



MANAGEMENT, WORK AND ORGANISATIONS  
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# LEADERSHIP: LIMITS AND POSSIBILITIES

SECOND EDITION

KEITH GRINT

OWAIN SMOLOVIĆ JONES

BLOOMSBURY

# **Leadership: Limits and Possibilities**

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# **Leadership: Limits and Possibilities**

**2<sup>nd</sup> edition**

**Keith Grint & Owain Smolović Jones**

**BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC**  
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## Preface

Like all books this one is the product of many people, but the responsibility remains ours alone. Keith would like to thank Oxford University for facilitating a sabbatical term during which the first draft of this book was completed; the second was completed at Lancaster Management School. The second edition was written by Keith at Warwick University and Owain at the Open University. Keith would also like to thank the RAF for taking him under their proverbial ‘wing’ and allowing him to follow two of their Intermediate Management and Leadership courses during the autumn of 2003. In particular, the following RAF members gave unselfishly of their time and thoughts: Flight Sergeants: Geoff Hancocks, Chris Bragan, Paul Phillips and Andy Richardson; Warrant Officer Geoff Steen; Squadron Leader Andy Williams and Wing Commander Dan Archer. Keith would also like to thank the two syndicates of sergeants that he followed who must remain anonymous but will know who they are. Many students suffered various versions of these chapters over the last few years so thanks to all the management undergraduates and postgraduates at Oxford, Lancaster, Cranfield and Warwick and all the executives who have had the misfortune to be sat in one of Keith’s sessions. Many of Keith’s academic colleagues also played a role in some of these chapters and we would especially like to thank David Collinson, Mike Harper, Alex König, Yiannis Gabriel, Dennis Tourish and Bryan Watters for their unstinting support and helpful criticism. Beyond academia a special word to all Keith’s various karate coaches – Paul Bayliss, Rob King, Ian Cuthbert and most especially Paul Wood, who at different times taught me karate and equally importantly facilitated my philosophical education. Finally, a word of thanks for Keith’s better half, Sandra, and their primary charges: Katy, Beki and Kris; their respective partners: Richie, Adam and Rebecca; and their children: Nate, Nell, Lola, Livy and Daphne.

Owain says that he became fascinated with leadership after reading the first edition of this book while studying for a master's degree. Some months later he was being interviewed by its author for a PhD studentship, and now he has co-authored the book's second edition. Owain (feeling very awkward about writing this in the third person) therefore thanks Keith Grint for giving him his break in academic life, for years of intellectual companionship and for generally being a great friend and mentor. Owain has learnt a lot about leadership at the sharp end of political life and would like to thank his comrades Carragh Skipper, Lauren Townsend and Jack Witeck in particular for their feedback and input on this project. From his time at the University of Auckland Owain would like to thank Philippa Collins, Joline Francoeur, Josh Firth, Ann Moore but particularly his leadership development siblings Sarah Bowman and Fiona Kennedy. Brigid Carroll and Brad Jackson continue to be a big influence on Owain's thinking, and he is very grateful for the months of patient time they have given to help him develop as a scholar. In the worlds of leadership and organization studies, Owain thanks David Collinson, Jackie Ford, Iain Munro, Alison Pullen, Chellie Spiller, Scott Taylor and Dennis Tourish for their fascinating conversations and support over the years. At the Open University, his friend and frequent collaborator Nik Winchester continues to offer guidance and companionship, for which he is very grateful. Peter Bloom and Jo Brewis have been terrific friends and mentors. Charles Barthold, Caroline Clarke, Wendy Crane, Carol Jacklin-Jarvis and Carol Sherriff have all been stimulating and generous colleagues to work closely with in shaping module material and research ideas, many of which found their way into this book. Owain thanks his parents, Dewi and Gwennan, for the care and love they have shown him. His best friend Walley is an endless source of companionship, love and fun. But finally, Owain thanks Nela, who inspires him every day and makes life worthwhile.

Both Keith and Owain thank Liz Barlow for her comments and support during the final drafting stages of the book.

# What's new in the second edition?

New to this edition you will find:

- Leadership and leaders through digital communication
- Artificial intelligence, automation and new technology as challenging the possibilities for leadership but also enabling new forms of leadership to emerge
- Environmental leadership
- A revamped emphasis on racial and gender equality, particularly focusing on Black Lives Matter
- Cities as the geography that shape new forms of leadership
- A new chapter on leadership as purpose

So why the changes? Leadership has been practiced, taught and debated for millennia, yet even the oldest of concepts have to adapt with the times. Perhaps its adaptability is one of the main reasons why the idea of leadership has persisted for so long. In this edition we have revisited the overall leadership framework previously offered to better reflect contemporary life. The Three Ps and an R of the first edition have become the 5Ps of the second edition.

A paper by Steve Kempster, Brad Jackson and Mervyn Conroy (Kempster et al., 2011) suggested that the original fourfold typology should have been fivefold to incorporate the notion of leadership purpose. We were convinced that they were right about the need for more purpose, and set to work on developing our own justification for this additional P. Looking back over these past sixteen years, one of the defining features has been a political awakening, particularly amongst younger people. Starting with the Arab Spring in 2010 but then continuing in an explosion of grassroots activity and social movements in opposition to austerity economics – and onwards in more recent years to encompass struggles for racial and gender

equality, the world is livelier today than it was in 2005. There is no better example of the vibrancy of contemporary life than the environmental movement, which experienced a renaissance of organization, professionalism and passion from a globally interconnected movement. Our new P of purpose tackles this political awakening head-on, connecting leadership to ideas of care and freedom, but also developing a new theory of organic leadership that captures this political vitality – particularly in relation to the environmental movement. Our treatment of process has also become more political, inspired as we were to write about the activism of the Black Lives Matter movement.

The world of work has also changed significantly since the first edition was published. What we think of as a ‘person’ doing leadership work has become ever more technologically advanced, with most leaders now consumed and interacted with digitally, through smartphones, tablets and computers. The rapid development of technology has also coincided with and fuelled ever greater forms of workplace control and surveillance. This development, which reached new intensity during the Covid-19 pandemic, forced us to reflect on whether what we were seeing was a victory of management over leadership – what we later call in [Chapter 4](#), Total Management. Such a totalizing of technological control in tandem with the erosion of worker agency has led us to reconsider the role and practice of leadership as something distinct from management. Technological developments have also encouraged us to revisit the nature of leadership as a product. This category was previously labelled ‘results’, but we realized that the heading did not quite capture the contemporary experience of digital production and consumption. We have therefore significantly extended this focus on ‘product’ to consider leadership and leaders as operating within a marketplace of images and ideas, usually digitally.

Finally, in common with all other aspects of life, leadership has become more globalized. In considering leadership position, we have therefore adopted a more geographically rich approach, one that acknowledges that people entering the workplace – and activism – now relate far more to the connections they make in a geographical place and between geographical places, rather than within the confines of the more traditionally conceived organization. This has liberating effects as people are able to form more creative, diverse and expansive relations of cooperation. Yet we also need to acknowledge the more precarious nature of contemporary life: temporary

jobs that usually pay less and offer fewer benefits; a deterioration in public services and welfare provision; increases in wealth inequality; and insecure, unhealthy and expensive housing. Extending our view of 'position' to incorporate 'space' and 'cities' allowed us to consider these issues in relation to leadership. This analysis is taken a step further when we consider purpose, which is where we engage with the possibilities for changing the world through leadership that stretches beyond geographical boundaries.

# Acknowledgements

Some of this material has its origins in an ESRC Senior Research Fellowship # H52427500197. A section of [Chapter 2](#) was originally published as '21st Century Leadership' in Cooper, C. L. (ed.) (2005), *Leadership and Management in the 21st Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). A section of [Chapter 5](#) was originally published as 'Overcoming the Hydra: Leaderless Groups and Terrorism' (2004) in Gabriel, Y. (ed.), *Myths, Stories, and Organizations: Premodern Narratives for Our Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

# Introduction

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Although leadership research seems to be increasing exponentially, we have yet to establish what leadership is, never mind whether we can teach it or predict its importance. In this context we consider leadership as limited in two senses: first, our understanding is limited even if our information is apparently unlimited; second, despite all the claims for leaders as the solution to all kinds of problems, we will suggest that the role of individual *leaders* is limited, even if the significance of *leadership* should not be underestimated.

This book is designed to explore the theoretical definitions and practical accomplishments of leadership, offering a multidimensional view of this most fascinating concept. It is not intended as a complete review of the extant literature, nor is its primary focus on retreading the traditional approaches; Keith has attempted this in several other publications and interested readers are referred to these (Bratton et al., 2004; Bryman et al., 2011; Grint, 1998; 2001).

The first chapter takes Gallie's notion of an Essentially Contested Concept (ECC) as the principal explanation for our limited advances in defining leadership and suggests that a consensus on a definition of leadership is unlikely, even in the long run. It then establishes a fivefold typology that embodies some of the most important varieties of leadership definition and illustrates why the quest for a consensus is both forlorn and unnecessary. Instead, there are (at least) five quite different ways of understanding what leadership is, which we present through our Five Ps model:

- Leadership as Person: is it WHO 'leaders' are that makes them leaders?



- Leadership as Product: is it WHAT ‘leaders’ achieve that makes them leaders? Is it WHAT is sold in a marketplace that makes it ‘leadership’?
- Leadership as Process: is it HOW activity between people and things accomplishes leadership?
- Leadership as Position: is it WHERE ‘leaders’ operate that makes them leaders? Is it the WHERE of geography that shapes leadership?
- Leadership as Purpose: is it WHY ‘leaders’ and groups lead that accounts for their leadership?

This may explain why we have so much trouble explaining leadership, trying to understand it and trying to teach or reward it. Of course, some of these definitions overlap and it is probable that leadership oftentimes involves all five elements, but sometimes they mean radically different things to different people. In each section we first consider some of the leadership theory in the field and then proceed to explore the field through related cases of leadership practice that highlight the different ways of understanding leadership, often by picking an extreme case to illustrate the viability of the argument.

[Chapter 2](#), for example, takes the definition – Leadership as Person – and explores two aspects of the identity of the ‘leader’ that might not normally be considered but can be summarized as ‘putting the “ship” back into leadership’. Leadership as Person implies that there is something remarkable about the character of the leader that makes him or her a leader, and this is often related to assumptions concerning leaders having been ‘born’ rather than made, though as has been recounted many times – all of us are born. However, the problems of taking this approach are established in two different dimensions, both concerned with leader ‘ship’.

The first ‘ship’ concerns the traditional assumptions about leaders as ‘individuals’ and suggests that this assumption is extremely tenuous: leadership is necessarily a relational not a possessive phenomenon, for the individual ‘leader’ without followers is demonstrably not a leader at all. This issue is evaluated through that most conventional and ostensibly ‘possessive’ characteristic of individual leaders: charisma. Through an analysis of several individuals held to be charismatic we suggest that the identity of the leader is essentially relational, not individual: thus,

leadership is a function of a community, not a result derived from an individual deemed to be objectively superhuman.

The second element of the identity of leader ‘ship’ is the extent to which this identity is necessarily limited to human embodiment. We argue that in all but a very few cases leadership is essentially hybrid in nature – it comprises humans, technologies, clothes, adornments, cultures, the built environment, nature, the flow of capital, rules and so on and so forth. There are, in effect, almost no cases of successful human leaders bereft of any ‘non-human’ supplement – that is, naked. This argument is then used to establish the nature of hybrid leadership on D-Day, 6 June 1944 and in particular with regard to the primary means for the first assault troops to land and cross the beaches: small boats. In the event many of these hybrids had significant weaknesses but they were primarily a consequence of political and cultural arguments rather than scientific or technical limitations. In short, these troops were led, and sometimes misled, in and through hybrid leaders. In the contemporary era, understanding leadership as a hybrid achievement is even more important. How many of us now can say that we ever interact directly with the senior bosses within our organizations? In reality, most people in large organizations experience senior leaders through carefully composed video messages, emails or through reading social media posts. More pressingly, an increasing body of people in organizations rarely encounter human leaders at all and are more likely to be ‘led’ or managed by algorithms that direct their work, set targets and assess performance. Given the increasing ubiquity of such conditions, we ask the pressing question of whether leaders and leadership have much of a role in organizations and society now or whether they are being increasingly marginalized by technology. This is a bigger debate that we return to in more depth in [Chapter 4](#).

Meanwhile, [Chapter 3](#) configures leadership through its products. In the last decade there have been many examples of Leadership-by-Product – and many examples where the products expose the consequences of this apparently Machiavellian embodiment: Enron and Lehman Brothers to name just two business cases, though the invasion of Iraq would be another. In the first part of this chapter, we consider the extent to which products are caused by leaders and the ethical aspects of this assumption. We then proceed to take three forms of leadership that appear to be radically different in their products to test the viability of defining leadership by its

apparent results: the ‘successful’ leadership of Greta Thunberg, Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Theresa and the ‘unsuccessful’ leadership of slave rebellions and resistance in Roman and Nazi times. The conclusion, uncomfortable though it may be for some, is that the linkage of results to ‘successful’ leaders is usually tenuous and even nominal ‘failures’ can be configured as successful leadership. These very same lessons have important ramifications for contemporary and future leadership: it is extraordinarily difficult to quantify the product of leadership, and yet the products of leadership seem extraordinarily important. To analyse either of these we need to be very clear about what we mean by leadership but that does not mean we need to agree on its ‘true’ or ‘objective’ nature. On the contrary this is neither necessary nor helpful, though we do need to be clear about what we mean by leadership. The most significant change in this chapter compared to the first edition of the book is the tweaking of the title from ‘results’ to ‘product’. This came about because it has become increasingly clear of the undesirability of considering leadership outside its circulation as a commercial product. That there is now a leadership ‘industry’ (Ferry and Guthey, 2020; Guthey et al., 2009), encapsulating multiple marketplaces, operating at the levels of universities, global publishers, corporate consulting giants and a multitude of small boutique consultancies, is inescapable. From this perspective leadership is whatever ideas sell. The evolution of this industry raises a number of important questions that we hope to highlight, if not definitely answer: To what extent is it the commercial success of leadership products that defines what ‘leadership’ truly is and is not? What happens to the relationship between ideas and real-life practice when ‘leadership’ becomes another symbol to be traded in the global marketplace? What are the effects on collective mental health and wellbeing if leadership transitions from being a real and lived practice to largely being one of trading in symbols?

Chapter 4 takes the third of the four approaches – leadership as a process – and investigates the extent to which the method by which leadership is executed enables us to differentiate leadership from any other organizing category, such as ‘management’ or ‘administration’. To help us understand the process of leadership we first need to understand something of the contemporary context, which we describe as a creep towards technologically driven Total Management (a term partially inspired by sociologist Erving Goffman’s classic study of asylums as Total Institutions

– see Goffman, 1961/1991), a theme picked up and developed from [Chapter 2](#) but focused on in depth in [Chapter 4](#). Under Total Management, workers (and indeed managers) are increasingly subjected to automated work processes, with performance and judgments about aptitude assessed by algorithms rather than people. To better understand this phenomenon we examine the intensification of control technology in the workplace during the Covid-19 pandemic, which seemed to widen and further entrench the erosion of autonomy for workers, and discretion for managers. As an exemplar case, we look more closely at the experiences of Amazon workers and reflect on the leadership implications for an ‘Amazonification’ of economies (Alimahomed-Wilson et al., 2020: 28). We conclude that under conditions of management-creep, the role of leadership processes is more vital than ever, as they hold the potential to challenge and overturn taken-for-granted and automated status quo assumptions about work and society. But to take this insight further we need to better conceptualize what we mean by a leadership process. In this case we take the process of leadership literally and consider the process through which leaders ‘learn to lead’. Learning to lead is a complex phenomenon and one that remains controversial. While machines can learn about processes, workers and customer demand, they cannot (yet) replicate the relational power dynamics and empathy that are hallmarks of human-driven leadership. This discussion therefore starts with some of the learning literature and suggests that a parallel can be drawn between learning to be a parent and learning to be a leader: in both cases, and counter-intuitively, it is the junior that teaches the senior how to do the senior’s job: children teach adults how to be parents and subordinates teach their superordinates how to lead. This is not just because power is a relationship and not a possession but because much of both parenting and leading seems to be acquired through experiential – and reflective – trial and error. Moreover, the engagement in a learning process is performative in two senses: first the engagement is rooted in discursive practices that constitute rather than merely reflect ‘reality’; second, it is a performance that needs to be continually reproduced for it to be effective. But there is more to this parallel than an interesting argument: children can be extraordinarily effective in teaching parenting skills because of their open and honest feedback. A number of historical cases then explore this argument and provides the basis for the claim that Calchas, the mythical Trojan who helped the Greeks defeat the Trojans,

provides an interesting case for modelling the way leaders might recruit and retain people willing to replicate this open and honest feedback that alone may stop them from failing in the long term. At present, algorithms offer no such responsiveness.

The second part of the process chapter moves us from the theoretical classroom to the practical experience of learning to lead by way of a study of an RAF leadership training course. We explore the process of leadership here because the RAF provides a classic case where formal authority is tightly embedded in, and executed through, the military hierarchy: the process is tightly demarcated, transparent and well tried. However, the learning literature suggests that such an organizational setting is ill-equipped to provide the best environment for learning, so how does the RAF manage to teach leadership? The case suggests that it embodies much that resonates with the Community of Practice ideas originally formulated by Wenger (2000) and that these notions also generate some important limits to the assumption that the process of leadership is inherently embodied in the acts of individuals. We conclude this chapter by introducing some critical points in relation to leadership process, cautioning against viewing this perspective as a panacea for all of the ills of leadership as person and product. Processes of leadership themselves can normalize unjust practice and even romanticize (Collinson et al., 2018) it. We invite consideration of democratic leadership processes, arguing that while introducing more inclusive forms of dialogue into leadership is surely something to be welcomed and nurtured, we should equally be careful not to overlook those moments of leadership that seek to radically destabilize a status quo. It is here that we introduce notions of dissensual leadership (Barthold et al., 2020), acts of leadership produced through the body that offer radical challenge and seek to undo. Technology here can be co-opted for more emancipatory ends of leadership. This case for a radical, tech-savvy and embodied leadership process is made through the example of the Black Lives Matter movement.

The fifth chapter moves from learning the process of leadership to evaluating the importance of leadership as a position. This most traditional way of understanding leadership is explored through a brief review of the contemporary debates on complexity, networks, hierarchies and heterarchies. It has been argued for some time that organizations of all forms are changing their architecture to divest themselves of unnecessary

management layers and to become flatter, slimmer and more agile. As such the formal leaders of these organizations have to respond by leading in a different way, by distributing authority and responsibility downwards so that they ‘facilitate’ rather than control their followers. By recent convention Distributed Leadership has been invested with all kinds of positive values and considered as a way of transcending the current ‘crisis in leadership’ that allegedly prevails. However, taking two case studies we suggest that this may not be so, either in temporal terms or in moral evaluation. In the first case – that proclaims the arrival of a new leadership model – we consider the role of distributed leadership in the (re)acquisition of civil rights for African-Americans in the 1960s through the alternative narratives of the charismatic leader, Martin Luther King, and the mass movement of distributed leaders. In the second case – that attributes an essentially moral compass to distributed leadership – we consider how the model informs an analysis of the leadership of terrorist groups, in particular al-Qaeda and ISIS. Distributive leadership can, then, provide both a constructive and a destructive approach to organizations and it can explain not just why democratic organizations can be more successful but also the resilience of terrorist groups in the face of conventional democratic authorities. The main change to this chapter is the consideration of ‘position’ as also a matter of geography and the spaces and places of leadership are discussed. Our approach to this topic is to view leadership space as dialectical, as a continuous relational movement between geography, economics and politics. From this perspective, leaders often design spaces, such as offices or factories, with the aim of better controlling the actions and movements of workers – but workers often counter with a kind of leadership that re-envisages space and the economic and social relations expressed within it. From this point, we move on to make the case that the city and phenomenon of urbanism (Harvey, 2009) is an increasingly important focus for leadership studies. Cities encapsulate the heart of the global economy and the struggles that play out within this frame – we therefore cannot understand leadership without gaining a clearer perspective on the forms of leadership that dominate but also resist across the spaces of contemporary cities. After considering the importance of a right to the city for leadership, we unpack the dynamics of urban leadership through three struggles – for housing justice in the UK, dignity and equality

in the favellas of Brazil, and against gentrification and cultural appropriation in Venice Beach, Los Angeles.

