6) courage, risk-taking, and (7) a wary unease, a chronic psychological unease. This chapter also contains a small discussion on the "great-man versus historical necessity" debate in history, arguing that the debate can be avoided by conceptualizing the great leaders as catalysts of political change rather than as their causes.

The final tenth chapter recapitulates the similarities between leaders of human and simian societies, and provides a speculative discussion of the inevitability of war from the perspective of Ludwig's theory of political leadership. On the one hand, war seems inevitable given the primate nature of humans. War is interpreted as a derivation of the instinctual striving to "became the alpha male and to preserve that status" (p. 363). The reason primates do not really wage wars is "not because they lack the

temperament to respond like humans" (p. 356) but rather because they lack resources. Thus, war "serves the broader political function of extending the struggle for social dominance beyond the artificial confines of a single ethnic group, culture, or country to other groups, cultures, countries. A such, it represents a natural expression of the primate model of ruling" (p. 362). On the other hand, his findings show that wars bring various benefits to rulers. Rulers who waged wars tend to stay longer in office than their more peaceful counterparts, and are more likely to attain a legendary status. At the same time, when the war is over, the winning ruler transforms into an agent of social stability, i.e., "he becomes obliged to maintain peace and order over these defeated people" (p. 364). Thus, one may – insofar only hypothetically – conceive a situation where the global stability and order are the concern of the global alpha male – George W. Bush.

Although, according to Ludwig, such a solution would hardly lead to a lasting peace due to cultural and civilizational heterogeneity, there are some recommendations that could make the 21st century more peaceful than the previous one. We can, for example, disqualify potential leaders "with the disposition of a warmonger" (p. 368), or pursue a more "estrogenic approach to world peace", i.e., elect more women into leading positions. However, democratic government seems to be still the most realistic way, according to Ludwig, since this form of government tends to "protect us against our own natural tendencies" (p. 370). Although many democratic leaders end up fighting wars, dictators are considerably more inclined in this direction. The reason is primarily that democratic system imposes "the greater number of constitutional constraints on them" (p. 373), but also in the fact that democratic leaders tend to differ in their socio-psychological characteristics which incline them towards more peaceful and accommodating solutions.

Even though the book is explicitly intended for general readership, the author suggests an

important theoretical point as well. Thus the book should be evaluated in both respects. From the general perspective, then, the book is written well and in an accessible and engaging style. The author possesses a fine sense of humor, facilitated by a rich collection of entertaining and often bizarre anecdotes about world leaders, especially about characters such as Idi Amin, Bokassa, or Trujillo. Thus, Ludwig presents the non-expert public with both entertaining and informative reading.

The theoretical contribution of the *King of the Mountain* is, however, more problematic as simply pointing out at the similarities in social hierarchy among humans and other primates is not a particularly novel argument. Ludwig's systematization of the data about the 20th century leaders, which should definitely be appreciated in itself, powerfully documents the extraordinary strength and irrationality that drives rulers to reach and remain on top of their societies. Comparison of the six categories of leaders reveals a number of interesting similarities and differences between them, showing the importance of the interaction between the presumably universal drive to become the alpha male and the cultural and political context. The question, however, is to what extent the presented findings support the author's theoretical claim, since interesting analogies are not a sufficiently convincing research approach. The issue is whether such analysis can in principle test the evolutionary explanations, rather than remaining on the level of "just so" theorizing.

It seems that the author himself had similar doubts: the theoretical discussion is kept at minimum throughout the book. The only references to evolutionary theory consist of quotes from classical primatological studies opening

individual chapters, and brief, very general and vague attempts to connect the content of a chapter with evolutionary theory in concluding paragraphs. By way of an example, the sixth chapter ends with a conclusion that "some unknown socio-biological process also seems to have been at work to select individuals with certain distinctive traits that seem well-suited for their role as rulers within different societies with particular kinds of governments, histories, and expectations" (p. 219; see also p. 271).

The use of occasionally questionable data is additional though minor problem. For example, one wonders about the reliability of the source which informed Ludwig that Josip Broz Tito of Yugoslavia was responsible for about 2 million deaths (p. 358).

This genuinely interesting and entertaining book provides support for the evolutionary explanation of the drive for climbing up the political hierarchy, but it does not advance the evolutionary theory of political leadership much further. An interesting but unexplored issue is to what extent generalizations about alpha male motivations are applicable to other social hierarchies, such as military, business or bureaucrats of higher rank. Although the book might not convince all readers into the explanatory power of the evolutionary approach to political leadership, it certainly reminds us of how strange and often frightening characters we elect to or tolerate at the positions from which they can make the greatest damage.

Bojan Todosijević, Department of Political Science, Central European University, Nador u. 9, 1051, Budapest, Hungary. Email: pphtod25@phd.ceu.hu.