

## Mario Barile and Paolo Dini

# European intellectuals follow Charlie Brown!

### Book section

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## European Intellectuals Follow Charlie Brown!

MARIO BARILE AND PAOLO DINI

One of the keys to the success of *Peanuts* is its ability to be equally enjoyable to children and adults—and also intellectuals. Schulz's strips and the movies derived from them have been making us laugh for over half a century, but the laughter always leaves room for serious reflection.

In Schulz's work, the use of humorous devices such as repetition, absurdity, ambiguity and exaggeration is instrumental for conveying further meanings, beyond laughter and a sense of empathy. In 1965 the philosopher Umberto Eco introduced the first issue of the Italian magazine *linus*, describing Charlie Brown's comics as a "very important and serious thing" and acknowledging their cultural and literary value. Many readers have found important philosophical, psychological, and sociological insights in *Peanuts*.

That said, would you ever have expected to take leadership and management lessons from poor old Charlie Brown and his dysfunctional baseball team? Let's start with a look at the *Peanuts* gang as a microcosm.

### Two Views of the *Peanuts* Microcosm

During his entire life, Charles Monroe Schulz drew nothing but children. In 1950, when the daily *Peanuts* strip first appeared, the choice to use children as the strip's main



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characters was not particularly original, nor were their adventures. In fact, Charlie Brown, Lucy, Linus and their friends are ordinary children living in an ordinary North American neighborhood and doing ordinary things, such as playing amongst themselves, going to school, or watching television. What makes Schulz's work unique, other than its global popularity, is his ability to give a mass medium like a comics strip artistic, philosophical, literary and sociological relevance.

In his 1964 book *Apocalittici e Integrati* (Apocalyptic and Integrated Intellectuals), Umberto Eco analyzes mass culture production as a result of the spread of mass media. According to Eco, the mass culture industry has replaced traditional bottom-up popular culture. Consumer music, books, and TV programs generally do not offer any stimulus for reflection. Rather, they reflect the dictates of the ruling power, giving the audience a temporary escape from everyday life while reinforcing current myths, norms, and values.

As in the past, when artists had to negotiate freedom of expression with censors, artistic expression still has constraints. However, some artists, thanks to their talent, succeed in conveying original, critical or liberating meanings, and Charles Schulz was one of them.

In the introduction to the first issue of *linus*, the first Italian magazine completely focused on comics, Umberto Eco interviewed two Italian writers, Elio Vittorini and Oreste Del Buono, trying to place *Peanuts* appropriately within American literature. Schulz was compared to J.D. Salinger; however, his work was described as more poetic. According to Vittorini, in *Peanuts* the world of children is a means to represent universal meanings, while in Salinger's work it is a mere escape from reality through literature.

From Eco's viewpoint, on a superficial and partial reading *Peanuts* portrays an idyllic children's world where Charlie Brown and his friends banter and make jokes in a light and funny way. A deeper, more reflective reading exposes Schulz's poetics emerging from the repetition of patterns and schemes. These, according to Eco, describe a microcosm that

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shows glimpses of the human condition: for example, he sees the *Peanuts* characters turning into little monsters as one of the negative effects of urban and industrial civilization on children.

At the heart of the vast majority of narratives is Charlie Brown, a sensitive child desperately searching for social acceptance and company but constantly failing, repulsed and bullied by the others. The tragic element in Charlie Brown's character is that he reflects the average person: a pure heart trying in vain to adapt to the formulas accepted by modern society, such as being a cherished entertainer or capturing girls' attention.

Charlie Brown's worst nightmare is Lucy, who probably best represents and assimilates contemporary values. She's self-confident, selfish, and perfidious. Together with her friends Patty and Violet, Lucy tries to escape from the contemporary human tragedy through alienation and heartlessness. Lucy's brother, Linus, is a science genius affected by emotional instability and able to feel at peace only when holding his blanket. Schroeder instead hides his neurosis behind an obsessive-compulsive passion for Beethoven and piano playing.