The final chapter focuses on the purpose behind the leadership: why do individuals and groups mobilize themselves and others to attempt to change the world? This brings us back to the beginning, because how we define leadership determines how we deal with such groups: if leadership is concerned with products or with individual charismatics who lead from the top we can (literally) undermine the organization by beheading the leadership – as the US-led coalition forces tried to do in the second Iraq war; but if leadership is more concerned with the community and with the process of leadership then such a strategy is unlikely to succeed. In this chapter we make the case that leadership can be driven strongly by purpose, one that often outlives individual leaders and followers who occupy organizations at any one historical juncture. Starting from the position that purpose is deeply imbued with ethics, we consider the proposition that such ethics equates to the personal ethical qualities of leaders. Finding this position ultimately unsatisfactory, we move on to consider ethical purpose as something generated through processes of leadership, one that demands a proper political theory of how leadership purpose forms, grows and is contested (Wilson, 2016). It is here that we introduce our theory of organic leadership, as purposeful leadership that forms within vibrant communities but that needs to scale up across chains of alliances in order to offer the possibility of more radical change. Helping us make sense of this process are two examples, the socialist takeover of the UK Labour Party in the years 2015–20, and contemporary environmentalist movements. Ending on environmentalism, with a consideration of its challenges to economic systems that have generated the potential catastrophe of climate change, reminds us that while thinking and writing about leadership is an enjoyable intellectual exercise, it also bears high real-world stakes. Leadership, then, is not just a theoretical arena but one with critical and practical implications for us all, and the limits of leadership – what leaders and leadership can do and what all of us should allow them to do – are foundational aspects of this arena. Leadership, in effect, is too important to be left to leaders.



# **‘What is leadership: Person, product, position, process or purpose?’**

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## **Introduction**

This chapter begins by setting out the context for answering the question – what is leadership? The first section considers whether this question needs to be contextualized in space and time and proceeds to investigate the links between ethics and leadership. It then confronts the issue of leadership definitions and explains why these definitions may be contested and why no consensus is either likely or necessary – because leadership is ‘an essentially contested concept’. Taking each of the primary definitions in turn, the chapter explores the foundational assumptions of the different answers to the question by structuring the debate around five different answers: Person, Products, Position, Practice or Purpose. That leadership often draws upon all five modes is self-evident, but it is also the case that different people and organizations approach the answer to the definitional question quite differently, and this may have profound effects upon how we perceive, recruit, reward and apportion responsibility to ‘leadership’.

## **Time for leadership?**

Leadership, or the lack of it, seems to be responsible for just about everything these days. On the day this was first written – 24 March 2020 – the front page of the *Guardian* newspaper is dominated by leadership.

Starting with the headline, 'PM: Stay at home, this is a national emergency', which is a command from a leader-figure in a senior position of authority (a prime minister) to his citizens. The sentence construction underlines the point, beginning with the commanding-verb 'stay', re-emphasizing the edict with the pronoun 'this' and the nouns 'national emergency', both static and seemingly undisputable things. Below the headline is an oversized picture of the UK prime minister, Boris Johnson, who only sixteen weeks previously had won a commanding majority at the general election. He sits with hunched shoulders, no doubt seeking to emulate his political hero, Winston Churchill. Johnson's posture is forthright, even aggressive, a hand raised and fist clenched in the air, while his other hand is also clenched in a fist but resting on a table; the lighting of the shot magnifies the lines on his face, while there are dark patches under his eyes. His gaze is centre left, suggesting that the viewer is seeing a figure of authority addressing an audience off camera. Dressed in formal, plain colours, in the background is a blurred union flag, hinting at the appeal to national unity and patriotism. The person of Johnson is given the most prominence in the article itself, with the subheading leading in with 'Boris Johnson' and likewise the introduction, both of which frame the Covid-19 lockdown as emanating from an 'order' by Johnson rather than from his government more generally. Further down the article, we see that leadership might be concerned with more than a leader giving orders, with a plea to people not to gather together and to take responsibility for their actions. Later on still, we are made aware that the decision to lock down was a contested one, with some senior advisers pressing for a more 'relaxed' approach. We learn that there is an ethical debate at play, with welfare and care issues competing with economic justifications for prominence.

On the face of it, the type of leadership portrayed and sustained in this news story seems terribly traditional, a view of a commanding (male) figure that could have featured prominently in a news story in any of the last three centuries. Yet below the surface we glimpse that there may be more to the story than 'The Leader' – that of direction setting in groups, who work with changing circumstances and knowledge, and who work with and within live ethical issues.

But has leadership changed since the beginning of the twenty-first century or even the beginning of the twentieth century? Do we need to reconstruct leadership because the situation has changed irrevocably? With

this article, as well as with most cultural representations of leadership, the surface impression is that leadership has not changed much at all.

If the assumption is that space and time are irrelevant to modelling leadership, then it does not matter what the twenty-first-century organization or business will look like because the leadership format will remain stable: leadership requirements are eternal. Thus, the question is not what leadership model is most suitable for the future but what kind of leadership model is best, full stop. This kind of model has been associated with a wide number of leadership theories, including Carlyle's 'Heroic Man' and some trait theories that suggest certain traits are both essential to leadership and essentially unchanging across space and time. Some form of charisma (manifested in our news story through Johnson's Churchillian hunched shoulders and clenched fists), the ability to envision a radically different solution to an aged problem, the ability to mobilize followers and so on are, in this approach, just a few of these universal requirements because the future is merely a reflection of the past.

The most radical version of this approach relates to the 'hardwiring' model of evolutionary psychology (Boyatzis et al., 2014) and neuroscience (Boone et al., 2020), though some of the claims of neuroscience seem to be close to neuromyths (Howard-Jones, 2014). In this perspective, leadership is something that we have always had and something that some of us are born with. This genetic make-up tends to propel 'alpha-males' – those men (and it is always men in these models) with high levels of testosterone – into positions of leadership where – if successful – they then generate high levels of serotonin, a hormone associated with happiness. The subsequent forms of natural selection eliminate all but the fittest, or rather all but the most appropriate for leadership positions (Nicholson, 2000: 97–125). In effect, the requirements of leadership are hardwired into humans and remain relatively stable across space and time. Or as Nicholson (2000: 1) puts it: 'We may have taken ourselves out of the Stone Age, but we haven't taken the Stone Age out of ourselves.' Nevertheless, assuming that the phenomenon of leadership could be distilled into a universal individual essence, under these circumstances we might, perhaps, follow Plato in concentrating on the question: 'Who should rule us?' even if his answer – the wisest rather than the most popular – runs contrary to our current democratic trend of electing populist leaders. But if leadership is hardwired then simply facilitating the process of natural selection should be sufficient

to resolve the problem because the kind of leadership is unlikely to change in the near or distant future. The persistence of this selection model is evident in the large number of TV programmes that operate on precisely this philosophical basis, such as *Big Brother*, *The Voice*, *X-Factor* and all the interminable cooking competitions that probably mean people are too busy watching them to bother actually cooking. We might then ask whether all the concern for different leadership styles is mere propaganda, a shifting debate about morality generated by the chattering classes or by those who believe history is on their side but ultimately deployed by those with what Nietzsche called 'the will to power' and, we would add, the material means to power. In other words, the ideological justification for domination may vary but the cause remains the same. The obvious concern this perspective raises, amongst many others, is the point that while neuroscience and genetic views of leadership (e.g. De Neve et al., 2013) might (although the science is disputed) predict who is likely to attain a leadership position, this does not mean that societies have the leaders or leadership they need to prosper. Were the direction we receive from senior leaders so effective, then perhaps we would not live in a world of pressing climate emergency and rampant inequality.

Often the natural selection approach to leadership relates the apparent universality and timelessness of human leadership to our animal nature because leadership in animals appears unchanging and tends to be amongst the most hierarchical and brutal. Leadership amongst lions, for example, is primarily undertaken by lionesses in terms of hunts and tending the young, but the alpha male dominates in terms of eating and mating privileges. Wolf packs tend to be family units of between 2 and 12 individuals led by the alpha pair who alone breed. A strict hierarchy exists within wolf packs in which the alpha male leads hunts and territorial defence while the alpha female leads the pups.<sup>1</sup>

But if human leadership is a mirror of the animal world then we should most closely resemble the world of chimpanzees, our closest genetic cousin. De Waal's (2000: 77–135) account of Chimpanzees suggests that leadership is not determined by size or necessarily by hardwiring but by coalition building. Hence during the observation period, three different males (First Yeroen, then Luit and finally Nikkie) took control over the group, but this was only possible by alliances built up over time both with one of the two other adult males and with the larger group of females. Moreover, no

leadership was permanent or self-stabilizing – each of the three leaders had to create and recreate the network of support and undermine the counter-alliances on a regular basis to maintain control. What is also intriguing is that the final male leader, Nikkie, who was rather young to be the group leader, had great difficulty maintaining control over the female adults and only succeeded by sharing his authority, collective leadership, with the oldest male, Yeroen, who undertook the ‘policing’ activities in the group on Nikkie’s behalf. De Waal (2000: 118), in a reformulation of Thomas Hobbes’s precondition for submission to a leader, suggests that this may be a consequence of the perception amongst the females that Nikkie was unable to protect them from attack. Whatever the cause, it does seem that chimpanzee leadership is essentially rooted in the ability to create and maintain a network of support – and to undermine any rivals attempting to build competitive alliances. And this alliance building is also key to explaining the persistence of egalitarian behaviour amongst hunter-gatherer societies, for when dominant males are perceived to be too dominant and acting against the interests of the group, it is not uncommon for reverse dominance hierarchies to evolve – a network bent on destroying the dictator (Boehm et al., 1993).

A related biological argument suggests that human altruism is not an ethical philosophy rooted in helping others, possibly by leading them, but a gene-based determinant. In other words, what might appear to be altruistic behaviour is in effect the consequence of genes maximizing the chance of their survival. Hence although laying down one’s life for one’s brother or sister might appear to be altruistic, the supporters of Socio-biology (E.O. Wilson, 1975) or the ‘selfish gene’ (Dawkins, 1989) would probably relate this action to the propensity of related genes in kin groups to protect each other. Of course, this raises enormous problems for anything other than transactional theories of leadership because only self-interest can determine follower- and leader-behaviour. There will certainly be no likelihood of transformational leadership succeeding because this suggests followers should subordinate their personal interests to those of a group that are unlikely to be restricted to kin groups (Grint, 2010a). We might also want to worry about empathy being the basis for transformational leadership because, as Bloom (2017) suggests, much of the research in this field actually suggests that empathy is radically restricted to those people we know well and resemble us, and definitely not something that motivates us

to help people who are in distress but unknown to us or alien to our sensibilities.

Moreover, experiments by Falk et al. (2003) suggest that self-oriented behaviour itself has significant limits. In the first experiment two people are required to share £100, but one (A) will decide who gets what. It is then up to the other (B) to accept their 'share' or reject the entire package, and if the latter course is chosen then A is deprived of his or her share too. Since even £1 is better than nothing, it would be logical for B to accept whatever A offers but the experiment suggests that when B's share drops below £25, B usually punishes A by refusing to participate at all. Related experiments in public good confirm the suspicion that there is a lot more to behaviour than gene-based selfishness and people are willing to punish selfish behaviour, even if it causes them harm too.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, if the assumption is that space and time are critical to changing organizational forms rather than genes or traits, because the organizational form determines the appropriate kind of leadership, and that organizational form changes, then we need to be very clear about the future and equally clear about the connection between the context and the leadership form required. Precisely what context requires what kind of leadership remains subject to dispute but there are several variants rooted in different models of time, of which four will detain us here.<sup>3</sup>

The linear model perceives time as both a straight line and (usually) an ever-improving line such that our notions of, and expertise about, leadership improves across time, irrespective of space. Thus, historically we might consider how the prior authoritarian and absolutist models of political and business leadership have gradually changed from tyrannies to participative democracies. In this 'Whig' model of historical change, Genghis Kahn, Louis XIV, Hitler and Stalin are replaced by democratic leaders; authoritarian business bosses, such as Henry Ford and Robert Maxwell, are replaced by liberals such as Richard Branson; and authoritarian military models, for instance, the Prussian Army of Frederick the Great, are replaced by decentralized military models rooted in some form of Mission Command (Grint, 2014; Krulak, 1999) or the distributive leadership approach that we will consider in [Chapter 5](#). If this model were adopted, we would expect future leaders to be ever more liberal and participative, in line with Western democratic philosophies drawn from the enlightenment. Such a model is certainly appealing – as witnessed by the popularity of Fukuyama's (1993)

claim about the end of history: democratic capitalism had both undermined all ideological opposition and marked the zenith of political systems; or Barack Obama's popularizing of the Martin Luther King Jr phrase (which was itself adapted from the words of the nineteenth-century abolitionist minister Theodore Parker) that 'the arc of the moral universe is long, but bends towards justice' (Smith, 2018). Indeed, the Leadership-as-Practice approach discussed later has an implicit bias towards a democratic leadership form that reproduces this 'Whig' model.

However, the urgency of the climate crisis and seeming inability of the present system to adequately address it, the election and continuing popularity of Trump, growing wealth inequality and the explosion of authoritarian conservative-nationalist movements globally, underlines the notion, to paraphrase Mark Twain, that the reports of the death of all opposition to progress are premature and, overall, probably necessary. Writing his theses on history with some urgency while on the run from the Nazis (he later committed suicide rather than face imprisonment and murder), Walter Benjamin (2015: Loc 4092–4098) distilled his critique of linear history and a historicist account progress in the metaphor of the *Angelus Novus*:

A Klee painting named '*Angelus Novus*' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

In Benjamin's fable, 'progress' is characterized as a 'violent' storm blowing towards the future. The angel faces the past and isolates a single, genesis catastrophe and seeks to rectify what has fallen to pieces, but the pile of wreckage keeps mounting and the storm of progress never abates. History, for Benjamin, was a series of catastrophes, through which one can trace the dominated and dominators and the task of historical materialism was to 'waken the dead', the fallen victims, and to resuscitate their lessons for the present, so as to charge it with revolutionary potential. Belief in progress was catastrophic fantasy but the world could yet be set right and it is on this



basis, in the full knowledge that defeat is the most likely outcome, that those seeking equality and justice must proceed (see also Eagleton, 2015).

Mining history for examples of leadership, many of which do not fit the narrative histographies of dominant forces, helps us account for the rich diversity of leadership forms that have existed in both time and space: in short, there have been more casualties to authoritarian leadership in the twentieth century than in any other, there are many examples of decentralized leadership in previous centuries, and the growth of fundamentalist religious governments – of all kinds and including Christian, Hindu and Muslim – in the last two decades does not bode well for what is predicted to be a continuously enlightening leadership style.

The metaphorical straight line that connects the problems of the past to the solutions of the future resonates with the popularity of the quest for the ‘answer’ to the leadership ‘question’. Indeed, as Kant said: ‘Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made’ – but, as Berlin makes clear in his book of the same name (2013), this has never stopped leaders trying to straight-jacket populations into their personal utopias that are inevitably collective dystopias.

Many harassed executives may attend a ‘leadership course’ ostensibly in the hope that the solution to their leadership problem will mysteriously emerge from participating in the course, in a manner akin to the smoke from the Vatican chimney that marks the election of a Pope – and thus the ‘solution’ to the leadership ‘problem’. But the quest for an answer, like the search for the Holy Grail, is unlikely to be successful because the leadership problem is inherently intractable – that is, impossible or difficult to manage. Instead of clean lines and harmonious relations, what we face instead is an ongoing quest to search through the rubble of history for clues as to how leadership could be otherwise.

But what of novelty seemingly outside history? Rittel and Webber (1973) observed that problems could be divided between ‘Wicked’ and ‘Tame’. The latter could be complicated issues, but each ‘Tame’ problem was theoretically capable of resolution through the application of established techniques and processes; that is to say, ‘tame problems’ can be solved by management. However, if the problems are essentially novel, indeed unique, if they embody no obvious resolution point or assessment mechanism, if the cause, explanation and apparent resolution of the problem depend upon the viewpoint of the stakeholder, and if the problem

is embedded in another similar problem, then the problem is Wicked. Wicked Problems are complex, potentially open to better or worse developments but seldom ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ solutions and are thus only amenable to leadership – defined as dealing with something novel – rather than management – defined as dealing with something which is both known, and which has a pre-existing resolution. A Tame Problem, however complicated, is teaching your children to pass their driving test; a Wicked Problem is remaining a successful parent to them. A Tame Problem is ‘winning’ a publicity drive to reduce the consumption of plastics; a Wicked Problem is securing a just and lasting transition to a green economy. A Tame Problem is heart surgery; a Wicked problem is providing unlimited health services to all who need them.<sup>4</sup> Management might be focused on solving complicated but essentially Tame Problems in a unilinear fashion: applying what worked last time; but leadership is essentially about facing Wicked Problems that are literally ‘unmanageable’. This does not mean tearing up and discarding the lessons of history but it does mean being more imaginative and expansive about where we look in history for guidance and in what configurations we place such lessons. Command, on the other hand, is restricted to Critical Problems –like a fire or a bomb. Thus, terrorism might be all three kinds of problems: an attack is a Critical Problem requiring a decisive ‘Command’, but it might also demand ‘Management’ to shepherd the survivors away, get them home and establish a secure perimeter for the police to collect forensic evidence; but ultimately the cause and remedy of terrorism might be extraordinary complex and require the collaborative skills of ‘leadership’ (see Grint, 2005; 2008; 2014; Smolović Jones et al., 2020a).

Perhaps, then, if space and time are important in generating radically different organizations and unique problems that demand significantly variable leadership forms, then a contingency-based approach (Fiedler, 1997) would be better than a linear model. This suggests that once we have established the context and format of such organizations then, and only then, can we begin to decipher the ‘needs’ for leadership. This form of reasoning, often nestling within a functionalist philosophy, usually implies some form of materialist determinism; in effect the future material world will determine the cultural context that supports leadership. So, for example, if our future world is very dynamic, competitive and unstable, then we ‘need’ to provide flexible and decentralized leadership systems. On

the other hand, if the future returns to the more stable global system that we allegedly experienced just after the Second World War, or if the future that we were allegedly about to enter resembles ‘the end of history’ that was almost upon us after the collapse of communism, then we can return to the stable hierarchies and centralized administrative leadership that dominated the 1950s and 1960s. For instance, it may be that ‘crisis’ situations require authoritarian or at least decisive leadership, while more stable periods facilitate the development of more liberal models. Many an electorate in Europe would seem to agree with this proposition, preferring the authoritarianism of conservative nationalists as a response to economic hard times than pre-2008 left-leaning liberalism. Whether such patterns are replicated and re-enforced in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic remains to be seen. It is, after all, possible that people rediscover a taste for social democratic public institutions, state intervention and nationalization of key services, utilities and industries, even if it is likely that the fall-out will lead to even more acute austerity and authoritarianism. Precisely what the context or problem is – and how we come to agree on this – never seems clear. The problems of Europe can be attributed to a lack of wealth distribution and opportunity, imperfect markets, a lapse of religious piety or (sadly) immigrants, depending on whom we choose to listen to. Moreover, as the scissor, paper, stone game analogy suggests, the context is constantly changing anyway as competing groups respond to one other; an idea that resonates closely to the ‘fitness landscapes’ of complexity theory where strategy is closer to walking on a waterbed than on dry land: everything moves as multiple actors enter and thus change the context (Battram, 1998: 209–23).

