



N A P O L E O N I C L E A D E R S H I P

A Study in Power

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PATRONAGE

The Scholarship, 1776–78: the first great opportunity – and setting up obligations for dispensing patronage in the future

For Napoleon, the importance of making contacts was instilled by his father Carlo Bonaparte in Corsica. The Corsican clan system represented ‘an astute exploitation of opportunities’.

Dwyer, 2007, pp515–6

If only Father were here now to see this!

Napoleon to his older brother Joseph, at his coronation as Emperor, 1804

Napoleon rewarded all his brothers but they ‘requited his favour with incompetence, defiance and treachery’.

McLynn, 1998, p663

In the ... complicated and hard-hitting school of Corsican politics ... Napoleon acquired his political apprenticeship ... in a society based on the clan, status was assessed by the solidarity of the family, and feuds were settled by private vengeance – the Corsican vendetta.

Markham, 1963, p16

Napoleon made political appointments to please his supplicants ... ‘he must maintain a balance between the clans and root his power in all

the self-interests. He has no illusions ... he must give, that is what is expected of him, and he needs to so that people remain loyal.

Gallo, 1997a, p252

Nothing annoyed Napoleon more ... than the name given to him by his enemies, 'the Corsican'. He did not attach much importance to his origins and lineage; he claimed to be a self-made man whose titles rested on his sword and on the desires of the French nation ... he retained to the end of his life a sense of family loyalty and obligation which was a markedly Corsican trait; but when he came to power 'a foreign origin was an embarrassment which had to be hidden like bastardy'.

Markham, 1963, p15

Napoleon owed his impetus to be a leader to patronage: this is how he made his start in his military, then political life, and how he created a network of supporters and built his power base. This is the subject of our first chapter: it all began in Corsica. Understanding this context is essential to understanding Napoleon. As a young man he won his first big break through gaining a place at a prestigious military school in France, arranged for him by the new French Governor of Corsica, who was willing to help the Bonapartes in order to gain their support as a prominent Corsican family. Napoleon gladly accepted this patronage and was later to use patronage to bolster his own power base, especially promoting his close family and their relations.



Corsica is a small Mediterranean island with Italian antecedents. The strength of the community, still largely apparent in this region, is in contrast with the more individualistic, independent and less clannish northern Europeans. Status and respect is everything. Shame cannot be tolerated; loss of face must be avenged, and loyalty is a matter of honour as well as reward. Systems of patronage, based on family and community ties, are an essential part of the culture.

This is where Napoleon grew up. The Bonapartes were a prominent local family with obligations and responsibilities to the community, and long-established loyalties and enmities. These pressures dominated the first decade of Napoleon's life, and inevitably influenced his attitudes in his formative years.

Napoleon's father was fashionable and landed. The Bonaparte family could be traced back 200 years to Tuscany, and claimed traces of

nobility when necessary. His mother was a girl from a military family. Marrying for love was popular in the unsophisticated, small rustic island of 130,000 people – not for them the strategic dynastic marriages of the leading families of Paris.

From the start, Carlo and Letizia Bonaparte encouraged their active and wayward second son to be ambitious – and this was a time of excitement and revolt in Corsica. A nationalist rebellion against the Genoese colonists, with an inspirational and heroic claim for independence, thrilled and inspired the Bonaparte couple. Indeed, the young Napoleon, whilst still in the womb, was campaigning in the mountains near Ajaccio. He was named after a favourite uncle of Letizia who had fought the French and who had died shortly before her second son's birth.

Napoleon was born French, but only just. In the early 1760s, the rebel leader Paoli, a devoted anti-colonial guerrilla fighter, had driven the hated Genoese out of much of Corsica and was trying to lead the island to independence. Strongly supported by the Bonapartes who shared Paoli's disgust with the way Corsicans were abused by their occupiers, Paoli had plans to enforce law and order and build roads and schools. Napoleon was born in the ferment of active hatred of a colonial oppressor who treated Corsicans as vassals, where aristocratic Genoese were favoured for advancement, and where rebel fighters fought in the hills, harried by local bandits as well as their political enemies. They had no uniforms, few weapons and lived off the land. They survived because they knew the terrain better than anyone else. Napoleon stayed true to much of this native Corsican tradition – of being anti-feudal, anti-colonial, anti-aristocratic, fiercely independent and unfazed by difficult geographical terrain and conditions. Like Paoli, Napoleon was to be dedicated to education, a keen reader of the classics and vastly energetic in the cause to which he was committed.