As a result of the passage of time and ancient civilizations, Pig Pen proudly gathers dust and dirt on his person. Even Snoopy shows maladjustment neuroses, through his dissatisfaction with being a dog and by constantly dreaming of being somebody else. In Eco's view, there are two reasons for Schulz's choice to portray a children's microcosm. On the one hand, it highlights the fact that industrial civilization has corrupted society from the roots; on the other hand, it leaves room for flashes of candor and optimism, that only children are still capable of.

Another interesting view of *Peanuts* as a microcosm comes from *Piccola Storia dei Peanuts*, the first monograph on *Peanuts*, published by Simona Bassano di Tuffillo, an Italian cartoonist. Bassano di Tuffillo describes Eco's analysis of the *Peanuts* microcosm as partial, as it was carried out while *Peanuts* was still in progress. According to Bassano di Tuffillo,

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Schulz's work highlights a wider philosophical conception of human beings in relation to nature than was observed by Eco.

To fully understand Bassano di Tuffillo's perspective, we need to consider the concepts of '*distancing effect*' and individualism as they apply to *Peanuts*. Originally introduced by the literary critic Viktor Shklovsky, the distancing effect is an artistic method used to awaken a more authentic understanding of reality. This is to be contrasted with the automated perception of reality through routine.

In *Peanuts*, the use of children as main characters is considered by Bassano di Tuffillo as a means to achieve a distancing effect, because children are new to the world and do not know its rules and habits. Together with the aim of strengthening the identification with the characters, this explains the total absence of adults in the strips. Another important element in Schulz's poetics is individualism and its relation to social solidarity.

On the one hand, difficulties in communication are among the most recurrent comedic aspects in *Peanuts*, and each character represents a monad, a single entity which is autonomous and unable to communicate with others. On the other hand, individualism does not lead to fights or isolation but to reciprocal acceptance and respect, shaping the concept of "sociable individualism." According to Bassano di Tuffillo, this element of Schulz's poetics recalls the ideal of individualism, deeply rooted in American identity and culture, combined with a sense of community which has a strong American tradition too and is distant from selfish impulses. In fact, the *Peanuts* characters are always presented as a community, as a whole.

Schulz's sociable individualism includes not only human beings, but also animals and inanimate beings. In particular, Bassano di Tuffillo considers *Peanuts* as an artistic representation of the vision conceived in the book *Mind and Nature* by the anthropologist Gregory Bateson. Bateson considers the human mind as part of the material world; therefore, its structure is no different from the universe's, including animals and

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inanimate beings. Leonardo da Vinci held a similar view with respect to the whole human body rather than just the mind: he saw the workings of the human body as a ‘microcosm’ of the ‘universe’ as it was perceived in the fifteenth century.

Similarly, in *Peanuts* animals, trees and schools think, and have their own personality. Nevertheless, they are not humanized as occurs in other cartoons such as Mickey Mouse. For Bassano di Tuffillo, Schulz, while giving “voice and personality” to every part of creation, considers them as having the same dignity and importance as human beings. Therefore, Bassano di Tuffillo attributes to Schulz an ecological message, even though in his work there are no explicit references to it.

Bateson’s and Bassano di Tuffillo’s views can be related to the philosophical foundations of aboriginal spirituality. Although present in different forms in most human cultures, aboriginal spirituality is generally associated with Australia and Canada. These spiritual beliefs are based on conceiving the interconnectedness and interrelation among the elements of the Earth and the universe, both animate and inanimate. The foundations of aboriginal spirituality can be explained through the metaphor of a woven pattern representing the whole. This pattern has many colored threads, each of which represents a form of life. Each thread has the same importance as the others: a human is as important as a kangaroo or a rock. Therefore, the interconnectedness of all elements implies interdependence and inter-responsibility between them.

This philosophy has current practical consequences for the environment. For example, the traditional management of salmon runs in the wild rivers up to the coast of British Columbia is much more sustainable than Norwegian salmon farms along the same coast, which are market-driven and are destroying not only the local habitat but also the economy of the traditional and sustainable fisheries of the indigenous First Nations.