A third take on time is in a circular format. Here the fashions of leadership revolve across time and space so that authoritarian and liberal leaders displace each other in sequences that may last some time. There is no essential ‘end point’ in this model, just a sequence of revolutions, but these changes can be related to the differing contexts within which they occur. In Barley and Kunda’s (2000) version of this, the endless cycle of management styles relates directly to a period within the Kondratiev economic ‘long wave’. Hence, expansionary periods when great scientific breakthroughs shake economic relations are associated with ‘rational’ or scientific forms of management, such as Scientific Management or Systems Theory approaches, while contracting economic periods are associated with

more ‘normative’ management styles, such as Industrial Betterment and Human Relations and Organizational Cultures. Here the future leadership style will depend upon the point of the next cycle, so the trick is to predict the cycle and then derive the appropriate leadership style. The long wave perspective has also become increasingly influential amongst leftist writers who draw on its lessons to ready their movements to appropriate revolutionary responses to dramatic forms of technological change, which hold the promise to usher in a new era of post-capitalist equality and wellbeing (Mason, 2016). Elitist models of leadership, such as Pareto’s (1997), also tend to adopt the cyclical approach but lock them into the oscillating forms of elites rather than cycles of the economy. However, like Kondratiev’s Long Wave theory, what appears an interesting argument has yet to establish itself as the accepted truth and is widely disputed.

The final variant on temporal change is that there is no pattern here, just a sequence of changes that have no ‘destination’ and thus no prediction is possible: the future may be an extrapolation of past trends or it may reveal a cyclical return to ‘old fashioned virtues’, or it may be novel, an accumulation of past forces but enacted anew, afresh and awry, something beyond our current comprehension. In the words of Karen Barad (2007: 141), ‘the world is an open process of mattering through which mattering itself acquires meaning and form through the realization of different agential possibilities.’ This means that through acting deliberately in tandem with the material in our orbit, with an expansive, open imagination and responsiveness to the non-human and human actors we affect, everything is to play for; it is within the power of each of us to contribute to – and change – the future (Eagleton, 2015). If the latter is true then the chances of anyone predicting entirely novel developments are remote, but we can exercise our creative faculties to re-shape our linguistic and material resources in ways that may make a difference, that may be made to matter (Barad, 2007).

This leads us to a reframing of the question: not what kind of leader will the future organization need but what kind of future organizations will the current crop of leaders and followers construct? This ‘construction’ can itself be of two variants.

First, leaders ‘build’ the future context – in the sense that Hitler laid the foundations for the Nazi State, Roosevelt laid the foundations for the United States to enter the Second World War or Mao Tse-tung constructed

the ideological basis for Communist China and so on. Of course, this leader-focused approach assumes that individuals rather than collectives are responsible for the construction of the future – in much the same way that Carlyle suggested, or in one of Napoleon’s favourite examples ‘The Gauls were not conquered by the Roman legions but by Caesar’ (quoted in Goldsworthy, 2003: 377). Or, in Brecht’s (1981) pointed question in his poem entitled ‘Questions from a worker who reads’

‘Caesar beat the Gauls.  
Did he not even have a cook with him?’

Tolstoy believed the opposite – that leaders were merely propelled by their organization in the same way that bow waves are generated by the motion of the boat; but while it would be absurd to assume the bow wave is pulling the boat along this is what the heroic model of leadership implies (Cf., Ackerman and Duvall, 2000; Jones, 2014).

Second, we need to consider whether we can ever secure a transparent rendition of the context without reference to the relationship between leaders and organizations. In other words, are leaders neutral in the interpretations of contexts and organizations or are they deeply implicated in those renditions – to the point where no ‘objective’ analysis is available? This goes beyond the popular idea that ‘spin-doctors’ are responsible for distorting the ‘truth’ or that Fake News designed to unseat President Trump is omnipresent, because this kind of approach assumes there is an objective ‘truth’ out there somewhere, waiting for our language to describe it. Instead, we suggest that what counts as the ‘truth’ is always contested, so the point is not what the spin-doctors are doing to the ‘truth’ but why we believe some versions of what we take to be reality but not others (Grint and Woolgar, 1997). Hence language does not so much describe reality as construct it. Or as Rorty (1999: xxvi) puts it, ‘languages are not attempts to copy what is out there, but rather tools for dealing with what is out there.’ Magritte’s marvellous painting ‘This is not a pipe’ demonstrates this well – it is indeed not a pipe; it is a *representation* of a pipe in the same way that photos of missile sites or mobile biological laboratories are not objective evidence of missiles or mobile biological laboratories but photographic *representations* of these. A famous (or infamous) case of a leader using this mode of persuasion might be Trump’s former press secretary, Sean Spicer,

berating the media for misrepresenting the size of the crowd present for his boss' inauguration in 2017, providing photographic evidence that showed a large crowd. His claim was of course undermined by other photographic images and later evidence showing how the White House had cropped Spicer's photographs to 'prove' large crowds. The incident was a farcical repetition of the US secretary of state Colin Powell trying to persuade the UN on 6 February 2003 of the existence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction by reference to photographic 'evidence'<sup>5</sup> (itself an echo of the famous 'Adlai Stevenson Moment' on 25 October 1962 when the then US ambassador to the UN showed photographs of Soviet missiles in Cuba to the UN Security Council).<sup>6</sup> Note here that none of these enactments are possible if we strip leadership of its non-human elements: what counts as missiles or weapons of mass destruction might be contested in language, but in their absence the situation simply does not make sense.

So, who says what the context is (it's usually a crisis)? And who says that – as a consequence of the context – we therefore need leaders of a particular kind (it's usually 'decisive'). Normally the answer is: the existing leaders. For instance, did we all believe Prime Minister Blair and President Bush, that the situation just prior to the second Gulf War was perilous – that Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction were on the verge of being mobilized and could be deployed within 45 minutes? This 'objective situation' clearly required leadership that was decisive and effective – hence the war against Iraq. But it is no longer clear precisely what this military threat actually was: it may be that there was no threat, so the situation did not require military conflict because the policy of containment was working and had done so since the end of the first Gulf war. Now the point is not whether there ever were weapons of mass destruction but that the situation is *constructed* by those with control over the information. Thus, the anti-war campaigns tried and failed to construct an account of the situation that downplayed the threat. What is remarkable about the Iraq example is in fact the very rhetorical use of the word 'leadership' and how leaders such as Blair and Bush so frequently and effectively deployed it as a means of shortcutting critical inquiry, dismissing dissent and defining the horizon of the possible (Smolović Jones et al., 2020a).

What remains, therefore is not a true and a false account of the situation. Instead, we have contending accounts, some of which are perceived as more powerful than others and which are therefore able to mobilize support for

particular actions. It is often very difficult, then, to establish what the context actually is and what the requirements of the situation are, and quite different forms of leadership have succeeded in markedly similar circumstances to bedevil our attempts to link the situation to the 'required' leadership (Grint, 2001). In the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, we saw this tension between situation requirements, solution, truth and falsehood manifest even within the rhetoric of single political leaders. As the virus spread, it was largely opposition voices in the United Kingdom, the United States and Brazil who called for emergency measures and social democratic interventions to defend the population, while Trump, Johnson and Bolsonaro seemed to evince a more languid, 'business as usual' approach. Such an approach was later blended with more decisive and radical measures of lockdown. The implications of the crisis are yet to settle, but one of the salutary lessons of the turbulent events of Brexit in 2016 is that an emotionally powerful story, a narrative, can ultimately be more powerful than objective data. By that reckoning the fairly simple 'story' of Brexit, of 'taking back control' resonated and it is yet to be determined whether the narrative of the virus is recounted as one of confusion and mixed messages, or one of decisive leaders (Grint, 2016). Returning to Benjamin, narrative, even and especially historical narratives, are contested and contestable (Benjamin, 2006), meaning that the account of 'effective' or 'ineffective' leadership is a matter for the (re)telling and the (re)remembering.

## **Time for moral leadership?**

If we cannot agree on whether the requirements for leadership have changed radically recently, can we at least agree that the time for moral leadership has arrived? If we are to take people's regular sharing of good causes and stories of tragedy on social media at face value, then how could we not believe that people yearn for moral leadership? If only we could agree on the definition of 'moral', and then agree on a process for peacefully resolving disputes, perhaps we could avoid the suffering of those at the 'wrong' end of leadership. Perhaps, but as we shall shortly see the calamitous consequences of leadership failures are seldom mechanically attributable to the moral treachery of our leaders. Adel Safty (2003), in contrast, argues that management and governance are neutral terms, while



‘leadership is or at least ought to be normatively apprehended as a set of values with connotations evocative of the higher achievements of the human spirit.’ It is not at all clear that the management of, for example, slave plantations was a neutral issue, but neither is leadership only tied to these ‘higher’ norms such as ‘the promotion of human development for the common good of people in a democratic environment’. In effect, leadership, which in this and related approaches is necessarily moral, is also necessarily tied to democracy. Leadership, here is an assumed good, as are the democratic conclusions of voters (hence the political adage that the electorate is never wrong). Clearly this would place almost all of human history and society beyond the limits of a more contested account of ethical leadership (Collinson et al., 2018). We clearly take issue with this and instead argue for a notion of purposeful and moral leadership (Sinha et al., 2021; Smolović Jones et al., 2016), a matter we will return to in [Chapter 6](#).

However, there are many who would argue against the democratic potential of leadership: Plato certainly despised it as a system for encouraging leadership by demagogue (a voracious, emotionally immature and impetuous populous selecting leaders who reflected such tendencies) rather than leadership by the wise, and the democratic element of leadership has certainly not been adequate in restraining several of the ‘lapses’ that Safty himself rails against: Lebanon, Grenada, Panama and the Persian Gulf wars, to name a few. He rightly laments the havoc caused by leaders such as Mussolini, Hitler and Saddam Hussein but suggests that their catastrophic impact relates primarily to the absence of higher moral purposes and defines such people as Rulers rather than Leaders, in much the same way that MacGregor Burns (2012) distinguishes between Transformational Leaders and Power-Wielders, Zaleznik (1974) differentiates between psychologically ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’ leaders, Howell (1988) contrasts Socialized and Personalized Leaders, and Bass (1985) distinguishes between authentic and inauthentic/pseudo-transformational leaders.<sup>7</sup>

But there is a problem here: who decides on which side of the divide they sit? This is not just a question of applying twenty-first-century Western standards as universally good but suggesting that all the leaders defined as sitting on the ‘wrong’ side of the fence probably perceived themselves to have a ‘moral’ purpose. Such was the case with Blair, whose leadership language surrounding the Iraq invasion was saturated with claims of morality (Smolović Jones et al., 2020a). At a far more extreme pole, Hitler

probably believed he was acting morally and in the best interests of the German population in his simultaneous mass murders of Jews, Communists, the disabled, Gypsies, homosexuals and anyone else who got in his way. That most people disputed this assumption vigorously matters not one jot because to imply that these rulers were simply evil is to simply miss the point – how did they mobilize so many followers if it was self-evident to all their followers that no good would come from their leadership? In other words, for all that we side with Safty in his assault upon immorality, what counts as immoral is neither easy to define nor does it explain the success of such leaders.

For instance, in May 2004 two American soldiers faced court martial for actions that remain morally controversial: Specialist Jeremy Sivits was on trial in Baghdad for taking photographs of abused Iraqi prisoners inside Abu Ghraib prison, while Sergeant Camilo Mejia was on trial in Fort Stewart army base for abandoning his unit after six months in Iraq on the grounds that to remain would have been to follow orders that he believed were immoral or illegal. As Ramsey Clark (former US attorney general during the Vietnam campaign) suggested, ‘The irony is that they are being court martialled over there [Iraq] for the very things that he is being court martialled for over here [USA] for not going back to do’ (quoted in Goldenberg, 2004: 4).

Another example would be the ethically contested terrain of whistleblowing, the phenomenon where a member of an organization draws public attention to wrongdoing because they either believe they will not be able to resolve the issue internally or because it has been proven to them that internal solutions are inadequate (Kenny and Bushnell, 2020). The contemporary and interrelated cases of Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning and Julian Assange, who collectively exposed crimes committed by US and other security and military personnel, serve to underline the point that, to their defenders, these people are defenders of decency and truth but to the governments that seek to prosecute and incarcerate them, they are a danger to ‘national security’ and should be punished according to the most savage means available under the (ever more draconian) law. This is the terrain of ‘truth games’ in the phraseology of Munro (2017), which can cross over and into deeper and more systemic political contestations about what it is societies value as moral underpinnings.

The solution for Safty is ‘People-Driven Moral Leadership’, though most of the examples used derive from the overthrow of old Soviet bloc or eastern dictatorships rather than contemporary democratic societies. And there’s the rub: for Safty, it seems that democracy, morality and ‘authentic’ leadership go hand in hand (for a more in-depth reading of the relationship between morality and authentic leadership, see Smolović Jones and Grint, 2013); they reflect and reinforce each other. But don’t all the democratic leaders claim this – even when, for many of their citizens, they are manifestly not acting democratically, morally or authentically? Indeed, people-power may be in line with the wishes of the majority but this does not make it moral, does it? If the majority of a population decide to enforce a religious law that requires the stoning of ‘fallen’ women is that essentially and objectively moral because it is democratically decided? As both de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* (1835) and John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* (1859) suggested, the tyranny of the majority is a permanent threat in democratic societies.

A related problem concerns the importance of emotion to leadership. It is self-evident that leadership is not a wholly rational process any more than people are emotionless. And it is, therefore, equally obvious that emotions, or emotional intelligence, or whatever label is in vogue, is an important element of leadership. But this does not directly translate into the approach which suggests that people with high emotional intelligence (EQ) are morally superior to those without high EQ. Hitler, for example, was extraordinarily effective in manipulating people’s emotions but this does not make him objectively moral. Also witness the parade of Trump surrogates proclaiming that ‘facts’ do not matter as much as people’s ‘feelings’ or indeed the attempts to impeach Trump for the second time because of his apparent encouragement of the assault upon the Capitol on 6 January 2021. It is because emotions are such a powerful motivator that we ought to limit their significance – that, after all, is the reason for living according to a system of laws rather than at the whim of a tyrant whose EQ is a liability for all who disagree with the tyrant.

The limits to the effectiveness of a call for ‘morality’ to be reinserted into political leadership are also self-evident in the inability of the UN to control its own members or to engage in effective peacekeeping duties. Those failures cannot be resolved by further appeals to moral behaviour any more than pacifism has proved effective in preventing wars (Cf. Ackerman and

Duval, 2000; Schell, 2003). Indeed, as long as the UN remains dependent upon the military power of a few nations to do its global policing, it will remain a morally upright ‘paper tiger’. An alternative solution to the problematic call for moral leadership is to demand a global parliament – a United Nations without the distorting influences of the Permanent Members of the Security Council and with the necessary powers to enforce the democratic decisions of the majority. Though again, a democratic UN does not guarantee moral behaviour, even if it is preferable to the status quo. As Martin Luther King suggested in a speech in London in 1964, ‘It may be true that morality cannot be legislated, but behaviour can be regulated. It may be true that the law cannot change the heart, but it can restrain the heartless.’<sup>8</sup> Questions of transnational morality ring like an urgent klaxon in today’s landscape of climate emergency, knowledge work that does not respect regional or national boundaries, global pandemics and growing wealth inequality. Hence the growth in organizational and political theories that seek to experiment with and question traditional boundaries and institutions, preferring to envisage a diverse multitude rather than social classes (Hardt and Negri, 2000 and 2017). Thinking and acting in multitudinous ways helps us see that moral leadership increasingly connects disparate actors, often occurs online and forms through conjoining and ebbing flows of solidarity. Perhaps the moral leadership of the future lies more with dynamic solidarities between care workers, gig economy workers, knowledge workers and environmental activists globally than it does in the more staid institutions of the twentieth century.

Maybe we should look again at Karl Popper: he always claimed that democracy was not a good in and of itself but the best system available for inhibiting a greater evil: tyranny. Is this the unpalatable truth: that all claims to the moral high ground should be treated with suspicion? Moral leadership is not the way to secure democracy, morality and justice because morality, like power and leadership, is an essentially contested concept; hence we might be better off seeking a more pragmatic alternative to the calls for ‘moral leadership’: a functioning global democracy, no matter how informally it is constituted – while no guarantee of global morality – might be the best opportunity we have for inhibiting their opposites. The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci got close to theorizing this kind of ‘moral leadership’, while writing as a captive of his nation’s fascist government (Gramsci, 2007). In Gramsci’s formulation, leadership is a moral direction

offered by one social class, which then forms democratic and coalitional associations with other groups. Such leadership stretches beyond government to civil society and the economy to broader society, while remaining rooted in and accountable to the organic communities from which the leadership emerges. While the notion of the more traditional proletarian hewed in heavy industry offering such moral leadership now seems implausible, it is possible that democratic and moral alternatives to the status quo may bubble up between the networked and distributed emergent knowledge class (Berardi, 2019) and ‘precariat’ class (Standing, 2014). Such moral leadership will look and sound quite different to the more institutionalized leadership we are accustomed to observing – and may receive less media attention as a result – but is evidenced in the wave of social media-savvy industrial actions of precarious workers in the hospitality industry (McDonalds, TGI Fridays and Wetherspoons to name only three).

However, we do not want to hop from one romanticization of leaders and their ethics to a new one of more radical collectives and their ethics (Collinson et al., 2018). Popper’s suggestion that science should advance through the quest for fallibility rather than infallibility, seeking out error rather than asserting perfection, might also be a useful analogy for our review of leadership. After all, if we could construct a science of leadership, then the more we knew about what leadership was, the closer we would be to perfecting and predicting it, wouldn’t we? But has this happened?

## **What is leadership?**

Despite over half a century of ‘professional’ academic research into leadership, we appear to be no nearer a consensus as to its basic meaning, let alone whether it can be taught, or its moral effects measured and predicted. This cannot be because of a dearth of interest or material: on 29 October 2003, when the first draft of the first edition of this book was written, there were 14,139 items relating to ‘Leadership’ on Amazon.co.uk for sale. Assuming you could read these at the rate of one per day it would take almost 39 years just to read the material, never mind write anything about leadership or practice it. Just two months later that number had increased by 3 per cent (471 items) to 14,610. Assuming this increase was

annualized to 18 per cent we estimated that we could look forward to just under 20,000 items by the beginning of 2005, 45,000 by 2010 and so on. In fact, in April 2020 there were over 70,000 books available and 100,000 items overall. At this rate of increase we will have reached the Thousand Year Read by the end of 2025. Put another way, since there were just 191 books on followership available in 2020, we will soon get to the interesting position where there are more books on leaders than physical followers. It should be self-evident that we do not need more ‘lists’ of leadership competences or skills because leadership research appears to be anything but incremental in its approach to ‘the truth’ about leadership: the longer we spend looking at leadership the more complex (or silly or irrelevant, or all of the above) the picture becomes.

Traditionally, leadership is defined by its alleged opposite: management. Management, in this approach, is concerned with executing routines and maintaining organizational stability – it is essentially concerned with control; leadership is about direction setting and novelty and is essentially linked to change, movement and persuasion. Another way to put this is that management is the equivalent of *déjà vu* (seen this before), whereas leadership is the equivalent of *vu jàdé* (never seen this before). Management implies that managers have seen it all before and simply need to respond correctly to the situation by categorizing it and executing the appropriate process; leadership implies that leaders have never seen anything like it before and must therefore construct a novel strategy. But this division is often taken to mean that different people are necessary to fill the different roles – hence anyone relegated to the role of ‘mere’ manager, cannot be considered as bringing anything unique to the party – after all, their task is limited to the mechanical task of recognizing situations and applying pre-existing processes. The consequence of the role subordination implied by this should be obvious: get out of management and into leadership! And if the organization is under-managed and over-led well it isn’t your fault, is it? That most roles actually require both recognition and invention should also be clear.

We could turn to the military for some answers here; after all, leadership probably has its origins in war and the avoidance of war. The British Army in 1948, for example, suggested that leadership ‘is the measure and degree of an individual’s ability to influence – and be influenced by – a group in the implementation of a common task. This circumscribes three important

aspects of leadership function: the individual, the group and the task and indicates leadership is a functional relationship between these three basic variables' (Harris, 1949: 19). This approach is the framework for, but self-evidently predates, John Adair's 1973 book *Action-Centred Leadership*.