Napoleon was born French and not Italian because just months before his birth, the Genoese decided to sell Corsica to France. The French, arriving to take possession of their new acquisition, faced the fiery, loud, gun-toting and determined Corsican rebels, who rapidly switched to attacking a new enemy. After some successes against their new occupiers, Paoli, the Bonapartes and their followers (including the infant Joseph and the embryonic Napoleon) were hopelessly outnumbered and forced to capitulate. Paoli and 300 close supporters went into exile in England rather than face a new form of colonial oppression.

But the practical and opportunistic Carlo Bonaparte decided to stay in Ajaccio and bring up his growing family. They lived in a big inherited

house, with other generations of the family and more distant relatives living on the other floors. Letizia went to Mass every morning, even when she had started to go into labour with Napoleon, who was born on the feast of the Virgin – 15 August 1769. The Bonapartes lived off the produce of their estates – ‘the Bonapartes never paid for bread, wine and oil’ (Cronin, 1971: 18–19); there was no coinage, only barter, and the land and what it could produce was the basis of all wealth. There was little incentive to amass capital, and a happy family life and high standing in the community was what mattered. Napoleon was to learn a lot from this: you looked after your relatives as they looked after you; religion was very powerful; land is the fundamental form of wealth; status in the community was of extreme importance; having a happy family life was highly desirable. From his father’s stories he learned of the power of a close-knit group of rebels defending their own patch, drawing on their experience at hunting: birds, animals or enemy soldiers.

Carlo recognized the new dispensation of power, and pragmatically ingratiated himself with the French as they became more established on Corsica. He particularly made the effort to meet the new French governor of the island, the comte de Marbeuf, who arrived in the mid-1770s. Marbeuf was to play a key role as Napoleon’s godfather – in more ways than one. He was his sponsor and patron, but also acted as a ‘godfather’ amidst the factions and infighting on the island. Marbeuf was immediately attracted to Napoleon’s parents amongst his constituents on Corsica. They were a handsome pair – Letizia had striking beauty and character, Carlo was charming, cultured and well-educated if rather weak and extravagant – and they were good company for the older, childless and lonely Marbeuf, on his own in Corsica representing the French overlords, and still facing some hostility.

Carlo’s co-operation with the French helped to assert the family’s prestige in the community. After a lengthy application process, also helped by Marbeuf, Carlo was elevated to the French nobility on Corsica, and the Bonapartes emerged as one of the leading families of Ajaccio. As Napoleon recalled, ‘we thought ourselves as good as the Bourbons: in the island we really were’ (Markham, 1963: 17).

But Napoleon’s mother Letizia never stopped reminding him that the Bonapartes had been poor, and might at any moment go back to being poor; in adversity they should put on a brave show, and bear discomfort. As young aristocrats of limited means, Napoleon and his older brother Joseph were entitled to be educated for free by the French state – and

again the Bonapartes needed the intervention of the helpful Marbeuf to prove their aristocratic connections.

Luckily for Napoleon, the clannish and old-fashioned nature of planning children's careers followed the tradition in Corsica that the eldest son went into the Church, and the second son to the army – otherwise Napoleon might have made a dubious and frustrated member of the clergy.

Marbeuf helped the eldest son Joseph into training for the priesthood, and also enabled the young Napoleon to enter one of the most prestigious military schools in France. The arrangement suited Marbeuf too. With no children of his own, he was happy to mentor the young Bonaparte children, whilst also fulfilling what he saw as a series of diplomatic obligations. With Corsica newly part of France, Marbeuf had been told by the Minister of Foreign Affairs to 'make yourself loved by the Corsicans, and neglect nothing to make them love France' (Cronin, 1971: 25).

Marbeuf's remit included the administration of justice, in the course of which he had to adapt to the strong moral standards that placed loyalty to family and personal honour above statute and rule. He soon became accustomed to Corsican ways, of vendettas, an obsession with violent death, of the importance of love, honour, justice and fair play. As Napoleon was later to remark, 'a Corsican would never think of abandoning even his tenth cousin' (Markham, 1963: 16). This attitude is in stark contrast with the looser family connections in northern Europe, and the modern rationalism that accompanied the Revolution. It might help to explain the rather naïve trust that Napoleon placed in 'family' – such as his belief that marrying Marie-Louise, daughter of the Emperor of Austria, would be enough to cement a political and military alliance. It counted for little when Napoleon really needed it.