As we’ve seen, *Peanuts* is a meaningful microcosm from literary and philosophical perspectives. In addition, the

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*Peanuts* gang is often engaged in team activities, the most popular of which is playing baseball: could we then consider it from an organizational perspective? In order to answer this question, we need to say a few things about the philosophy of management and some of the ideas at its foundation.

## **Peanuts and Philosophy of Management**

One of the main concerns of the philosophy of management is to justify an organization's right to exist in the larger social system. In other words, how does an organization contribute to the community it is embedded in and to the common good? This is the issue of corporate legitimacy, which is at the core of the philosophy of management.

The philosophy of management also focuses on understanding what organizations are, the role of human beings in organizations, and the knowledge that is relevant to the study of organizations. In this regard, the philosophy of management blends theoretical knowledge with empirical observation and integrates different social sciences, such as sociology, economics, management and leadership.

Another important discussion concerns the complex relation between ethics and economics. Some economists, such as Adam Smith, argue that economic rationality, which implies self-interest and seeking profit maximization in markets, is a part of ethics. Thus, market actors, while seeking their own interest, will contribute to the common good. Therefore, fair competition and economic institutions could be adequate and sufficient to contribute to a better society.

Other approaches such as that of the sociologist Walter Powell state that even though economic rationality can inspire ethical values it is completely separate from ethics. From this perspective, in addition to economic rationality it is the personal values of individuals that have an impact on organizational behavior and contribute to shape business ethics, including moral values. The philosophy of management also focuses on the relation between art, creativity and management, because they are considered sources of innovation.

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As we have seen with Bassano di Tuffillo, the relation between the self and the other is a major topic in the *Peanuts* microcosm. In addition to relational, also organizational aspects emerge in Schulz's work. But can the *Peanuts* "community" be considered an organization?

The Online Business Dictionary defines an organization as "a social unit of people that is structured and managed to meet a need or to pursue collective goals". Thus, *Peanuts* can be defined as an organization, as Charlie Brown and his friends are often engaged in collective activities toward a common goal, most of which are baseball games.

The *Peanuts* baseball team has fairly well-defined roles under the management of Charlie Brown. In spite of that and of Charlie Brown's persistent efforts and optimism at the start of each season, the team achieves very poor results. Over fifty years of daily strips and several cartoon specials, Charlie Brown's team was able to win only about ten matches, most of which when its manager was not playing (very funny for us, but terribly disheartening for him). That is just one of the reasons why our favorite child is often blamed and bullied by his friends.

Even though the *Peanuts* gang is a group of peers and there are no real main characters, during their collective activities the issue of leadership is particularly evident and has a strong impact on the team.

### **Lucy versus Charlie Brown**

In addition to baseball matches, the *Peanuts* gang is often engaged in organizing school recitals, especially during the Christmas holiday season. Charlie Brown and Lucy are the most recurrent leading personalities, and show opposite management styles. Lucy's leadership emerges, for example, in the 1985 cartoon "Sally's Sweet Babboo," where Charlie Brown writes an essay on his last Christmas. The essay is mainly about the Christmas play organized by Lucy. Lucy has a fixed and well-defined plan with roles and responsibilities for everyone (she being the star, of course). Many of the



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roles assigned are not tailored to her friends' personalities and skills. However, to Charlie Brown's and Linus's complaints, she responds: "Learn!" As a result, everyone feels under pressure and the play is a disaster, with everyone blaming . . . Charlie Brown. On the other hand, the 'round-headed kid' shows strong listening and mediation skills, even though his friends tend to ignore his suggestions. Charlie Brown is much more oriented towards pondering about the meaning and sense of his and his team's actions. He's generally committed, fairly assertive, and well prepared, but team harmony and unity are his main concerns.

These two leadership styles mirroring the respective personalities of Lucy and Charlie Brown can be related to the two modes of relating to people and things identified by Martin Heidegger in his work *Discourse on Thinking*.