Another way of approaching the problem might be to consider what the most popular textbooks have to say on the issue: Hughes et al. (1999), Northouse (1997), Wright (1996) and Yukl (1998). On the very first page of their book, Hughes et al. (1999) suggest that 'if any single idea is central to this book, it is that leadership is a process, not a position'. They then illustrate the gap between leadership research and personalized accounts of leadership by exploring three short case studies: Colin Powell, Madeleine Albright and Konosuke Matsushita. Now by any stretch of the imagination these three are leaders in a positional sense, irrespective of the processes that they employ, so already we have at best a contested concept and at worst a contradiction. They go on (1999: 8) to list the various definitional forms that include: inducing subordinates to behave in a desired manner; an influencing relationship, directing and coordinating group work; a volitional, as opposed to a coerced, interpersonal relationship; a transformative relationship; actions that focus resources to create desirable opportunities; creating the conditions for teams to be effective; and finally the one that they adopt, that leadership is the influencing of an organized group towards accomplishing its goals (Roach and Behling, 1984). Thus, for Hughes et al., 1999, and despite their examples, the conclusion is that leadership, above everything else, is not a position but a process or a practice.

Northouse (1997: 2) begins by noting Stogdill's (1974: 7) famous quip that there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are people who have tried to define it and accepts that leadership has different meanings for different people. He then proceeds to relate Bass's (1990: 11–20) typology that distinguished between leadership as the focus of group process, the embodiment of the collective will, leadership as a personality issue, a complex phenomenon that induces others to accomplish tasks, and finally leadership as an act or behaviour – the things leaders do to bring about change in a group. Noting the importance of power, processes, goal achievement and groups, Northouse (1997: 3) settles on a definition that suggests leadership 'is a process whereby an individual influences a group

of individuals to achieve a common goal'. This is clearly very close to that adopted by Hughes et al. on the basis of Roach and Behling's definition.

In contrast, Yukl (1998: 2), who does accept that there is no 'correct definition'; does not distinguish between leadership, management and 'the boss'; and also considers Katz and Kahn's (1978: 528) suggestion that leadership is 'the influential increment over and above mechanical compliance with the routine directives of the organization'. Leadership might also be demonstrated by 'those who consistently make effective contributions to social order and who are expected and perceived to do so' (Hosking, 1988: 153), or it may be 'a process of giving purpose to collective effort' (Jacobs and Jaques, 1990: 281), or 'the ability to step outside the culture ... to start evolutionary change processes that are more adaptive' (Schein, 1992: 2), or even 'the process of making sense of what people are doing together so that people will understand and be committed' (Drath and Palus, 1994: 4). It could be the activity involved in 'articulating visions, embodying values, and creating the environment within which things can be accomplished' (Richards and Engle, 1986: 206). This is a much more differentiated collection of terms, and Yukl (1998: 5) concludes that 'It is neither feasible nor desirable *at this point* in the development of the discipline to attempt to resolve the controversies over the appropriate definition of leadership' [our italics]. However, 'over time it will be possible to compare the utility of different conceptions and arrive at some consensus on the matter' (1998: 5). In other words, for Yukl at least, the problem is not inherent to the topic but a consequence of its novelty.

Finally, Wright (1996: 1) also begins by acknowledging the complexity and ambiguity of the concept, especially concerning the role of personality, the existence of leadership positions, the role of coercion, the determination of effects and the evaluation of performance; nevertheless, he concludes that common to most approaches are the notions of influence and the role of followers.

Apart from noting the variegated properties of these definitions we are left *more* rather than *less* confused by them. Leadership does seem to be defined differently and even if there are some similarities, the complexities undermine most attempts to explain why the differences exist. That is to say, that we know differences exist but we remain unable to construct a consensus about the concept. However, the dissensus seems to hang around



five areas of dispute, leadership defined as: *person, product, position, practice and purpose*.

There are several potential resolutions to this problem of leadership definition:

- 1 Stop the research now: since the research is making things worse, not better, we should stop while we are not totally confused.
- 2 Keep going in the hope that someone will eventually discover the truth about leadership and save us all a thousand years of wasted reading time.
- 3 Reconstruct why we are unable to generate a consensus on what leadership is and consider what this might mean for leadership *practice* as well as theory.

The rest of this chapter focuses upon the last of these and we want to suggest one explanation for the problem and a way of constraining its effects. We hesitate to use the word 'resolution' because the explanation actively inhibits any resolution, but it does enable us to establish some parameters that we might use to understand why the differences exist in the first place. In other words, this does not provide a first step towards a consensus but a first step towards understanding why a consensus might be unachievable. Moreover, the point is not simply to redescribe the varieties of interpretation but to consider how this affects the way leadership is perceived, enacted, recruited and supported. For example, if organizations promote individuals on the basis of one particular interpretation of leadership then that approach will be encouraged, and others discouraged – but it may well be that other interpretations of leadership are critical to the organization's success. Hence the importance of the definition is not simply to delineate a space in a language game, and it is not merely a game of sophistry; on the contrary, how we define leadership has vital implications for how organizations work – or don't work.

## **Leadership: an essentially contested concept?**

Sixty-five years ago, W. B. Gallie (1955/56) called power an ‘Essentially Contested Concept’ (ECC). Gallie suggested that many concepts – such as power – involved ‘endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of the users’ to the point where debates appeared irresolvable. For example, a discussion about whether Donald Trump and Boris Johnson are ‘good’ leaders is likely to generate more heat than light and precious little hope of a consensus amongst people who bring different definitions of ‘good leadership’ to the debate. For Gallie (1964: 187–8), ‘Recognition of a given concept as essentially contested implies recognition of rival uses of it (such as oneself repudiates) as not only logically possible and humanly “likely”, but as of permanent potential critical value to one’s own use or interpretation of the concept in question.’ Examples of ECCs are multiple, as are the attempts to resolve the contestation: Strine et al. (1990), consider Performance as an ECC; Kellow (2002) applies it to Sustainable Development; Bajpai (1999) uses it to analyse Security; Cohen (2000) takes Civil Society as an ECC; and finally, Terrorism is the subject of Smelser and Mitchell’s (2002) application of an ECC, while Ehrenberg (2011) puts the case against law being an ECC. Some of our recent research has experimented with a similar approach, interpreting leadership as an ‘empty signifier’ (Smolović Jones et al., 2016; Smolović Jones et al., 2020a; see also Alvehus, 2020; Kelly, 2014), a phrase from the work of political theorist Ernesto Laclau (2005). Empty signifiers enjoy a unique status in language in the sense that they are simultaneously ‘overdetermined’ and ‘underdetermined’. Being overdetermined means overflowing with associations and meaning, while underdetermined means holding a loose, ‘empty’ meaning. The power of leadership by this logic lies more in its ability to congeal a loose and potent sense of affect and identification than it does through any specific definition. As an example, watch any edition of a political television show with audience participation, or for that matter discussion around any hot topic on social media, and you are sure to encounter multiple people calling for someone or something to offer more ‘leadership’. It is usually unclear what is meant by ‘leadership’ in this equation and yet people nod along, ‘like’ and applaud. Viewing leadership as an empty signifier, however, is not meant solely as a critique of the term (although we do accept that calls for leadership often equate to casual demands to be dominated by authoritarians) – its very ambiguity partially

explains not only its cultural appeal but also its capacity to push people beyond known methods and solutions.

The contested and empty dynamics of leadership also translate over to leaders and the difficulties we have in evaluating their value. Such a problem is exemplified by Jack Welch: was he ‘the best’ business leader of the 1990s because GE under his ‘leadership’ made more money than any other company or would GE have been this successful anyway and did his methods unnecessarily destroy hundreds of careers? Likewise, should Amazon chief executive Jeff Bezos, the world’s second richest person at the time of writing (after Elon Musk), who has revolutionized retail, be celebrated and learned from, despite the fact that he has faced severe criticism for the terms and conditions of his delivery and warehouse workers – not to mention his seemingly outrageous call for the public to donate to a ‘relief fund’ for his workers facing hardship during the Covid-19 pandemic (Zoellner, 2020)? We could equally argue that Sir Peter Bonfield, ex-CEO of BT, was ‘the best’ because despite losing over £30 billion it could be argued that he saved BT from bankruptcy. In other words, it is always possible to devise a way of measuring ‘successful leadership’, but the measures may not generate a consensus because they are neither objective nor do we all agree on the way to measure success because our definitions and interpretations of leadership are ECCs. Certainly, Sir Philip Green, ex-CEO of BHS in the UK, argued that he had done his best by the company – despite it having a pension deficit of £571m and the Green family taking £586m in dividends. Perhaps leaders are as much contested symbols as is the concept of leadership, an issue we will return to in the next chapter, and interpreting them through only one lens invites misperception.

An equivalent danger lies in simply following ‘evidence’ for policy making: if we take the evidence of airport security as a measure to establish the threat of terrorism, we have little to go on: do the measures demonstrate their success (because terrorist incidents on planes are few and far between) or failure (because terrorists stopped targeting planes years ago)? You might have experienced a sense of temporary relief during the spread of Coronavirus due to your country or region’s low rate of infection before realizing that the number could be explained by the lack of testing and/or the intensity of the wave on the horizon but not yet at your front door. The point is that the evidence sometimes doesn’t always tell us very much, one

way or the other. And oftentimes the evidence is missing for political reasons. For example, you might have assumed that there exists a lot of research on the effects of gun control in the United States given the proliferation of gun-related deaths there – but you would be wrong because the National Rifle Association (NRA) managed to persuade Congress through the so-called 1996 ‘Dickey Amendment’ to block research that might ‘advocate or promote gun control’ (Hiltzik, 2016). This was only overturned in December 2019.

Furthermore, and on a more practical note, if we select, criticize and reward people for their ‘leadership’ we should not be surprised if they fail to meet our standards – it may well be that their conception of ‘leadership’ is radically different from ours; thus, we should then be in a position to add a clarifying statement – ‘and by leadership we mean X not Y’.

Let us first generate the taxonomy of leadership. This must include the Process/Practice issues that most of the texts highlight, but also the Positional issues that they tend to use as illustrations of leaders. However, a huge amount of research has focused upon the Person of the leader as well, and it would be strange indeed if leadership research bore no interest in the product of leadership activity – though note that this takes as given that leadership makes a difference to the product, the results. Finally, what about the Purpose of leadership – if there is no purpose then what is the point? Or as President Johnson responded to one of his aides who was suggesting it was not the president’s job to sort out civil rights in the United States, ‘Well what the hell’s the presidency for?’ (quoted in O'Donnell, 2014).

This fivefold typology does not claim universal coverage, but it should encompass a significant proportion of our definitions of leadership. Moreover, the typology is not hierarchical: it does not claim that one definition is more important than another and, contrary to the consensual approach, it is constructed upon foundations that *may* be mutually exclusive. And it does not suggest that time or space are irrelevant, but these are not forms of leadership. In effect, we may have to choose which form of leadership we are talking about rather than attempt to elide the differences. It is, however, quite possible that empirical examples of leadership embody elements of all five forms. Thus, we are left with five major alternatives:

- Leadership as Person: is it WHO ‘leaders’ are that makes them leaders?
- Leadership as Product: is it WHAT ‘leaders’ achieve that makes them leaders? Is it WHAT is sold in a marketplace that makes it ‘leadership’?
- Leadership as Process: is it HOW activity between people and things accomplishes leadership?
- Leadership as Position: is it WHERE ‘leaders’ operate that makes them leaders? Is it the WHERE of geography that shapes leadership?
- Leadership as Purpose: is it WHY ‘leaders’ and groups lead that accounts for their leadership?

All these aspects are ‘ideal types’, following Max Weber’s assertion that no such ‘real’ empirical case probably exists in any pure form, but this does enable us to understand the phenomenon of leadership better, and its attendant confusions and complexities, because leadership means different things to different people. This is therefore a heuristic model not an attempt to carve up the world into ‘objective’ segments that mirror what we take to be reality. We will suggest, having examined these five different approaches to leadership, that the differences both explain why so little agreement has been reached on the definition of leadership and why this is important to the execution and analysis of leadership.

## **Defining leadership**

### **Person-based leadership**

Is it who you are that determines whether you are a leader or not? This, of course resonates with the traditional traits approach: a leader’s character or personality. We might consider the best example of this as the charismatic, to whom followers are attracted because of the charismatic’s personal ‘magnetism’. Ironically, while a huge effort has been made to reduce the ideal leader to his or her essence – the quintessential characteristics or competencies or behaviours of the leader – the effort of reduction has simultaneously reduced its value. It is rather as if a leadership scientist had

turned chef and was engaged in reducing a renowned leader to her or his elements by placing them in a saucepan and applying heat. Eventually the residue left from the cooking could be analysed and the material substances divided into their various chemical compounds. Take, for instance, Wofford's (1999: 525) claim that laboratory research on charisma would develop a 'purer' construct 'free from the influences of such nuisance variables as performance, organizational culture and other styles of leadership'. What a culture-free leader would be like is anyone's guess and this attempted purification is literally *reductio ad absurdum*: a pile of chemical residues might have considerable difficulty persuading other people to follow it. Yet clearly some authorities remain wedded to such an approach and, to be fair, it may be that some chemical residues do, paradoxically, have exactly this ability: heroin, for example, is often blamed for 'leading' people astray. Moreover, this kind of approach might also suggest that the search for the answer to the question 'What is leadership?' is untenable because it implies an essential element, an essence that simply does not exist in such a form. At its most basic the 'essence' of leadership, *qua* an individual leader, leaves out the followers and without followers you cannot be a leader. Indeed, this might be the simplest definition of leadership: 'having followers'. Erasing the notion of followers from the leadership equation can be interpreted as a political move, either a progressive one that seeks to reframe and boost the agency of multiple people (Raelin, 2011) or one that erases the material struggles of oppressed people, as well as the very value of serving and caring practices (Ford and Harding, 2018).

A complementary or contradictory case can also be made for defining leadership generally as a collective, rather than an individual, phenomenon. In this case the focus usually moves from an individual formal leader to multiple informal leaders. We might, for example, consider how organizations actually achieve anything, rather than being over-concerned with what the CEO has said should be achieved. Thus, we could trace the role of informal opinion-leaders in persuading their colleagues to work differently, or to work harder, or not to work at all and so on. This 'negotiated' or 'distributed' or 'deep' leadership is often overlooked precisely because it remains informal and distributed amongst the collective rather than emanating from a formal and individual leader. This does not necessarily imply that everyone is a leader – though it might do – but rather

that a relatively small number of people are crucial for ensuring organizations survive and succeed – and this minority or critical mass, may or may not coincide with those in formal leadership positions (Gronn, 2003; Jones, 2014; Ridderstrale, 2002: 11). There are, for instance several hunter-gatherer societies, or rather ‘bands’, such as the Hadza of Tanzania, who are formally leaderless. Individuals do ‘lead’ in specific tasks at particular times, but the identity of the task leader tends to change across time. Here, as in most such bands, decisions are made in a democratic forum by a consensus of adult members with dissenters free to leave if they wish. Similarly, Josephy (1997: 268–9) argues that conflict between Native American Indians and the US government over opening up the Oregon Trail in 1851 was, in part, rooted in the false assumption made by the latter that the Sioux nation could be bound by the word of a single leader – chosen by the Superintendent of Indian Affairs – when the Sioux themselves insisted that no single person could take such a decision.

Either way, leadership according to this criterion is primarily defined by *who* the leader is or who the leaders are (formal and informal), and it may be that such an approach is associated with an emotional relationship between leader and followers or between leaders; or with our emotional bias in favour of attributing phenomena to people rather than material objects – or even the natural world. At its most extreme, as in Le Bon (2002), this emotional relationship renders the followers in ‘the crowd’ incapable of discriminating between good and bad actions – as indeed does the leader of the crowd. Freud (Surprenant, 2002), however, retains the notion of the leader embodying the ego-ideal of the followers who project onto their leader all their aspirational characteristics (see also Gabriel, 2017).

Despite the Western fetish for heroic individuals as leadership icons, it is not at all clear that such examples exist in social isolation. For instance, Newton may claim to have ‘led’ the discovery of gravity, but it was, in effect, the result of collective work by Robert Hooke and Edmund Halley as well as Newton. Take the discovery of penicillin as a further example of this. In September 1928 Alexander Fleming was cleaning some Petri dishes in St Mary’s Hospital, London, when he ‘discovered’ that bacteria had been impeded by a mould. On the conventional account, under his leadership the momentous discovery that *Penicillium* had antibacterial effects was followed by years of painstaking research, and by 1942 penicillin was

launched as a life-saving antibiotic. His leadership was subsequently recognized by twenty-five honorary degrees: providence may have played a hand, but it was Fleming's research leadership that recognized its significance and developed the drug.

Yet the antibacterial properties of penicillin had been known since Lister's work in 1872 and Duchesne's doctoral thesis in 1897, though the strain that Fleming fortunately worked with – *Penicillium notatum* – was far more effective. Indeed, far from Fleming continuing to lead a dedicated research team to transform the mould into a miraculous cure for septic wounds in the Second World War, he actually abandoned research on it, regarding it at best as a 'local antiseptic' and made only one minor reference to it in 1931; the rest of his work focused upon the value of mercury-based compounds for treating wounds. Other researchers took up the project at various periods but without Fleming's help, and it was not until the team of Howard Florey, Ernst Chain and Norman Heatley began working on the issue from 1938 to 1941 at Oxford University that any radical advance was made.

Without any assistance from Fleming (one of the team thought he was already dead) Florey et al. developed penicillin to the point where its therapeutic properties were self-evident and mass production was possible. The team then published their results in the *Lancet*, and the *British Medical Journal* published an editorial that, while noting Fleming's modest involvement at the beginning, lavished praise on the 'real' authors of the new 'wonder-drug'. Instantly Fleming mobilized Almroth Wright, head of Fleming's department at St Mary's Hospital, and Lord Moran, head of the hospital and confidant of Winston Churchill and Lord Beaverbrooke, to write to the *Times* proclaiming Fleming as the discoverer and thus a major press and political campaign was initiated that sidelined Florey et al. and promoted Fleming to 'leader' (Waller, 2002: 247–67).

Nevertheless, whoever is the 'real' leader, conventional accounts of leadership, are, it would seem, naked. Search as one may for a definition of leadership that encompasses anything beyond the human, the most likely trail leads back to the comforting figure of a *Homo sapien*. Few would disagree with Northouse's (1997: 3) view that leadership 'is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal', but our particular concern here is whether the identity of the



leader is necessarily human, and if so, is it sufficient just to be a human, in reality to be a naked leader?

In some ways the ‘transparent’ appearance of a human leader can be effective. For instance, in July 2002, the Chevron-Texaco Escravos oil terminal in Nigeria (then producing around 1/2 million barrels of oil per day) was closed by 150 women demanding schools, health clinics, pollution clean-up, water supplies and jobs. After a ten-day occupation, and no concessions from the company, the women threatened to remove all their clothes – a symbol of enormous cultural shame – that eventually forced the company to agree to their demands.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, naked humans are often the weakest link in any hybrid and that generates a search for stronger resources. Hawkins (2015) reinforces this with her argument that leadership can be understood as a process of ‘materializing’ between multiple human and non-human actors. Her case study is the British Royal Navy, and she demonstrates how the layout and routines of a ship, the uniforms and their ranked insignia, not to mention the particular traditions of this branch of the armed services ‘lead’ as much as any individual leader or collection of leaders. People materialize leadership with materials, rules and customs; while the cast of humans leading frequently changes, the materiality of organizations can be more durable, outliving yet still shaping the leadership of generations of leaders. This, of course, begs the question: what does it mean to be ‘led’? If ‘to lead’ implies ‘to set goals and alter behaviour to achieve those goals’ then we could still argue that assembly lines or algorithms ‘lead’ people. That is, the pulses of an app ‘persuade’ delivery drivers to exert more energy and urgency. Whereas assembly lines could still be said to have a human ‘behind’ them, overseeing and controlling flows of production, this is not necessarily the case with algorithms. As many of these workers are not ‘employed’ in a legally binding sense, instead operating on zero-hours and often phoney self-employment contracts, they are rarely fired but instead have their apps deactivated. In the words of a delivery rider we met with at a trade union event: ‘My boss is an algorithm and I can’t reason with it.’ That we should be highly sceptical of utopian views of technology found no better illustration than during the Covid-19 pandemic, when gig economy workers suffered disproportionately, still at the mercy of the machine and unable to stop work because their ‘self-employed’ status meant that they were not originally covered by government assistance to the same extent as other workers.