For Napoleon, life changed dramatically in December 1778 when, blessed by the Father Superior, this confident 9-year-old set off for the military academy of Brienne, one of twelve royal schools for the sons of nobles founded in 1776 by St Germain, Louis XVI's Minister of War. He was bullied for his foreign accent and poverty, defending himself as a persecuted Corsican patriot, and he must have suffered the usual anxieties of a child sent away to school: some have suggested that he harboured a subconscious jealousy of his mother's close friendship with Marbeuf. Especially after the death of his father, Napoleon must have wondered about his patron's hidden motives.

Reflections on leadership and power

- Napoleon was brought up to be a leader – especially to respond to family obligations.
- His family background included rebels and fighters and had a tradition of independence and hating colonialism – Napoleon was expected to continue this.
- Napoleon was talented, intelligent, passionate, capable of inspiring others but could be petty and vindictive – which is seen as typical of Corsican politics and society.
- But France was taking over Corsica – the Bonapartes opportunistically stayed rather than following Paoli into exile, and then rose to aristocratic status helped by the French Governor Marbeuf.
- Marbeuf's support of the Bonaparte children gave Napoleon his start in life, but this patronage through his parents put him under an obligation to succeed.
- Patronage and reward (and opportunism) helped Napoleon to join the leadership track.
- Patronage as a way of gaining support was used by Napoleon all his life.
- The strong influence of Corsican community culture was prominent in Napoleon's background – supporting the family, avoiding shame, seeking revenge/honour when wronged, valuing independence, living off the land, sharing any wealth.
- Patronage was being used to develop a network of supporters – by Paoli, by Carlo Bonaparte, and then by Napoleon himself.
- In this context, potential leaders receive patronage to become leaders, and then are expected to give it to others.

Napoleon's parents used the networking and relationship-oriented ways of operating in Corsica to good effect. Napoleon's family, with their aristocratic status on the island, encouraged their sons (and daughters) to seek high positions in society. When France took over Corsica and officially recognized the Bonapartes, they were looked up to – especially when they carried favour with the French Governor. They were indeed lucky that Governor Marbeuf was childless and willing to support the many Bonaparte children. Marbeuf's generosity in being a patron to the young Napoleon put the latter under an obligation to succeed and pay back his benefactor, living up to his expectations.

Patronage and reward was the way that Napoleon first joined the leadership track – and it became a cultural norm which he had to recognize all his life. The pressure of Corsican culture was strong from the start; help is provided by patrons, then the recipient of patronage gives help back to the patrons and their current and future supporters. Patronage and reward became the cornerstone of Napoleon's early obsession with leadership, pushing him to fulfil the expectations of his benefactor.

Patronage comes with strings attached; already Napoleon was under pressure to succeed, to meet the expectations of his well-to-do patron. He also increasingly felt an obligation to support his mother and her seven children, especially as older brother Joseph was much less ambitious and responsible.

Napoleon was to remember the vital role of Marbeuf in giving him a start in life, and recognized the sense of obligation it laid upon him. Along with his rising power and influence came opportunities for ever more lavish patronage.

The Bonapartes' friendship with Marbeuf made for an easier choice between supporting Corsican independence and welcoming the coming French occupation (though it was to lead to their eventual exile from their homeland). Napoleon never regretted throwing in his lot with the French and later, in supporting the Revolution rather than the aristocracy, he backed another winner.

When in power himself Napoleon too often focused patronage on his siblings, appointing them to positions of power and wealth. He gained little by doing so: they were already on his side, and were mostly ill-suited to the roles. Thus he used these most prominent opportunities for patronage to reward his family, rather than to extend the network of obligation and loyalty around him.

But this is understandable. Napoleon wanted to ensure that his siblings and their supporters would owe allegiance to him, and at the same time to avoid setting up potential rivals to his own position. But as he enriched his followers, they became more concerned to protect their gains, and less willing to embark on risky military escapades or radical political reforms. And like any leader, as his power began to wane, Napoleon could offer less to his followers, so the most powerful amongst them shifted allegiance to his up-and-coming successors.

Patronage is crucial to the influence wielded by any political or corporate leader: in a complex enterprise most of the work is done by people

the leader can trust. Trust and loyalty are substantially underpinned by obligation and gratitude, which are bought by patronage.

The advantage of the power of patronage is that it can quickly build mutual support and a network of acolytes, and for Napoleon it was culturally obligatory. But the downside can be an expectation of rewards purely on the basis of family connections and long-term service – and those receiving the rewards increasingly wanted to preserve their wealth and enjoy their new status and comfort. So patronage and reward power can foster a sense of entitlement and greed, and taking the patron for granted.

