

Review of “ON BIG (WO)MEN, TYRANTS, CHIEFS, DICTATORS,
EMPERORS AND PRESIDENTS” by FRANCESCO DELL’ISOLA

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A kaleidoscope of observations and ideas: it runs the gamut from the German king and Roman emperor Friedrich II von Hohenstaufen – stupor mundi, and close to the hearts and minds of the people of southern Italy – over the tsarina Katharina II and Dschingis Khan – about whose sexual appetites we learn more, perhaps, than we wanted to know – all the way down in history to the Count of Cavour, who had his hands in Italian unification in the 19th century and is now known to Italian and tourists alike for giving his name to many a piazza and avenida in Italian towns. The text is enriched with intelligent and somewhat cynical innuendoes about the conduct of human society and the behaviour of groups of bonobos.

Those subjects are tied together by Arrow’s theorem of game theory which makes it impossible for a social group not to develop a hierarchy and, in particular, not to bow to a “dictator”. Dictators are everywhere; they impose their acts of benevolence or their ill-conditioned moods on their groups, and govern. The author is a man grown up in academia and he runs up to top form in characterizing the rise of nitwits – yet successful manipulators – to influential positions in the academic field: two fictitious (?) characters, whom he calls Don Pasquale and Caesar Sacristy. It gives me, the reviewer, great joy to follow the account of their subtle tricks. I am (un)pleasantly reminded of my own past snubs experienced at the hands of such nincompoops during my own academic life.

The text is written in a forceful though unusual style – not always traditionally English – and it is a pleasure to read; hard to put down. The author is a man of the “South” – Italian south that is – and it is clear that he still suffers from the downfall of the kingdom of the two Sicilies. However, his agenda is universal and he uses his Latin-Greek background as a microcosmic paradigm for a somewhat cynical view of the world.

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