Returning to the question of who or what leads, we might want to differentiate between leadership as means and ends. For instance, the assembly line is the *means* by which workers are ‘led’ to act. But the *ends* do not originate in the machinery; instead, the present, but invisible, human leader constructs the ‘ends’. So, does this analytic separation solve the problem: non-humans can be the means to lead but not the ends? Clearly humans are not always aware that they remain in control of the technology – who can really say that humans are always consciously in control of their terribly addictive smartphones? Technologies can also develop a life and momentum of their own, themselves creating a new ‘normal’: think here on the difference email has made to contemporary workplaces or more acutely the fact that algorithms usually do not operate with an overseer when directing humans, but self-correct. Evidently, human leaders cannot dissociate themselves from technical supports completely, for even at a mundane level leaders usually act in a ‘dressed’ manner, surrounded by all kinds of technologies and non-human supports, so, in effect, there are no ‘pure’ leaders, though the issues of purity and contamination remain crucial (Douglas, 2002), hence all the concern for dressing in a culturally appropriate manner for a leader, whether that is a pinstriped suit, a hoody, a twin-set, a sari or whatever. Latour (1988), for example, makes a robust case for Actor-Network Theory with his suggestion that a naked Napoleon would have been markedly less effective than a clothed Napoleon, surrounded by clothed soldiers with weapons (making a similar argument to Hawkins and her naval officers).

Actor-Network Theory and post-humanist studies more generally have a history and origin that need not detain us here (see Barad, 2007; Callon, 1986; Haraway, 2013 and 2016; Latour, 1993 and 2007; Law and Hassard, 1999; Law and Hassard, 1999), but it suggests both that wholly social relations are inconceivable – because all humans rely upon and work through non-human forms, through hybrids and intra-acting collectives – and that humans distinguish themselves from animals, amongst other things, on the basis of the durability or obduracy of their relations. That is, it is probably unhelpful to overly distinguish between the ‘social’ and ‘material’ and instead we should talk about mutually implicated and entangled relations (Barad, 2007).

Does this imply anything about the link between hybridity and agency? We do not need to enter the debate about whether the future is destined to

be dominated by robots or Cyborgs here (see Brooks, 2002; Friedland, 2014; Geary, 2002; Haraway, 2013) to note the increasing degree of hybridity amongst ‘people’. In Actor-Network terms, agency sits in the hybrids, rather than located within either the humans or the non-humans whose relationship forms the hybrid actant (Latour, 1993). And an actant – that is something that acts or to which activity is granted by others – implies no special motivation of human individual actors, or of humans in general. An actant can literally be anything provided it is legitimated as the source of an action (Latour, 1993: 4). Hence, for example, when the regular ‘Human versus Machine’ chess competitions appear, are we to assume that the ‘Machine’ side has no human input or that the ‘Human’ side has had nothing to do with technology?

We adopt the position that envisaging leadership in entangled ways between humans and non-humans means taking two conceptual steps and we will later expand upon our position. The first is that we re-think what it means to be a human. Boundaries between where the person ends and the machine begins are fuzzy at best. Next time you find yourself on a train, look up from your entertainment of choice and you will note a sea of ‘people’ engrossed in their phones; indeed, these phones have become such a part of people’s identities that it is unhelpful to talk of a neat distinction between person and phone. Secondly, it is therefore wise for us to think about agency in leadership in relation to materializing practices – in other words, to focus on the emerging practice rather than the ‘person’ or ‘material object’ (Crevani, 2018; Hawkins, 2015; Simpson, 2016). Debates about who instigates what then become less important than what kinds of leadership are made and a reflection on what we can do about it. Such a twin focus is particularly necessary when we conceptualize pandemics and the climate emergency – both simultaneously human and non-human challenges, requiring leadership that incorporates science, nature, technology and care for human and non-human life (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). And there lies the (essentially contested) rub – it isn’t the consciousness of leaders that makes them leaders or makes them effective, it’s their hybridity; not how they think but how they link. We will pursue this particular creature in [Chapter 2](#).

## Product-based leadership

It might be more appropriate to take the product-based approach because without products or results there is little support for leadership. There may be thousands of individuals who are ‘potentially’ great leaders but if that potential is never realized, if no results of that leadership are forthcoming, then it would be logically difficult to speak of these people as ‘leaders’ – except in the sense of ‘failed’ or ‘theoretical’ ‘leaders’: people who actually achieve little or nothing. On the other hand, there is a tendency (e.g. Ulrich et al., 1999) to focus on products as the primary criteria for leadership: since X achieved a 200 per cent increase in profits, or ‘led’ the team to victory, or successfully ‘led’ the defence of the nation, they must be successful leaders. Of course, there is then an issue about *which* products should be pursued by leaders and Elkington (1999) has argued vigorously that unless the ‘Triple Bottom Line’ – environmental quality and social justice as well as economic prosperity – are included then product or results-based approaches are ultimately doomed. For example, Trump, the then president, tweeted on 25 February 2017: ‘The media has not reported that the National Debt in my first month went down by \$12 billion vs a \$200 billion increase in Obama first mo’ [sic]. But just a passing knowledge of economics and fiscal governance would suggest that what happens in such a short space of time can have nothing to do with any new incumbent of the White House. So, the reason the media did not report it was that it wasn’t news; it was coincidence.

But there are two other issues that need further examination here: first, how do we attribute the collective results of an organization to the actions of the individual leader? Second, assuming that we can causally link the two, do the methods by which the results are achieved play any role in determining the presence of leadership?

The first issue – that we can trace effects back to the actions of individual leaders – is deeply controversial. On the one hand there are several studies from a psychological approach that suggest it is possible to measure the effect of leaders (e.g. Gerstner and Day, 1997) but more sociologically inclined authors often deny the validity of such measures (e.g. Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a). A related controversy suggests that this dispute is itself deeply encased within most traditional approaches to leadership and implies that leaders embody agency. Lee and Brown (1994) suggest that to be human is to possess agency but this, of course, begs the question of agency itself. In fact, we might say that assuming that a ‘pure’ human is in

control is a sign of anthropocentric arrogance, an assumption that action and events are all about us – that the world exists to serve us. This ‘anthropomorphism’ has been identified in ethically problematic ways as at the root of many chronic contemporary problems, the climate crisis most obviously.

Volition is the exercise of freewill or conscious choice, as opposed to determinism, hence, if human action is determined (by coercion, biological genes or technology or whatever) then the intentional element of leadership is removed, and we may have a problem in determining individual responsibility. In effect, we may have results but no responsibility and therefore no leadership: thus, the legal defence enacted by those who regard themselves as acting under duress. In fact, taking this approach to its logical conclusion in the case of biologically inherited characteristics would be to suggest that those leaders with ‘criminal genes’ are not responsible for their leadership of criminal gangs, even if the results are significant in terms of people killed or money stolen and so on. And if we insist that action is determined by biological requirements over which individuals have no volitional control then we might even consider looking for the leadership gene that is making them act (De Neve et al., 2013; Wen-Dong et al., 2015).

Yet we still regard people as leaders even if they are not ‘responsible’. For example, we do not hold young children or the insane as responsible for their actions, but they can still lead others on. Indeed, it may be that some cult leaders are schizophrenic – and thus not capable of volitional control as we ordinarily understand it – but they are still leaders (Tourish, 2013). In other words, even individuals who are irrational, unreasonable, insane or under the influence of drugs, can still act as leaders provided we assess their leadership through the results of their action rather than their intention, volition or responsibility.

One could also argue that leadership can be linked to fatalism amongst followers or subordinates. For example, Nelson, Churchill, Hitler, Martin Luther King, Joan of Arc and General Patton, to name but a few, are all associated with significant achievements – for better or for worse – but all believed themselves to have been chosen by fate for a particular and very significant mission on earth. This fatalism induces enormous self-confidence and facilitates what others would regard as dangerous risk-taking and conflates confidence with competence. This also hinders our account of leadership – for now leadership is divorced from volition. In

effect, if leaders believe themselves to have no choice and no freedom of action, because of a particular belief structure or threat, or religion or whatever, then no matter what we, the observers, might decide, these leaders experience their leadership as non-volitional, as determined by forces beyond their control.

The most extreme case against products-based leadership – especially those of ‘Great Men’ – is Tolstoy’s bow-waves – always in front and theoretically leading, but, in practice, not leading but merely being pushed along by the boat itself. Or more bleakly, we could revisit Walter Benjamin’s *Angelus Novus*, blown through time by the ‘progressive’ wreckage of heaped catastrophes. In the same context-determined approach, Peter Sellers in the movie *Being There* plays Chancy Gardner, a simple-minded gardener, who is mistaken for a very successful business executive. Because of the assumptions made by those around him, Chancy’s homilies on gardening are interpreted as Zen-like statements of wisdom about the economy and as a consequence Chancy becomes the ‘leading’ economic forecaster to the US president.

In such approaches the role of the leader is not necessarily to cause things to happen but to act as ‘hero’ when events work out advantageously and to act as ‘scapegoat’ when things go wrong (Grint, 2010b); after all, it is usually very difficult, for example, to establish precisely what contribution a professional sports coach makes to a team’s performance – but it is usually far easier (and cheaper) to replace the coach than to replace the entire team. Meindl et al. referred to this as the Romance of Leadership in which followers and onlookers regularly sought – and discovered – ‘leadership’ when events were going very well or very badly but rarely experienced any leadership when events were relatively calm, mundane and unexceptional (1985; 1995) (this reading was expanded to incorporate collectives and resisting groups by Collinson et al., 2018). So, while Gemmill and Oakley (1997) conclude that leadership is probably just an ‘alienating social myth’ – an essentially contested concept if ever there was one – it might also be a convenient social myth. Whether it is a myth or not depends upon causally relating the results to the leader and, as such, the practical achievements rather than the personal characteristics of the leader are manifestations of this shifting in attention from leadership as a noun to leadership as a verb (Hosking, 1988). Even when we may be assured that individuals are responsible for remarkable results, the failure of such ‘stars’

to perform elsewhere suggests that results are as much to do with a supportive culture, system and circumstances as anything individuals can do. For example, the analysis of 1000 ‘star’ US stock analysts in the 1990s by Groysberg et al. (2004) suggests that it is very difficult for them to replicate their success elsewhere because they are so dependent on their prior support system and because the staff of their new organizations often resent the new ‘transplants’ and overall performance often deteriorates. The replication issue is an important aspect if we are to conclude that the results of academic studies are valid. But, as the Reproducibility Project into the validity of various psychological studies has demonstrated, perhaps as many as two thirds of the studies cannot be reproduced (Baker, 2015).

This raises a second related issue: quite often changes in organizational structures or data collection practices mean that it is virtually impossible to establish whether a change process actually succeeded. For instance, Hood and Dixon’s (2015) review of the changes in the public sector in the UK over the last few decades concludes that it is very difficult to discern any improvements and, if anything, rather than achieving the aim of improving performance and reducing costs the more likely result has been services that work less well and cost more.

This brings us to the third issue at the heart of product-based leadership – does the process by which the results are achieved actually matter? Most certainly, the office or school bully who successfully ‘encourages’ followers to comply under threat of punishment becomes a leader under the results-based criteria – providing they are successful in their coercion and its effects. But such a results-based approach to leadership immediately sets it at odds with some perspectives that differentiate leaders according to some putative distinction between leadership – which is allegedly non-coercive – and all other forms of activity that we might regard as the actions of a ‘bully’ or a ‘tyrant’ and so on. Northouse (1997: 7–8), for instance, examines ‘leaders who use coercion [such as] ... Adolf Hitler ... Jim Jones’. But he then suggests that we should distinguish between coercion and leadership and thus writes a large proportion of human ‘leadership’ out of view by implying that ‘Leaders who use coercion are interested in their own goals and seldom interested in the wants and needs of subordinates’. Yet, Command as a decision-style seems to be entirely appropriate and legitimate in crisis conditions (Grint, 2005; 2010a). A review by Doh (2003) of six leading leadership scholars reflects this line and suggests that

the use of ‘unethical’ methods negates the claim to ‘leadership’. Since what counts as ‘ethical’ behaviour is not discussed, this leaves us stuck in contestable ethical treacle: it could be argued that Hitler was unethical and therefore was not a leader or it could be argued, as suggested above, that since Hitler managed to align his followers’ ‘ethics’ with his own, the issue is not the pursuit of some indefinable ethical position but the mutual alignment of what counts as ‘ethics’.

Ultimately, it is dangerous terrain to label actions and people we think to be ‘good’ as leadership and things we disapprove of as something else, less desirable, such as coercion. Such a move eliminates our capacity for critical engagement with the word ‘leadership’ and its effects, leading to a phenomenon referred to by Collinson (2012) as ‘prozac leadership’, a synthetic and ‘excessive’ positivity that negates the capacity for critique and self-reflection (see also Gabriel (1997) and Alvesson (2020)). The confusion between coercion and leadership, and the conflation of coercion and self-interest, are dubious logical steps at best and at worst remain essentially contested concepts. It should be apparent that many coercive leaders believe themselves to be working for the benefit of the group, not themselves, and, furthermore, it is difficult to think of any leader who is not, to some extent, coercive. Indeed, most aspects of leadership use motivational strategies that can be regarded by some people – especially those subject to them – as coercive. Thus, a religious charismatic might regard his or her actions as simply based on revealing the truth to followers – who are then free to choose to follow or not as they wish. But if the followers believe that failure to adhere to religious principles will lead to eternal damnation and a slow roast in hell, then they might consider that as coercive. Equally, an employer may not regard an employment contract as coercive since both parties freely enter into it, but if the employee feels that failing to work at the requisite level will lead to ‘the sack’ – with all its attendant embarrassment, misery and penury – then she or he may believe the contract to be coercive. Nevertheless, for those who perceive leadership to be primarily focused on results, the process by which these results were obtained, or even whether the leader was responsible for them, may be insignificant.

Of course, product-based leadership need not be restricted to authoritarian or unethical leaders; on the contrary, eminently practical people who may be distinctly uncharismatic but very effective in getting



things done can also exemplify it. Much of their work may often go unnoticed but it may also be critical in keeping the organization moving, and this form of leadership may be associated with an appeal to the interests of followers, rather than their emotional relationships.

One particularly well-supported case of this is Benjamin Franklin, whose early approach seems not to have been one of articulating a compelling vision and rousing the emotion of followers to transcend their personal interests in favour of the greater good. On the contrary, Franklin's pragmatic leadership was rooted in finding practical solutions to outstanding problems that engaged the interests, rather than the emotions, of others. Yet those mobilized by Franklin were not simply involved in an exchange process with him, as understood in transactional theories of leadership, because, for example, in instigating the development in Philadelphia of a police force, a hospital, a paper currency, paving, lighting and volunteer fire departments and so on, Franklin's skill lay in persuading his colleagues to help solve their own practical problems (Mumford and Van Doorn, 2001). An important point here is the visibility of Franklin's leadership, for although the product is clear, the hand that secures it is not. In effect, if Franklin had died early in his career it may well be that much of this backroom networking may not have become apparent and that he would not have been considered a great leader.

We also need to consider leadership product from a different angle, in terms of a commercial product. Leadership is big business and is increasingly being taken seriously as an industry (Ferry and Guthey, 2020; Guthey et al., 2009). From this perspective the tangible result that we need to pay attention to is the role that concepts of leadership play in generating revenue for universities, publishers and business consultants. The word leadership seems to be used in a range of settings and ways to bring in money, and often in ways that bear little relation to whether the product being sold is in fact leadership. The most common example of this is the course or 'leadership' development programme that in reality comprises a cluster of ideas and management tools that educators suppose that people occupying senior positions in organizations will need. Hence things that are clearly not leadership, such as project management techniques, become 'leadership' through an act of naming. This can be attributed as much to the commercial world reflecting fashions as anything else. It has become socially unattractive to talk of management or administration, let alone

command, but ‘leadership’ is assumed to carry with it an allure and aspirational feeling. We will examine this commodification of leadership as product in more depth in [Chapter 3](#).

## Process-based leadership

There is an assumption that people that we attribute the term leadership to act differently from non-leaders – but what does this mean? It could mean that the context is critical, or that leaders must be exemplary or that the attribution of difference starts early in the life of individuals such that ‘natural’ leaders can be perceived in the school play grounds or on the sports field, etc.

But what is this ‘process differential? Well, there is, for instance, research which suggests that the luck of being born earlier in the school year is correlated with leadership of all kinds because the small aspects of greater maturity associated with age (physical size and mental agility) generate small forms of advantage over those born later in the school year and these advantages are then multiplied across time into significant differences: the so-called ‘Matthew Effect’ – the rich get richer, the poor get poorer, the strong get stronger and the weak get weaker. In other words, luck plays a big part in determining who gets to be a successful leader and who doesn’t (Frank, 2016).

We might also drag on stage a whole host of leadership types to flesh out this practice typology. The errant sergeant major would be a good start with the archetypal call: ‘Do as I say not as I do’, which can, of course, be linked to its opposite ‘Walk the Talk’. So are leaders those that allegedly embody the exemplary performance we require to avoid any hint of hypocrisy? And when sacrifice is required or new forms of behaviour demanded from followers, is it exemplary leaders that are the most successful?

Perhaps, but think of two counter-examples that contradict this ideal type: first, sergeant majors tend to secure followers whether they embody exemplary action or not. We might argue, following Northouse, that coercive sergeant majors who scream at recruits on the parade ground are not ‘really’ leaders, but if their leadership processes do indeed produce trained soldiers are we to deduce that the military, because it is rooted in coercive mechanisms, cannot demonstrate leadership? Or is it that what

counts as legitimate leadership processes depends upon the local culture? That is, soldiers expect to be coerced and would probably not recognize attempts by their sergeants or officers to reach a consensus by egalitarian debate as 'leadership'? And since military cultures differ radically in space and time, we cannot even suggest that the practices of leadership can be recognized by their occupational context because that also remains contested. If it did not then we would have difficulty explaining the outbreak of mutinies or even the so-called Christmas Truce in December 1914 (Grint, 2021; Weintraub, 2002).

The second counter-example is Admiral Nelson, an individual whose military successes were almost always grounded in a paradoxical situation wherein he demanded absolute obedience from his subordinates to naval regulations but who personally broke just about every rule in that same rule book (Grabsky, 1993). Yet Nelson's success was not simply a consequence of rule-breaking actions but also a result of his engagement with, and motivation of, his followers, most importantly his fellow officers in his battle fleet, his 'Band of Brothers' (Kennedy, 2001). Hence, at one level this process approach may encompass the specific skills and resources that motivate followers: rhetoric, coercion, bribery, exemplary behaviour, bravery and so on. Leadership under this guise is necessarily a relational concept, not a possessional one (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011). In other words, it does not matter whether you think you have great skills if your followers disagree with you. Thus, it may be that we can recognize leadership by the behavioural practices that differentiate leaders from followers, but this does not mean we can simply list the processes as universally valid across space and time. After all, we would not expect a second-century Roman leader to act in the same way as a twenty-first-century Italian politician, but neither would we expect an American Indian leader to act in a fashion indistinguishable from an American President (Warner, 2003). Yet it remains the case that most of our assumptions about leadership relate to our own cultural context rather than someone else's.