Patronage rests on an assumption that wisdom is a possession of those with power – that wisdom and power are united in the same person. Patronage is fundamental to feudalism, the distribution of resources by which wealth is created, which is seen as legitimately derived from a central authority with wisdom and power. To obtain access to resources, there is a need to obtain a patron, who controls these resources. Throughout the Renaissance, artists relied on patronage. Wealthy people would patronize them and give them work. Patrons expected that those they patronized would flatter them, owe them a debt of obligation, and do their best work in their name. This concept of obligation is fundamental to the system of patronage, and the processes of patronage are seen as natural and inevitable. Showing loyalty to a patron is essential in the point of view of a ruler; rulers recognize a need to create a fertile social network of obligation to feed and sustain their regimes.

Patronage as the natural order of things goes back to classical times, and was espoused by Xenophon in his historical novel *Cyropaedia*, in which he analysed the rule of Cyrus the Great of Persia. In this ‘master-class’ in the use of patronage, Xenophon explains how Cyrus would give gifts and honours of status without any overt contract. He could assume that the recipients of patronage would give their loyalty, at least to some extent, although this dependency on patronage does not entirely explain the long-term obligations then seen as an important part of maintaining a system. Patronage was used to reinforce this dependency, and worked much more effectively than depending only on short-term transactions.

A cultural system of beliefs as well as pragmatic social contracts came together with patronage to create feudal societies. In the era of the French Revolution and Napoleon, these were taken over by other ideologies which were supplemented but not replaced by a meritocracy, but the contemporary relevance of patronage continued then and now.

In modern examples, we can see the political leader who declares his or her intention not to run for office any more, and how immediately his or her potential to hold out the gift of patronage and support dries up.

In the professions, there can be two possibilities for bringing on the next generation. Young people are supported through being selected by objective criteria; or leading professionals select and support the young people they deem most worthy to receive their organization's patronage, based on their experience, knowledge and judgement. The former approach removes the power of patronage from individual professionals – the young person worth supporting is chosen by a committee, which has agreed to pre-determined bureaucratic processes and procedures, referring to ostensibly meritocratic neutrality. Arguably, this system leads to a bland and unadventurous approach and little opportunity to adapt to changing circumstances. By contrast, the approach favouring patronage gives resources to a proven expert and along with this the freedom to develop new and creative ideas.

Advocates of the latter, feudal-like system argue that it preserves high quality because the bureaucratic alternative inevitably leads to mediocrity, as candidates play the system of emphasizing the favoured criteria and structuring their approach accordingly. Should there be open advertisements for jobs whereby candidates are mechanically selected by key words, or appointment made by internal and external experts? There is always the feeling that patronage is associated with nepotism and other forms of corruption, as critics of this system point out. But within the ideology of patronage, the open and transparent giving and receiving of patronage is accepted; it depends on the dominant ideology of the regime.

As we will see in this book, Napoleon squandered his patronage on his family members. He didn't have to give favours to his family to buy their loyalty, but the fact that he did so was the most powerful demonstration that he was still living in a society dominated by a clan-based approach to patronage, rather than seeing a systemic understanding of the value of patronage. A more sophisticated appreciation of patronage may have led him to distribute favours among those whose loyalty and participation was more reliable and competent. Napoleon's patronage was wasted on his family as they were either loyal or disloyal, depending on their inclinations, and they mostly used his patronage to be independent of him. In the feudal system of old, a king would give patronage, and then take it back if the person receiving it turned out to be undeserving; Napoleon did not feel able to do this. His ability to dispense patronage effectively was undermined by his lack of legitimacy and his dependence on winning battles and

other short-term needs, and as we have seen, he did not always choose the recipients of his patronage as wisely and effectively as he could have done.

Questions on leadership and power

Why do you want to be a leader? Is it at least partly to fulfil expectations and reward a patron? And to use patronage yourself to gain the support of those around you?

- Did you use patronage to get to your position of power?
- What was the role of your family in your leadership progression? Encouragement or discouragement?
- Have you or your patrons been principled or opportunistic in achieving a leadership role?
- Was the patronage you received with or without obligation?
- Do you now behave in a way similar to those who were your patrons in the past, by being a patron of others?
- Have you deliberately used patronage to build up a network of supporters?
- Do you think you are using your patronage wisely – are you bestowing your patronage on the right people?
- How are you influenced by the culture of your homeland or where you were brought up in your relationships?