Lucy's approach to the world can be defined as *calculative*. *Calculative thinking* is a form of thinking which emerged in the technological age, and refers to the human capacity to control, compute, and exploit things and people. This approach, focused on planning, research, and scientific organization, is considered instrumental to attaining power and profit. Rather than focusing on controlling and computing with the aim of maximizing self-interest, *reflective thinking* searches for the meaning and the directions of human actions in the world.

To understand this approach, it needs to be related to Heidegger's major work, *Being and Time*, which undertakes to understand how human beings interact with the world and what this means in relation to the finiteness of life. In Heidegger's view, living authentically means accepting and appropriating our individual and collective responsibilities towards ourselves and the world.

This search for sense is conditioned by our limited existence. Therefore, even though *calculative thinking* may be useful to achieve our everyday life objectives, we should use *reflective thinking* to discover the authentic meaning of our individual and collective involvement in the world, in order to find sense and direction. Rather than planning and con-

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trolling things and relations in order to achieve outcomes, we should be open to the “mystery” of our being-in-the-world, which is not always obvious or apparent to us.

*Calculative* and *reflective thinking* can also be applied to organizations. The former mirrors an approach strongly oriented towards efficiency, power and economic strength, which implies rigid organizational structures, roles and responsibilities. As the main goals are profits and outcomes, there is no room for change, creativity and innovation. Actually, this model seems to describe most organizations, which can be identified as ‘inauthentic’ in Heidegger’s view.

By contrast, the *reflective organization* is focused on fostering and encouraging its members to search for their own possibilities by empowering and engaging them actively in setting goals, finding appropriate means, and even contributing to implement or revise corporate ends. Similarly, an ‘authentic’ organization does not regard its members as a means to efficiency, effectiveness and productivity, but cares for them and their diversity as they are ends in themselves. As a consequence, according to a Heideggerian perspective, profits are important but less important than personal and social values.

Heidegger’s approach was applied to management and leadership only recently, as organizational behavior has always been paired with conformity; furthermore, traditional management theories define the leader as a person who is in control, rather than encouraging their fellow workers’ search for their own authenticity. If Heidegger’s view can be meaningfully applied to leadership and management, we believe that Charlie Brown and his baseball team represent it well. A clear example is shown in the TV special *Charlie Brown’s All-Stars*.

Despite countless defeats, Charlie Brown receives a sponsor proposal which would guarantee a placement in an organized league and a new uniform (it would be an outstanding result for an amateur team). That news gives some hope to the team, which was about to abandon its manager. However, Charlie Brown decides to refuse the proposal

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after being asked to leave girls and Snoopy out of the team in order to join the league, as girls or dogs are not allowed. When he communicates the decision to his friends, not telling the reasons why, he causes girls' anger and complaints. Once Linus tells them the whole story, they present a uniform with the words "Our Manager" on the front to Charlie Brown, in order to make up for having been hard on him.

*Peanuts* has no happy ending, and Charlie Brown's team will never succeed. However, Charlie Brown teaches us that, even though results are important, human dignity, creativity and diversity are much more so.

### **Chuck, a Modern Leader**

Even though he's not a protagonist, as Schulz wrote in 1975, Charlie Brown is "the focal point of almost every story." He is "the one who suffers, because he is the caricature of the average person." However, repetition and irony in *Peanuts* strips make him into a very complex character. On the one hand, he is a lovable loser: insecure, constantly failing, blamed and bullied by everyone. A genuine person in a cruel world, a kind of victim predestined. On the other hand, he is the only one who is able to keep his friends together.

That's particularly true of the baseball team. He's the boss not because of strong skills, charisma, or authoritarian attitude, but because of his exceptional ability to shape and safeguard a climate of tolerance, mutual respect, and freedom for everyone to seek his or her own authentic form of expression. As we have seen, it's a well-defined leadership style which can be compared to a Heideggerian approach to management.

The fact that Charlie Brown is and will always be a loser is a leitmotif which will make us laugh and love him forever. However, paradoxically, that leaves us another important and inspirational message: Never give up. Dealing with failure is a key to success.