Indeed, while many accounts of the leadership process might focus upon the acts of 'Great Men' it has long been a point of great controversy as to whether men and women lead in the same way or in ways that are genetically or culturally influenced by their genders. And while Carlyle's heroic 'men' *solve* the problems of their followers, Heifetz and Linsky (2002) suggest that leadership is really related to what they call 'Adaptive'

rather than ‘Technical’ work. Here Adaptive work requires novel responses by those facing the problem and thus leadership means making followers face up to their own responsibilities. Technical work, on the other hand, can be resolved by managers who have the authority to execute pre-existing routines and procedures. In sum, if there is an essential process of leadership for Heifetz and Linsky it is as much to do with making followers responsible as with anything the leader does – an interpretation directly at odds with Carlyle’s view. Gemmill and Oakley (1997: 281) take a similar line to suggest that ‘Leadership as a social process can be defined as a process of dynamic collaboration, where individuals and organizational members authorize themselves and others to interact in ways that experiment with new forms of intellectual and emotional meaning.’

Since the publication of the first edition of this book, a fresh debate has ignited within leadership studies concerning ‘leadership-as-practice’ (LAP) (Raelin, 2016a) and it is relevant for our purposes to explore some of its contours. In essence the LAP approach extends the more human and mutual influencing processes outlined by Gemmil and Oakley and Heifetz above by incorporating insights from deliberative forms of democratic practice and the post-human perspectives we touched upon earlier. Leadership in this configuration is a flow, a process that does not respect the boundaries of person, technology or place, but is instead the name for an ongoing outcome within and between things.

In effect, the process approach to leadership is more concerned with how leadership works – how material objects, technology, culture and rhetoric all come together in a particular place and time to enact something that can be recognized as leadership. But whatever the dispute about the processes or practices, none of these seem important without some element of positioning. What, for instance, is the use of great rhetorical skill or having a big stick when you are in solitary confinement or on a desert island with patchy mobile phone reception and no discernible power source?

## Position-based leadership

Perhaps the most traditional way of configuring leadership is to suggest that it is really concerned with a spatial position in an organization of some kind – formal or informal. Thus, we can define leadership as the activity

undertaken by someone whose position on a vertical, and usually formal, hierarchy provides them with the resources to lead. These are ‘above us’, ‘at the top of the tree’, ‘superordinates’ and so on. In effect, they exhibit what we might call ‘Leadership-in-Charge’. This is how we normally perceive the heads of vertical hierarchies, whether CEOs or military generals or Head Teachers or their equivalents. These people lead from their positional control over large networks of subordinates and tend to drive any such required change from the top. That ‘drive’ also hints at the coercion that is available to those in-charge: a general can order executions, a judge can imprison people and a CEO can discipline or sack employees and so on. But note that Hughes et al. (1999) remain adamant that position is not related to leadership so, yet again, we have an ECC at the heart of the issue.

A related aspect of this vertical structuring is what appears to be the parallel structuring of power and responsibility. Since the leader is ‘in charge’, then presumably he or she can ensure the enactment of his or her will. But we should be wary of this parallel universe that irreversibly links a hierarchy of labels to a hierarchy of power because there are good grounds for linking them both in obverse and in reverse. That is to say, that the hierarchy of power simultaneously inverts the hierarchy of labels. While a formal leader may *demand* obedience from his or her subordinates – and normally acquires it because, *inter alia*, of the resource imbalance – that obedience is never guaranteed. In fact, following Lukes (1979), one could suggest that power encompasses a counterfactual possibility, a subjunctivist verb tense rather than just a verb – it could have been otherwise. Indeed, one could well argue that power is not just a cause of subordinate action but also a consequence of it: if subordinates do as leaders demand then, and only then, are leaders powerful. And if followers choose not to comply – and accept the consequences of non-compliance – then leaders have no power over them. If this was not the case we could not explain mutinies nor the universal ability of small children to resist their parents’ demands.

The limitations of restricting leadership to a position within a vertical hierarchy are also exposed when we move to consider Leadership-in-Front, a horizontal approach, in which leadership is largely unrelated to vertical hierarchies and is usually informally constituted through a network or a heterarchy (a flexible and fluid hierarchy). Leadership-in-Front might be manifest in several forms, and where it merges into Leadership-in-Charge might be at the penultimate rank at the bottom of a hierarchy. For instance,

within an army such leadership might be manifest in corporals who have some degree of formal authority but may secure their position with the private soldiers – their followers – through leading from the front. Indeed, the leadership abilities of low-level leaders may be critical in differentiating the success of armies, both in prior conflicts and in the focus on ‘strategic corporals’ in the US Marine Corps (Krulak, 1999).

More commonly, though, we might conceive of Leadership-in-Front from a fashion leader – someone who is ‘in front’ of her or his followers, whether that is trends in clothing, music, business models or whatever. These leaders provide guides to the mass of fashion-followers without any formal authority over them. But leading from the front also encompasses those who guide others, either a professional guide showing the way or simply whoever knows the best way to an agreed destination amongst a group of friends on a Sunday stroll; both guides exhibit leadership through their role in front, but neither is necessarily formally instituted into an official hierarchy. Indeed, often these informal guides – such as Native American Indian guides in the US Army in the nineteenth century – are situated beyond the boundaries of the formal organization. And again, these horizontal leaders are commonly related to a temporal dimension: they are ‘the first’ to signify, recognize or embody new fashions and they are also the first to shed ‘yesterday’s’ approach and maintain their leadership by being ‘ahead of their time’.

Increasingly, the left in Europe is reinventing itself in horizontal terms, generating social movements in overlapping configurations with more traditional political parties – Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain and the Corbynism era of Labour in the UK – that seek to combine a grassroots anti-establishment campaigning ethos with ambitions for state power. These movements are usually suspicious of leaders, in a similar fashion to movements informed by an anarchist ethos (Sutherland et al., 2014). In the days when the idea of left wingers Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell taking power of the UK’s Labour Party seemed absurd, the two gave an interview to online magazine *Vice* (Segalov, 2015) in which McDonnell openly disparaged and critiqued the very notion of vertical leadership. He said:

We believe that leaders should be following the masses. We only ran in leadership campaigns to get our ideas across, to use it as a platform. One of the first things we’d have done, had we won, was transform the idea of leadership within the Labour Party.

Yet after they unexpectedly took power, both Corbyn and McDonnell were forced to operate within a Western culture of leadership that places great importance on the individual leader and formal institutions, structuring its very way of knowing and interpreting events, often, around such figures and structures. One way of interpreting the loss of Corbyn (amongst others) in the 2019 British general election, compared to the effective stalemate of the 2017 election, was that this radical figure and his movement had been progressively sucked into the intra-parliamentary procedures of Brexit, which came to replace their previous strategic focus on building through movements. Simultaneously, the media's gaze increasingly on the figure of Corbyn became more intense, eroding the sense of novelty and outsider status previously enjoyed. In other words, even when groups and people in formal leadership positions try to break the dominant focus on position, even when such positional authority is anathema to them, they usually find it impossible to break free from the expectations and norms imposed by culture and society. Does this mean that there is no place for horizontal forms of leadership?

We might retrace the origins of the English words for leadership to shed light on this aspect. The etymological roots of 'Leadership' derive from the Old German *Lidan* to go, the Old English *Lithan* to travel, and the Old Norse *Leid* to find the way at sea. Thus, the origins tend to support both vertical and horizontal positional approaches.

The horizontal perspective generates a rather more positive role for the followers of leaders. The English word 'Follower' is derived from the Old English word *Folgian* and the Old Norse *Fylgja*, meaning to accompany, help or lead. The etymological roots are relatively positive and are reproduced in the following current definitions:

- 1 An ordinary person who accepts the leadership of another.
- 2 Someone who travels behind or pursues another.
- 3 One who follows; a pursuer, an attendant, a disciple, a dependent associate, a retainer.

However, the negative images of 'follower' are more clearly visible in these definitions:

- 4 A person or algorithm that compensates for lack of sophistication or native stupidity by efficiently following some simple procedure shown to have been effective in the past.
- 5 A sweetheart, a Trollope.
- 6 (Steam Engine) The removable flange of a piston.
- 7 The part of a machine that receives motion from another; Gaelic, for instance, surname ending in ‘agh’ or ‘augh’ means ‘follower of’ – Cavanagh stands for ‘Follower of Kevin’.

Those readers familiar with Harry Enfield’s old television character ‘Kevin’ – a teenage nightmare of sullenness and irresponsibility – will note that the diminution of the role of follower in the light of the superordinate ‘leader’ is much closer to the vertical notion of leadership than its horizontal equivalent.

Leadership-in-Front might also be provided in the sense of legitimizing otherwise prohibited behaviour. For instance, we might consider how Hitler’s overt and public anti-Semitism legitimated the articulation of anti-Semitism by his followers. And again, it has been suggested that acts such as suicide provide ‘permission’ by ‘leaders-in-front’ for others to follow, hence there are often spates of similar acts in quick succession almost as if the social behaviour operates as a biological epidemic (Gladwell, 2002). This also became visible in the UK directly after the EU referendum in 2016 when the anti-immigration trope of some of the Brexit campaigners seems to have legitimated an outburst of overt racism on British streets that had not been visible for many years (Agerholm, 2016).

Leadership along this positional dimension, then, differs according to the extent to which it is formally or informally structured, and vertically or horizontally constituted. Leadership-in-Charge implies some degree of centralizing resources and authority, while Leadership-in-Front implies the opposite.

Finally, we need to highlight the important positional dimensions of leadership as they relate to the social world and to geography. People’s positions in class, racial and gender relations can influence how they are perceived as leaders, or whether they are considered for leadership positions at all. Here we can approach the issue from two perspectives. The first invites us to look at the historically loaded nature of the concept of leadership and the various ways in which it has been equated with ‘strong’



white men from the upper classes. From this perspective, we need to ask whether people's conceptions of leadership too easily offer up images of 'white knights' (Liu and Baker, 2016), and legitimize systems and behaviours that prevent a more inclusive and transformative leadership. The second invites us to search for leadership in positions at the margins of society and organizations (Hooks, 2014), further away from the dominant way of doing things that has seemingly created so many deeply embedded problems – systemic forms of racism, misogyny and climate change to name but three. From this perspective we should start looking for leadership from those who resist the status quo and offer alternative, people positioned at the margins, such as trade unionists, anti-racism campaigners, transformative community campaigners, gender equality activists and environmentalists. Maybe part of the riddle of leadership could be addressed, if not solved, if we started looking for examples outside the usual dominant positions of chief executives, prime ministers and presidents.

Overlapping the social positioning of leadership is an emphasis on the geography of leadership. Leadership process can be heavily shaped by the geographical context within and through which it occurs. The geographer David Harvey provides us with a helpful tripartite view of space through which we can better understand leadership (Harvey, 2009). First, there is absolute space, which is space interpreted as something fixed and immovable – there are certain geographical features rooted in nature, where, try as humankind might, can never be fully manipulated to their ends and force humans to work around them in their leadership practice: oceans are not going anywhere and so people collaborating in leadership across distance need to find ways of making this work, either through frequent long-haul travel or more imaginative, digitally driven methods; one feature of the digital age is that it has enabled people across distance to collaborate, which can be productive for leadership projects, for as one person downs tools, for example in France, someone in New Zealand can pick up the work, and so on until the project is complete. Second is the notion of relative space, where space is interpreted as relative or co-dependent on something else. The most obvious example of this is economic activity, so when planners or developers envisage a space, they often have in mind the need for money to freely circulate in exchange through space. Third is the notion of relational space, which is where space

is envisaged as the product of people's everyday relational activities – here space adapts and is re-envisaged in often imaginative ways. Hence people operating in very challenging spaces, such as workers under the glare of harsh management often find subtle ways of exploiting and using space – quiet corners free of surveillance in which they can plot resistance, for example. People can also transform spaces relationally, re-envisaging them for purposes that better suit their everyday needs: kitchens can become meeting spaces; urban wastelands sites of temporary housing; shopping streets the sites of mass protest.

As we have hinted, profound social and economic changes are reflected in built geography. Hence struggles for racial/economic equality are ones that nearly always engage deeply with urban logics that segregate black and poor people in densely populated but heavily policed peripheral or central slum accommodation (Harvey, 2009). In general, leadership theory needs to grapple far more with the phenomenon of urbanism, the increasingly central role cities play in the global economy and the many struggles such a process presents. Cities are the great vectors of economic activity but also resistance to the various injustices of capitalism. While to date most leadership research has focused on the big economic winners of urbanism – the corporate CEOs – we can expand the focus of our attention. Doing so means looking for examples of leadership in urban struggle – in particular against 'gentrification', housing and health inequalities, but also offering bold assertions of cultural identity and creativity. Focusing on leadership as occurring in positions of space means expanding the scale of our analysis from the organization to the geography; it invites us to be playful with boundaries and to follow leadership wherever it may lead. Viewing leadership as intimately enmeshed in geography also allows us to notice the time-lapse effect we all experience of leading our daily lives in a built environment constructed at a time of quite different social and economic relations (Wetherell, 2020). Hence the displacement effect that many professionals and activists felt during the Covid-19 pandemic, when they sought to practice leadership through systems designed for face to face meetings in shared buildings, whereas the challenges of the time called for a reinvention of leadership in digital spaces.

## Purpose-based leadership

The final approach we want to consider is Purpose-based leadership. The purpose – or point – of leadership is an interesting approach. It embodies the possibility that the product may be meagre, but the purpose is more important: take Malala Yousafzai, as an example, a Pakistani girl shot by the Taliban for promoting education amongst girls in October 2012. In terms of direct product manifest in an expansion of education for girls across the country, the results are indeed meagre. But in terms of the symbolic significance of her continued activism the purpose crowds out the product. Moreover, the product approach is always limited by a subsequent temporal question: to misquote Chou en Lai 1970s assessment of the significance of the French Revolution: it's too early to tell; as it is to determine the results of Malala's leadership (Yousafzai and Lamb, 2014).

The purpose of leadership encompasses an overarching focus on the ethics of leadership: the notion that we may turn to ethics to explain the agency of leadership, the thorny question of what performs leadership in practice. For some political philosophers, the legitimation of unethical practices is anything but ambiguous. As Coady (2008) reminds us, for Thomas Hobbes ethical prohibitions against certain practices could not hold when compliance with the ethics led to self-destruction because it was 'contrary to the ground of all laws of nature' (1982: 110); an interesting reflection on the dilemma faced by liberals seeking to protect freedom of speech even for those seeking the end of freedom of speech, or the democratic rights of those who seek to secure democratic election in order to destroy democracy (as of course Hitler did in 1933).

As we have already suggested, ethics are as contested as leadership, but this does not mean that ethics are irrelevant. On the contrary, how leaders and followers grapple with the thorny issue of ethics seems to us to be critical. As we shall argue in [Chapter 6](#), if complying absolutely with a set of absolute ethics was a pre-requisite for successful leadership then few of us would achieve much in the world because it is precisely when the ethics we abide by do not actually provide clear guidance that we need to consider the role of leadership.

This arena, where the black and white dichotomies of ethical guidance shades into grey, is the place where leadership is forged by those willing to engage in the world of leadership practice rather than leadership theory. As Primo Levi (1989: 39–43) describes the entry of the newcomer to the extermination camp:

The newcomer was derided, [probably] the hostility was motivated, like all other forms of intolerance, in an unconscious attempt to consolidate the ‘we’ at the expense of the ‘they’.... As for the privileged prisoners, the situation was more complex.... They represented a potent minority within the Lager but a potent majority among survivors.... [to cope with] the hard labour, beatings, the cold, and the illnesses the meagre food ration was insufficient.... Death by hunger, or by diseases induced by hunger, was the prisoner’s normal destiny, avoidable only with additional food ... Obtaining that required whatever it took to lift oneself above the norm.... The ascent of the privileged ... is an anguishing but unfailing phenomena.... It is a grey zone, poorly defined, where the two camps of masters and servants both diverge and converge. This grey zone possesses an incredibly complicated internal structure and contains within itself enough to confuse our need to judge.... The harsher the oppression, the more widespread among the oppressed is the willingness ... to collaborate.

At the heart of the ‘grey zone’ of ethical complexity, we will argue, is the essential complexity and contest at the heart of all being: the notion that the world around us is so complex and inter-connected that our ways of knowing it and working within it are necessarily partial. Furthermore, if we view ourselves as intimately implicated in the world, rather than as rulers of the world, we are forced to remove ourselves (our egos) from the heart of the analysis and consider what might be best for the world, rather than for ourselves (Knights and O’Leary, 2006). We consider how all acts of ‘ethical’ leadership are necessarily partial and temporary. It is therefore more helpful to think of ethical, purpose-based leadership – and its close sibling, caring forms of leadership – as ongoing and imperfect processes rather than as a single or series of discrete, one-off decisions.

Our focus in [Chapter 6](#) is therefore to provide a more political account, one that takes seriously the contested but vital nature of purpose. To do this we engage with ideas from the political theorist Antonio Gramsci, who provides a subtle and systemic view of power. He also teaches us about the generation of purpose within communities and of the challenges of scaling up from such communities to broaden out purpose in ways that can join people together to offer more encompassing and radical change. We will draw on these ideas as the basis of offering a theory of organic leadership, something we do in conversation with two recent examples of activist leadership – the socialist takeover of the UK Labour Party and the recent wave and revitalization of environmental activism.

## Conclusion

We began by suggesting that although it has become fashionable to comment on the importance of leadership, in its positive and negative impacts. It is by no means clear that the twenty-first century poses unique problems for leaders, let alone that some people's definitions of 'moral' leadership are the solution to the world's contemporary problems. Indeed, there appears to be little consensus on what defines leadership and hence considerable conflict over what counts as demonstrations of leadership, whether leadership can be taught and what its effects might be. Following a brief review of four leading leadership texts we then reduced the multiplicity of accounts to five approaches to leadership that embody significantly different approaches. Although all five are adopted by different organizations at different times, the lack of clarity as to which definition of leadership is being used can inhibit organizational success.

If organizational leaders assume that leadership is primarily *positional* so that, for example, only those people in formal positions of power are recognized as leaders, then those without formal positions may well be discouraged from taking actions that are vital for organizational success but deemed by the formal leaders to be irrelevant. Hence it may be that risk-taking, showing initiative, taking responsibility and so on are not actions that non-formal leaders will take. The result may well be an extremely bureaucratic and torpid organization but, since the penalties for making a mistake far outweigh the rewards for success, most people choose to avoid taking risks that might endanger them (Weaver, 1986).

On the other hand, for some interpretations leadership is essentially related to *products*, though whether we can causally relate these to an individual leader, and, if we can, whether we can ignore the practices by which these results were achieved, or what the products were, is very debateable. Nevertheless, if organizations, and especially their political superordinates, consider leadership to be manifest only or primarily through products and nothing else then we should not be surprised to find hospitals and schools manipulating their activities to generate the requisite results, even if the overall performance as a health or education provider plummets.

Those processes or *practices* of leadership imply that we can distinguish leaders from non-leaders on the basis of examining what it is that leaders do but, irrespective of the issue of coercion, it is still not clear that successful leaders are necessarily exemplary nor that such processes or practices are generic across space and time. Again, if the form by which leaders are

judged is the extent to which they embody the required formal processes or practices then we may end up with leaders who are excellent ‘actors’, whose behaviours are tightly tied to the monitoring requirements but who are actually rather ineffective in generating products.

We then suggested that even when we revert to the *person* of leaders we are still no nearer a consensus, not simply because so much lies in the eyes of the beholder but also because leadership is usually a name we give for a process that, when examined closely, is an ongoing outcome of a meeting of rhetorical practice and our intimate entanglements with the material word around us (and within us). Such leadership is a performance to be achieved, not a script to be rolled out. In short, hybrid leadership is more appropriately configured not simply as a verb rather than a noun but as a specific tense of verb: subjunctivist – something that *might* occur, rather than something that has occurred or will occur – something that influences a ‘radically open’ future (Barad, 2007). And if it does occur then leadership is an effect as much as a cause of this.

Finally, we considered whether the purpose of leadership is critical; after all, if the leaders (individual or collective) are uncertain about their purpose then their enrolment of followers is likely to be limited. Moreover, it is clear that the purpose, however immoral we may consider it, is often what mobilizes communities behind leaders. Leadership remains then, like power, an ECC. And because it remains contested exactly how we recognize, train, teach, exert and limit leadership depends fundamentally on that first definitional step.

## Notes

- 1 Mech, D. L. ‘Leadership in Wolf, *Canis lupus*, Packs’ at <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/usgsnpwrc/384/>.
- 2 For related papers, see: <http://ideas.repec.org/e/pfe29.html>.
- 3 See Hassard (1996) for a review of the importance of Time in organizations.
- 4 Thanks to David Knowles, then at the Kings Fund, for this example.
- 5 <http://www.cnn.com/2003/US/02/05/sprj.irq.powell.transcript/>.
- 6 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xgR8NjNw\\_I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xgR8NjNw_I). This episode is also captured in the 2002 movie *Thirteen Days*.
- 7 Bratton, J., Grint, K. and Nelson, D., *Organizational Leadership*, chapter 9 (Mason OH: Thomson Southwestern, 2004).
- 8 King, M. L. ‘Civil Rights, Segregation and Apartheid South Africa’, reproduced in *Democracy Now!* 15 January, 2018.

- 9 <https://www.corpwatch.org/article/nigeria-women-claim-victory-chevrontexaco-oil-terminal-takeover>, accessed 20 November, 2003.

## Leadership as person: Putting the ‘ship’ back into ‘leader-ship’

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### Introduction

This chapter takes its starting point from the approach to leadership that perceives it to be a consequence of a person – an individual human that embodies and demonstrates personal characteristics traditionally associated with leaders. However, the first part suggests that this reduction of leadership to the individual human constitutes an analytically inadequate explanatory foundation, and this is illustrated by reference to the importance of followers, as well as to the myriad of material objects upon which leaders rely. Hence the subtitle: putting the ‘ship’ back into leadership. We go on to suggest that leadership might be better configured as a function of the community – ‘the god of small things’ – rather than the result of superhuman individuals. However, this expansion of the term ‘person’ is still unable to explain how leadership actually occurs and for this we then explore the viability of approaching leadership beyond its individual human embodiment and beyond a collective human form towards a notion of hybridity. Considering the role of technology in how we perceive and consume leaders has become more salient than ever in these digitalized times, when so much communication from leaders occurs through screens rather than in person. We will reflect on the extent to which what we know as a leader is in fact a carefully choreographed image designed to fit within our increasingly limited and fleeting ability to engage in depth with questions of leadership. Yet we also need to step back and



consider the extent to which technology has always mediated leaders and leadership. That notion is tested against a second account of putting the ship back into leadership – this time moving beyond the ‘ship’ conceived as the crew to the literal ships that were used to ‘lead’ troops on D-Day to the Normandy beaches.

## **Leadership, followership, commitment and independence**

When listing the traits required by formal leaders it is usual for people to come up with any number of characteristics: charisma, energy, vision, confidence, tolerance, communication skills, ‘presence’, the ability to multitask, listening skills, decisiveness, team building, ‘distance’, strategic skills and so on and so forth. No two lists constructed by leadership students or leaders ever seem to be the same and no consensus exists as to which traits or characteristics or competences are essential or optional. Indeed, the most interesting aspect of list-making is that by the time the list is complete the only plausible description of the owner of such a skill base is ‘god’. Irrespective of whether the traits are contradictory it is usually impossible for anyone to name leaders who have all these traits, at least to any significant degree; yet it seems clear that all these traits are necessary to a successful organization. Thus, we are left with a paradox: the leaders who have all of these – the omniscient leaders – do not exist, but we seem to need them. Indeed, complaints about leaders and calls for more or better leadership occur on such a regular basis that one would be forgiven for assuming that there was a time when good leaders were ubiquitous. Sadly, a trawl through the leadership archives reveals no golden past but nevertheless a pervasive yearning for such an era. An urban myth like this ‘Romance of Leadership’ – the era when heroic leaders were allegedly plentiful and solved all our problems – is not only misconceived but positively counter-productive because it sets up a model of leadership that few, if any, of us, can ever match and thus it inhibits the development of leadership, warts and all (Collinson et al., 2018). It should be no surprise, then, to see, for example, the continuous re-advertising of vacancies for head teachers when the possibilities of success are either beyond the control of individuals or so clearly defined by comparative reference to Superman

and Wonderwoman that only those who can walk on water need apply; not for these leaders the Latin warning: *nemo sine vitio est* (no one is without fault).

The traditional solution to this kind of recruitment problem, or the perceived weakness of contemporary business chief executives or directors of public services or not-for-profit organizations, is to demand better recruitment criteria so that the ‘weak’ are selected out, leaving the ‘strong’ to save the day. In contemporary times, algorithmic digital technology is being deployed to manage organizational selection processes from beginning to end, raising concerns that such approaches may be leading to an entrenchment of the disproportionately wealthier, white and male composition of senior positions (Bogen, 2019). This approach can therefore reproduce rather than solve the problem of selection. An alternative approach might be to start from where we are, not where we would like to be: with all leaders, because they are human, as flawed individuals, not all leaders as the embodiments of all that we merely mortal and imperfect followers would like them to be: perfect. This approach resembles a White Elephant – in both dictionary definitions: as a mythical beast that is itself a deity, and as an expensive and foolhardy endeavour. Indeed, in Thai history the King would give a White Elephant to an unfavoured noble because the special dietary and religious requirements would ruin the noble.

The White Elephant is also a manifestation of Plato’s approach to leadership, for to him the most important question was ‘Who should lead us?’ The answer, of course, was the wisest amongst us: the individual with the greatest knowledge, skill, power and resources of all kinds. This kind of approach echoes our current search criteria for omniscient leaders and leads us unerringly to select charismatics, larger than life characters and personalities whose magnetic charm, astute vision and personal forcefulness will displace all the bland and miserable failures that we have previously recruited to that position – though strangely enough using precisely the same selection criteria. Alas, this is to confuse confidence with competence and unless the new leaders are indeed Platonic Philosopher-Kings, endowed with extraordinary wisdom, they will surely fail sooner or later and then the whole circus will start again, probably with the same result.

Of course, for Plato it was more than likely that the leaders would be men, after all, Greek women were not even citizens of their own city states, though he did admit that it was theoretically possible that a woman might

have all the natural requirements of leadership. Since Plato's time, assumptions about the role of gender in leadership have varied enormously, even if the presence of women as leaders has proved remarkably limited and remarkably stable. It has become more common to see women occupy senior public roles – e.g. Theresa May was the UK's second female prime minister, Nicola Sturgeon is Scotland's first and New Zealand's Jacinda Ardern continues to attract warm praise for her leadership of New Zealand. But it is well known that the proportion of women declines rapidly as they rise through organizational hierarchies (see Bratton et al., 2004: 180–99), a phenomenon known as vertical gender segregation (Smolović Jones et al., 2020b). Segregation means a range of practices and assumptions, tacit and explicit, which seem to prevent women from attaining senior positions to the same degree as men. Caring professions are good cases in point, dominated by women workers but male executives. Elected politics is another salient example – plenty of volunteers for political parties are women but few party leaders are, with some notable exceptions, such as in Finland. Some people sit at the crossroads of several identities that are marginalized by their societies – in terms of race, social class, gender and so on – a phenomenon known as intersectionality, and vertical segregation (and inequality in general) can be far more acute when this is the case (Collins and Bilge, 2016). For example, if someone is simultaneously black, a woman, disabled, transgender and poor, you would expect them to find career progression – or even basic survival – far more challenging than it would be for a white man in England called Rupert, born into a hedge fund inheritance.

One major reason for the continuation of segregation and inequality in general is the naturalization of what are actually social constructions of what it means to be a leader. By this we mean the distinctly unnatural process of academics and practitioners deciding that certain 'masculine' and white characteristics are naturally more suitable for leadership. For some scholars of leadership, the very term 'leadership' cannot be dissociated from its roots in misogynistic and racist connotations (Liu, 2020) and we find it hard to disagree with these claims. For example, Goldberg (1993) and Browne (2002) insist that the chemical hormones, especially testosterone, generate behavioural patterns that leave men 'naturally' more suited to positions of dominance and leadership than women who are 'naturally' less aggressive. The damage inflicted by such accounts of

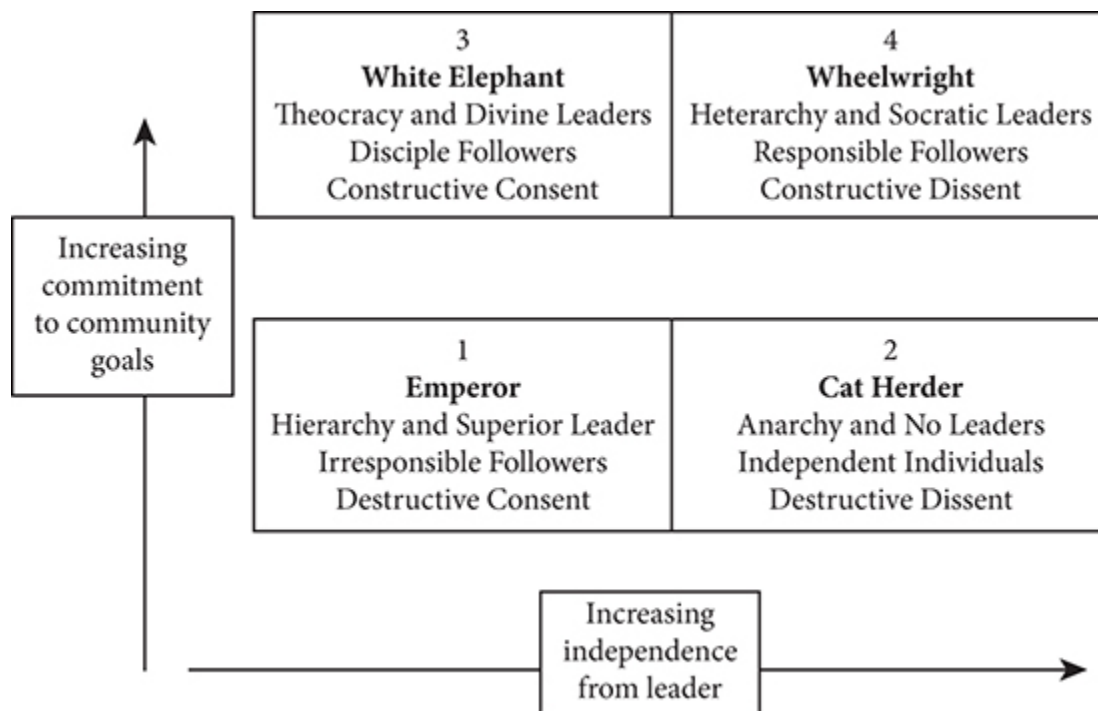
leadership is that they provide an allegedly ‘natural’ basis for distinctly unnatural orderings of people as more or less suitable for leadership roles.

Liu (2020) proposes a task of ‘redeeming’ leadership from its past – a difficult and necessarily confrontational process of interrogating the history of leadership theory and practice to better critique and address its origins of oppression so that alternatives can be built. An alternative, ameliorative and transitory approach is to start from the inherent weakness of leaders and work to inhibit and restrain these, rather than to assume that leaders will never display them. Karl Popper provides a firmer foundation for this in his assumption that just as we can only disprove rather than prove scientific theories, so we should adopt mechanisms that inhibit leaders rather than surrender ourselves to them. For Popper, democracy was an institutional mechanism for deselecting leaders, rather than a benefit in and of itself, and even though there are precious few democratic systems operating within non-political organizations, similar processes ought to be replicable elsewhere. Otherwise, although omniscient leaders are a figment of irresponsible followers’ minds and utopian recruiters’ fervid imagination, when subordinates question their leaders’ direction or skill these (in)subordinates are usually replaced by those ‘more aligned with the current strategic thinking’ – otherwise known as Yes People. In turn, such subordinates become transformed into Irresponsible Followers whose advice to their leader is often limited to Destructive Consent: they may know that their leader is wrong but there are all kinds of reasons not to say as much, hence they consent to the destruction of their own leader and possibly their own organization too.

Popper’s warnings about leaders, however, suggest that it is the responsibility of followers to inhibit leaders’ errors and to remain as Constructive Dissenters, helping the organization achieve its goals but not allowing any leaders to undermine this. Thus, Constructive Dissenters attribute the assumptions of Socratic Ignorance rather than Platonic Knowledge to their leaders: they know that nobody is omniscient and act accordingly.

Of course, for this to work subordinates need to remain committed to the goals of the community or organization while simultaneously retaining their spirit of independence from the whims of their leaders, and it is this paradoxical combination of commitment and independence that provides the most fertile ground for Responsible Followers. [Figure 2.1](#) outlines the

possible combinations of this mix of commitment and independence. Again, this is for illustrative purposes and generates a series of Weberian ‘ideal types’ that are neither ‘ideal’ in any normative sense nor ‘typical’ in any universal sense. On the contrary, these types are for heuristic purposes, designed to flag up and magnify the extreme consequences of theoretically polar positions.



**Figure 2.1** Leadership, followership, commitment and independence.

Despite these reservations, Box 1 – the hierarchy – probably contains the most typical form of relationship between leaders and followers wherein a conventional hierarchy functions under a leader deemed to be superior to her or his followers by dint of superior *personal* qualities of intelligence, vision, charisma and so on, and thus to be responsible for solving all the problems of the organization. Such imperial ambitions resonate with the label for this form of leader: the emperor, with all of its connotations of Empire and colonialism. In turn, that generates followers who are only marginally committed to the organization’s goals – often because these are reduced to the personal goals of the leader – and hence the followers remain literally ‘irresponsible’ through the Destructive Consent that is associated with the absence of responsibility.

Box 2 is rooted in a similar level of disinterest in the community but combined with an increase in the level of independence from the leader, the consequence is a formal ‘anarchy’ – without leadership – and without the community that supporters of anarchism suggest would automatically flow from the absence of individual leaders. The result is a leader that resembles a Herder of Cats – an impossible task.

Box 3 – the theocracy – generates that community spirit in buckets but only because the leader is deemed to be a deity, a divine leader whose disciples are compelled to obey through religious requirement: the White Elephant described above. That consent remains constructive if, and only if, the leader is indeed divine, a god in whom omniscience and omnipotence are unquestionably present, or where an agreed crisis requires the formal leader to be godlike in her or his commands to resolve the crisis. However, it is clear that although many charismatics generate cults that would ostensibly sit within this category the consent is destructive because the leader is in fact a false god, misleading rather than leading his or her disciples (Hassan, 2019; Tourish and Wohlforth, 2000).

The final category, Box 4 – the heterarchy – denotes an organization where the leaders recognize their own limitations, in the fashion of Socrates, and thus leadership is distributed according to the perceived requirements of space and time (a rowing squad is a good example of a heterarchy in which the leadership switches between the cox, the captain, the stroke and the coach depending on the situation). That recognition of the limits of any individual leader generates a requirement for Responsible Followers to compensate for these limits that are best served through Constructive Dissent, in which followers are willing to dissent from their leader if the latter is deemed to be acting against the interests of the community.

Perhaps an ancient Chinese story, retold by Phil Jackson (1995: 149–51), coach of the phenomenally successful Chicago Bulls basketball team, makes this point rather more emphatically. In the third century bce, the Chinese emperor Liu Bang celebrated his consolidation of China with a banquet where he sat surrounded by his nobles and military and political experts. Since Liu Bang was neither a noble by birth nor an expert in military or political affairs, some of the guests asked one of the military experts, Chen Cen, why Liu Bang was the emperor? Chen Cen’s response was to ask the questioner a question in return: ‘What determines the

strength of a wheel?’ One guest suggested the strength of the spokes, but Chen Cen countered that two sets of spokes of identical strength did not necessarily make wheels of identical strength. On the contrary, the strength was also affected by the spaces between the spokes, and determining the spaces was the true art of the wheelwright. Thus, while the spokes represent the collective resources necessary to an organization’s success – and the resources that the leader lacks – the spaces represent the autonomy for followers to grow into leaders themselves.

In sum, holding together the diversity of talents necessary for organizational success is what distinguishes a successful from an unsuccessful leader: leaders don’t need to be perfect but, on the contrary, they do have to recognize that the limits of their knowledge and power will ultimately doom them to failure unless they rely upon their subordinate leaders and followers to compensate for their own ignorance and impotence. Two intriguing examples of this leading as a wheelwright come from the United States Navy. Both Michael Abrashoff (2007), as captain of the USS *Benfold*, and David Marquet (2015), as captain of the USS *Santa Fe*, demonstrate how it is possible to learn from the crew and facilitate a different approach to leadership that inverts the traditional assumption that the formal leader must have all the answers to all the problems and must rule through autocratic command in order to be successful.

In contrast, real White Elephants, albinos, do exist, but they are so rare as to be irrelevant for those who are looking for them to drag us out of the organizational mud; far better to find a good wheelwright and start the organizational wheel moving. In effect, leadership is the property and consequence of a community rather than the property and consequence of an individual leader (Edwards, 2015).

Moreover, whereas White Elephants are born, wheelwrights are made. In fact, the analogy is useful in distinguishing between the learning pedagogies of both, for while those who believe themselves born to rule need no teachers or advisers, but merely supplicant followers, those who are wheelwrights have to serve an apprenticeship in which they are taught how to make the wheel and in which trial and error play a significant role.

The attribution of god-like qualities by irresponsible followers to allegedly omniscient leaders also generates an equivalent assumption about the power of leaders. While Plato’s leaders rest like mythical Greek gods on Mount Olympus, manipulating the lives of mortals at will and with

irresistible power, Popper's leaders should be resisted for precisely these dangerous pretensions. Yet it should also be self-evident that an individual can have virtually no control over anything or anybody – as an *individual*. Indeed, we have known for a long time that leaders spend most of their time talking – not actually 'doing' anything else (Carlson, 1951; Mintzberg, 1973). In effect, leaders might pretend to be omnipotent, to have the future of their organizations and its members in their hands, but this can only ever be a symbolic or metaphorical control because leaders only get things done through others. In short, the power of leaders is a consequence of the actions of followers rather than a cause of it. If this were not so then no parents would ever be resisted by their children, no CEO would ever face a defeat by the board of directors, no general would suffer a mutiny, and no strikes would ever occur. That they do, should lead us to conclude that no leader is omnipotent, and that the kind of leadership is a consequence of the kind of followership, rather than a cause of it. Thus, while Plato's leaders might construct formal hierarchies for subordinates to execute their perfect orders, Popper's leaders work through networks and relationships because that's where power is actually generated: it is essentially distributed like a wheel, not concentrated in what is actually a White Elephant.

None of this is new: Helmuth von Moltke, Chief of the Prussian General Staff from 1857 to 1888, understood Clausewitz's dictum that the local concentration of force was critical for military success and recognized that the nascent system of decentralized leadership already present in the Prussian army was crucial to achieving this. After all, a central commander in Berlin, or even 5 miles behind the battle, had no way of understanding, let alone controlling, what was happening in each and every sector of the battle. The result was a system of leadership rooted in Mission Command – *Auftragstaktiker* or general directives, not specific orders, strategic aims not operational requirements, thereby enabling decentralized control that facilitated distributed leadership and the ability of local ground commanders to seize the initiative rather than await orders (Grint, 2008; 2014).<sup>1</sup>

## Leadership as the god of small things



Another resolution of this paradox is that the focus should be shifted from the leader to leadership – such that as a social phenomenon the leadership characteristics may well be present within the leadership team or the followers even if no individual possesses them all. Thus, it is the crew of the metaphorical ‘ship’ not the literal ship’s ‘captain’ that has the requirements to construct and maintain an organization; hence the need to put the ‘ship’ back into ‘the leadership’. In other words, rather than leadership being restricted to the gods it might instead be associated with the opposite. Arundhati Roy authored the novel *The God of Small Things*, which she has described as ‘a book where you connect the very smallest things to the very biggest: whether it’s the dent that a baby spider makes on the surface of water or the quality of the moonlight on a river or how history and politics intrude into your life, your house, your bedroom’ (Barsamian, 2007).<sup>2</sup> Here we want to suggest that leadership is better configured as *The God of Small Things*, an accumulation of micro practices that together connect to and accumulate into big, systemic effects.

The Big Idea, then, is that there isn’t one; there are only lots of small actions taken by followers that combine to make a difference. This is not the same as saying that small actions operate as ‘Tipping Points’ (Gladwell, 2002), though they might, but rather that big things are the consequence of an accumulation of small things. An organization is not an oil tanker that goes where the captain steers it but a living and disparate organism, a network of people, materials, culture and politics – and its direction and speed is thus a consequence of many small configurations, decisions and acts (Crevani, 2018; Hawkins, 2015). Or, as William Lowndes (1652–1724) [Auditor of the Land Revenue under Queen Anne] suggested, ‘Take care of the pence and the pounds will take care of themselves.’ This has been liberally translated as ‘Take care of the small things and the big things will take care of themselves’, but the important thing here is to note the shift from individual heroes to multiple heroics. This doesn’t mean that CEOs, Head Teachers, Chief Constables, Generals and so on, are irrelevant; their role is critical but limited and dependent upon the actions of subordinates, and indeed their own preparation for the ‘big’ decision that may derive from the accumulation of many small acts and decisions. In the words of Lord Naoshige (1538–1618) (a samurai warlord), ‘Matters of great concern should be treated lightly’ (Tsunetomo, 2000: 27).

Another way of putting this is that the traditional focus of many leadership studies – the decision-making actions of individual leaders – is better configured as the consequence of ‘sense-making’ activities by organizational members. As Weick (1995) suggests, what counts as ‘reality’ is a collective and ongoing accomplishment as people try to make sense of the ‘mess of potage’ that surrounds them, rather than the consequence of rational decision-making by individual leaders. That is not to say that sense-making is a democratic activity because there are always some people more involved in sense-making than others and these ‘leaders’ are those ‘bricoleurs’ – people who make sense from variegated materials that they are faced with and manage to construct a novel solution to a specific problem from this assembly of materials.

Because of this, successes and failures are often dependent upon small decisions and small practices – both by leaders and ‘followers’ who also ‘lead’. This implies that we should abandon Plato’s question: ‘Who should rule us?’ and focus instead on Popper’s question: ‘How can we stop our rulers ruining us?’<sup>3</sup> In effect, we cannot secure omniscient leaders but, because we concentrate on the selection mechanism, those that become formal leaders often assume they are omniscient and are therefore very likely to make mistakes that may affect all of us mere followers and undermine our organizations.

Take, for example, Sir Cloudsley Shovell (1650–1707) a British Admiral who, returning home from an attack on Toulon in 1707, in his flagship ‘Association’, allegedly hanged a sailor who had the temerity to insist that the fleet was heading for the rocks off the Isles of Scilly. The fleet was subsequently lost on the aforementioned and allegedly non-existent rocks with between 800 and 2,000 dead from all 4 ships.<sup>4</sup> Or the equally infamous Vice-Admiral Sir George Tryon whose actions on 22 June 1893 caused the loss of his own flagship, the *Victoria*, after he insisted that the fleet, then split into two columns, turn towards each other in insufficient space. Despite being warned by several subordinates that the operation was impossible, Tryon insisted on its execution and 358 sailors were drowned – including Tryon. At the subsequent court martial of Rear Admiral Markham on the *Camperdown* that rammed the *Victoria*, he was asked, if he knew it was wrong why did he comply? ‘I thought’, responded Markham, ‘Admiral Tryon must have some trick up his sleeve.’ The court found Tryon to blame but accepted that it ‘would be fatal for the Navy to encourage subordinates

to question superordinates'.<sup>5</sup> Thus, to misquote Burke, it only takes the good follower to do nothing for leadership to fail.<sup>6</sup>

Nor are attributions of omniscience limited to national military or political leaders alone. For example, when the Air Florida 90 ('Palm 90') flight crashed on 13 January 1982 in poor weather conditions, it is apparent from the conversation between Captain Larry Wheaton and the first Officer Roger Pettit that the latter was unconvinced that the plane was ready for lift off, yet his failure to stop the take-off inadvertently led to the crash.<sup>7</sup> Precisely the same thing occurred in the Tenerife air crash where the co-pilot thought that there was a problem but failed to prevent the pilot from taking off in a dangerous situation because his warnings were too 'mitigated' (another plane was on the runway directly in front of them and, unbeknown to the co-pilot, his own pilot did not have permission to take off) (O'Hare and Roscoe, 1990: 219).

A similar level of 'inappropriate subordination' or 'irresponsible followers' seems to have occurred in Marks and Spencer. According to Judy Bevan, Richard Greenbury, having achieved significant successes, became more and more isolated from his subordinate board members to the point where they only engaged in Destructive Consent and not Constructive Dissent. As she remarks about one of the final board meetings through the words of a board member:

The thing about Rick is that he never understood the impact he had on people – people were just too scared to say what they thought. I remember one meeting we had to discuss a new policy and two or three directors got me on one side beforehand and said they were really unhappy about it. Then Rick made his presentation and asked for views. There was total silence until one said, 'Chairman we are all 100% behind you on this one.' And that was the end of the meeting.

(Bevan, 2002: 3)

Alfred Sloan, according to Drucker (2001: 254), faced a similar problem with his board but was able to recognize the manifestations of Destructive Consent, 'Gentlemen, I take it we are all in complete agreement on the decision here?' [Consensus of nodding heads.] 'Then I propose we postpone further discussion of this matter until our next meeting to give ourselves time to develop disagreement and perhaps gain some understanding of what the decision is all about.'

Three hundred years earlier, Yamamoto Tsunetomo (2000: 37) recalled a similar problem in Japan:

Last year at a great conference there was a certain man who explained his dissenting opinion and said that he was resolved to kill the conference leader if it was not accepted. This motion was passed. After the procedures were over the man said, 'Their assent came quickly. I think that they are too weak and unreliable to be counsellors to the master.'

This problem persists across all areas; take the case of Wayne Jowett who was erroneously injected with Vincristine, by the intrathecal (spinal) route on 4 January 2001, under the supervision of the Specialist Registrar Dr Mulhem, by Dr Morton, a Senior House Officer at the Queen's Medical Centre Nottingham (QMC).<sup>8</sup> Such a procedure almost always results in death, but the issue here is not that a mistake was made. Dr Mulhem did not state how the drugs should be administered; he said that he was thinking of a different drug (administered spinally). Dr Morton then asked Dr Mulhem to confirm that Vincristine should be administered spinally, and surprisingly to Dr Morton, was told it should. Dr Morton said he felt he could not challenge a superordinate.<sup>9</sup>

Note here how that the subordinate is, once again, concerned about the veracity of the decision made by the superordinate but feels unable or unwilling to challenge that decision. When organizations are dominated by leaders with authoritarian tendencies and the material wellbeing of subordinates depends on compliance, the phenomenon of Destructive Consent is more comprehensible. The notoriously thin-skinned Donald Trump infamously fired staff who he felt undermined his authority regularly, and those who survived the longest tended to have closer familial ties to him. Even in moments of crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, Trump lashed out at others – members of Congress, Governors, China, his own Chief Medical Advisor, Dr Fauci, or the media, rather than consider that some of the criticism aimed at him might have some merit.

Unfortunately, not only are all leaders flawed – and thus incompetent to some degree or other – but most people are actually unable to recognize their own levels and areas of incompetence: to put it another way we don't know what we don't know (Kruger and Dunning, 1999).

Nor are the problems of knowledge and competence limited to individuals. In September 1998 Long Term Capital Management (LTCM), a Hedge Fund, was in debt to the tune of \$4.6 billion and was only bailed out by the intervention of the US Federal Reserve organized by Greenspan.<sup>10</sup> LTCM included two Nobel Economics Prize winners and an ex-VC of the American Federal Reserve. It used complex math formulas to spread risk

across a range of stocks, bonds, etc., and its sophistication encouraged Robert Merton (one of the Nobel Prize winners) to claim that the model ‘would provide the perfect hedge’; it obviously did not (Stein, 2003: 56:5). As the global financial crisis of 2007–8 and the Covid-19 pandemic over a decade later demonstrate, while private citizens are often lectured to maintain responsible levels of savings and to behave moderately in their spending habits in case of impending crises, large corporate businesses are often less parsimonious in their attitudes to rewarding shareholder dividends and lavish corporate salaries and bonuses.

What can be done about this problem? Clearly the provision of honest and timely advice to leaders – Constructive Dissent – provides an appropriate solution but it is equally clear, first that leaders tend to discourage this by recruiting and appointing subordinates that are ‘more aligned with the official line’ – that usually means sycophants and ‘Yes People’ who provide Destructive Consent. Moreover, leaders’ unwillingness to admit to mistakes reinforces followers’ attribution of omniscience.

On 29 June 1994 Charles, the prince of Wales, crashed a BAe 146 of the Royal Flight on Islay in Scotland after he took control of aircraft to land it. However, the descent was too steep and quick, and the plane ran off the tarmac into mud damaging the aircraft to the tune of £1 million. The RAF captain and navigator were both held responsible for the error – not the prince (who seems to have been completely exonerated) – because they should not have allowed him to take control and should have warned him of his error.

This is ironic given that historically, in feudal societies, only the royal ‘Fool’ or court jester could provide Constructive Dissent and survive, primarily because the advice was wrapped up in humour and therefore could be publicly dismissed by the monarch, even if privately he or she could then reconsider it rather more carefully. There is, perhaps, no better example of the difficulty and importance of this role than the Fool in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*.

Lear, having given away his kingdom to his daughters in a show of bravado and omnipotence, is warned first by his loyal follower, Kent, that the action is foolhardy, but Kent is exiled for his honesty. Then the Fool attempts the same advice but does so through a series of riddles that, unfortunately, Lear only begins to understand when it is too late:

*Fool:* That lord that counsell'd thee  
To give away thy land,  
Come place him here by me,  
Do thou for him stand:  
The sweet and bitter fool  
Will presently appear;  
The one in motley here,  
The other out there

*Lear:* Dost thou call me fool, boy?

*Fool:* All thy other titles thou hast given away; that thou wast born with.

*King Lear*, Act 1 Scene 1, 154–65

It is possible to recreate the role of honest advisor played by Shakespeare's Fool without the 'motley' clothes and perhaps with more success, either by leaders relying on one or more individuals whose position cannot be threatened by the advice proffered, and it may also be possible to institutionalize the role by requiring all members of a decision-making body to enact the role of Devil's Advocate in turn. In this way the advice is required by the role and not derived from the individual, and hence should provide some degree of protection from leaders annoyed by the 'helpful' but perhaps embarrassing advice of their subordinates (see Holt, 2016, for a useful heuristic that models the relationship between dissent and followership).

In some cases, the consequences of decisions by leaders are so critical that procedures may be developed to inhibit individual error of the kind exemplified in *Dr Strangelove* subtitled '*Or how I learned to stop worrying and love the bomb*'. In Stanley Kubrick's 1964 movie, an impotent US Air Force Commander single-handedly initiates the Third World War, aided and abetted by equally incompetent political and military leaders (several played by Peter Sellers). The notoriously dark humour of the film, however, underlines the dangers of allowing individuals with limited knowledge to take critical decisions.

Ironically, and probably unknown to the filmmakers, two years before the film's release, such a situation was almost enacted during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. On Saturday, 27 October that year, as the United States and the USSR brought the world ever-closer to a nuclear stand-off over the

deployment of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba, an American U-2 spy plane was shot down over Cuba at 13.41 hrs. At 16.00hrs the American Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended an invasion of the island by Monday 29 October at the latest. Half an hour after this recommendation was made, the American navy destroyer, the USS *Beale* (DD 471), made sonar contact with an unknown submarine. At 16.59 hrs the *Beale* dropped five signalling depth charges on what turned out to be the Soviet submarine B-59. These depth charges are very small explosives designed to force the submarine to identify itself, rather than designed to destroy the submarine. Half an hour later, with no response from the submarine, the USS *Cony* dropped five more signalling depth charges on the B-59 that then tried to evade its American pursuers for four hours. However, technical problems on the submarine led to increased temperatures on the submarine (108F), an oxygen problem, and the beginnings of health problems amongst the Soviet crew. According to the Soviet captain's (Valentin Savitsky) account, at this point the B-59 was then rocked by 'something bigger than a signalling depth charge'. Savitsky then ordered the crew to prepare for firing a nuclear torpedo at their 'attackers'. As he apparently stated: 'Maybe the war has already started up there, while we were doing somersaults here. We're going to blast them now! We will die but we will sink them all – we will not disgrace our navy.' Fortunately, the Soviet Navy's Rules of Engagement at the time required the agreement of three officers: the Captain plus the two deputy commanders. The first deputy commander agreed, but the second – Vasili Arkhipov – refused and the captain was unable to fire the torpedo; instead, the B-59 surfaced at 20.50hrs. Understandably, Vasili Arkhipov was later lauded as 'the man who saved the world', but it is also important to note that the fail-safe procedures were critical to inhibit the intention of the captain (Blanton, 2002).

Another solution would be a more democratic approach to the way in which organizations approach leaders. By democratic we mean practices that prioritize inclusion, the capacity for dissent, conflict and collective forms of decision making rather than the more formal version of democracy that evokes staged and formal elections of representatives at given intervals. Whereas some see the democratic imperative as one of curtailing the very presence of leaders wherever possible (Sutherland et al., 2014), Smolović Jones et al. (2016) translate a democratic account over to the notion of leaders as contested symbols. By this they mean that the notion of what a

leader is and should be can always be a matter for groups to negotiate through deliberation. In their example of a collective of women's groups in the Pacific, they show how participants routinely articulate what they view as a valid leader at any given time, debating the parameters of identity rather than the individual personalities. At some points, leaders may be guides, at others, teachers – occasionally they may be more autocratic. Democratic checks and balances can be mainstreamed in ways that involve an eye for micro practice rather than formally, via job descriptions and other HR techniques.

We acknowledge, however, that the current and more likely alternative to the mainstreaming of democratic practices is treating relationships to leaders as 'sacred' ones (Grint, 2010b). In this formulation, both leaders and followers gain from a relationship of 'separation', 'silence' and 'sacrifice'. Leaders are kept separate from their followers through layers of hierarchy and prestige; followers are silenced to the extent that they are not represented in executive decisions to the extent that they could be, and trade union membership has long been waning; followers are asked to make sacrifices for the sake of organizations while leaders seldom do. When things go awry, however, particularly when it catches the media's gaze, the leader can be scapegoated – sacrificed, silenced and separated (from the organization). Attributing god-like qualities to leaders does not result in god-like qualities – but it might encourage us to think of leaders as gods and take 'appropriate action'. For example, during the 2002 Football World Cup Keith asked his MBA class what kind of leader the then English coach, Sven Goran Eriksson, was? The immediate answer from one English student was that since England had just beaten Argentina 'Sven must be a God!' But when Keith then asked what would happen if England lost their next game against Brazil, the same student responded, 'We will crucify him!' Here is an intriguing dialogue for it exposes the attributions of saint and sinner, saviour and scapegoat, that hoists leaders onto pedestals that cannot support them and then ensures those same leaders are hoist by their own petard.

What this also reveals is the consequence of attributing omnipotence to leaders – we, the followers, are rendered irresponsible by our own action, for when the gods of leadership fail their impossible task – as fail they must eventually – we followers have a scapegoat to take all the blame for what is, in reality, our own failure to accept responsibility.<sup>11</sup> As Žižek (2015) notes,



scapegoating leaders can help perpetuate the very system that concentrates wealth and power in the hands of the few in the first place, as the act of sacrifice convinces people that the problem is solved, whereas in reality the problem really resides in a dysfunctional system. For example, some have argued that it is runaway capitalism that threatens the future of the planet, and the climate emergency will likely never be addressed until the system, rather than individual leader personalities, change.

Grint's sacred order also has implications for how we view the agency of followers, of course. Scapegoating leaders feels like something of a last resort, a temporary relief of tension for people who have suffered anxiety, exhaustion and marginalization. Yet isn't it more common that workers and the majority of citizens are usually the scapegoats of leaders? The most obvious example comes in the form of mass job redundancies in organizations experiencing (often temporary) drops in profit. Similarly, during the Covid-19 pandemic, many corporations sought public funds to pay their furloughed employees, rather than dipping into their own personal fortunes. History can accumulate big corporate wins over workers to such an extent that drastic power and wealth imbalances can be normalized over time. For example, during the University and College Union strike of 2020 against erosions of university staff pensions and precarious work contracts (amongst other things) in the UK, one critique of the action was that staff should not strike because other occupations had it worse – i.e. very often no pensions at all, or even worse employment contracts. Betrayed in such assertions is an erosion of social solidarity, where (a) followers are deemed to have no right to agency and ought to be silent and separate from decision-making, even when it has a direct material effect on their wellbeing and (b) various groups within society are deemed to have no organic connection or shared material interests; instead, areas of social life should be parcelled up and compartmentalized rather than viewed as a shared struggle for dignity. We need to be very careful therefore not to state the problem of the sacred in terms of pity for the leader, traces of which have spawned a trend of charity, pity and handouts for the very wealthiest in certain parts of the world, most notably in the United States (Frank, 2012). Rather, we can view the sacred of leadership as an invitation to engage critically and with de-romanticized modesty at the role and importance of leaders in societies.

The Leadership as Person approach might be configured not so much as a self-imposed cover to distract us from our own frailty but a functional and symbolic resource for different groups at different times. Abraham Lincoln is an interesting illustration of this phenomenon: either a ‘charismatic’ leader who single-handedly saved the American union, revoked slavery and in Wills’ (1992) terms, ‘rewrote American history’, or an ordinary and non-charismatic mortal who was not a champion of civil rights but a champion of the union, and was not a champion of freedom but wanted to free the slaves initially to deport them, and whose memory has been variously reconstructed and paraded to suit the perceived needs of later generations. Thus, his image only developed after his death, it waxed and waned over time, and only really became identified with ideas of charisma at the beginning of the twentieth century (Schwartz, 2000). In effect, the image was both contested and changed as Americans faced a different world and required a different leadership icon through which the new world could be reinterpreted (see Smolović Jones and Grint, 2013).

Similarly, our notions of Hitler as a charismatic leader need to be addressed very carefully. Lloyd George described him as ‘a born leader, a magnetic dynamic personality with a single-minded purpose’, and this is supported by William Shirer, an American journalist watching the crowd at the 1934 Nürnberg rally – ‘They looked up at him as if he were a Messiah, their faces transformed into something positively inhuman’ (quoted in Lewis, 2003: 5–7). But contrast this with Fritz Wiedemann, Regimental Adjutant to the 16th Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment, who was singularly unimpressed by Corporal Hitler in the First World War:

Hitler did not cut a particularly impressive figure. ... (he) was an excellent soldier. A brave man, he was reliable, quiet and modest. But we could find no reason to promote him because he lacked the necessary qualities required to be a leader.... When I first knew him, Hitler possessed no leadership qualities at all.

(Quoted in Lewis, 2003: 4)

Quite how Hitler is transformed from a modest corporal into an egotistical tyrant is the subject of much dispute but suffice to say that, like many historical leaders of significance (good and bad), Hitler came to believe himself destined to lead, in this case Germany to world domination. Lewis suggests that Hitler’s treatment in 1918 for ‘gas-induced blindness’ by Edmund Forster, a psychiatrist specializing in military ‘hysteria’, was pivotal in this transformation. Forster recognized that Hitler was unlike any

other ‘hysterical’ patient because he had no medical reason for the apparent blindness (normally diagnosed as lack of will) – but contrary to the norm – was desperate to return to the front. Forster’s experimental solution was to suggest to Hitler that he was permanently blind – unless Hitler was in fact the one person destined to lead Germany out of the abyss it had fallen into, in which case he would be able to heal himself through the domination of the will; he ostensibly did just this and the rest is (controversial) history. Whether an accurate explanation for Hitler’s transformation or not, the point here is that self-belief, the submission to fate and destiny, both propels individuals to take enormous risks and generates a level of self-confidence that few conventional leaders display.

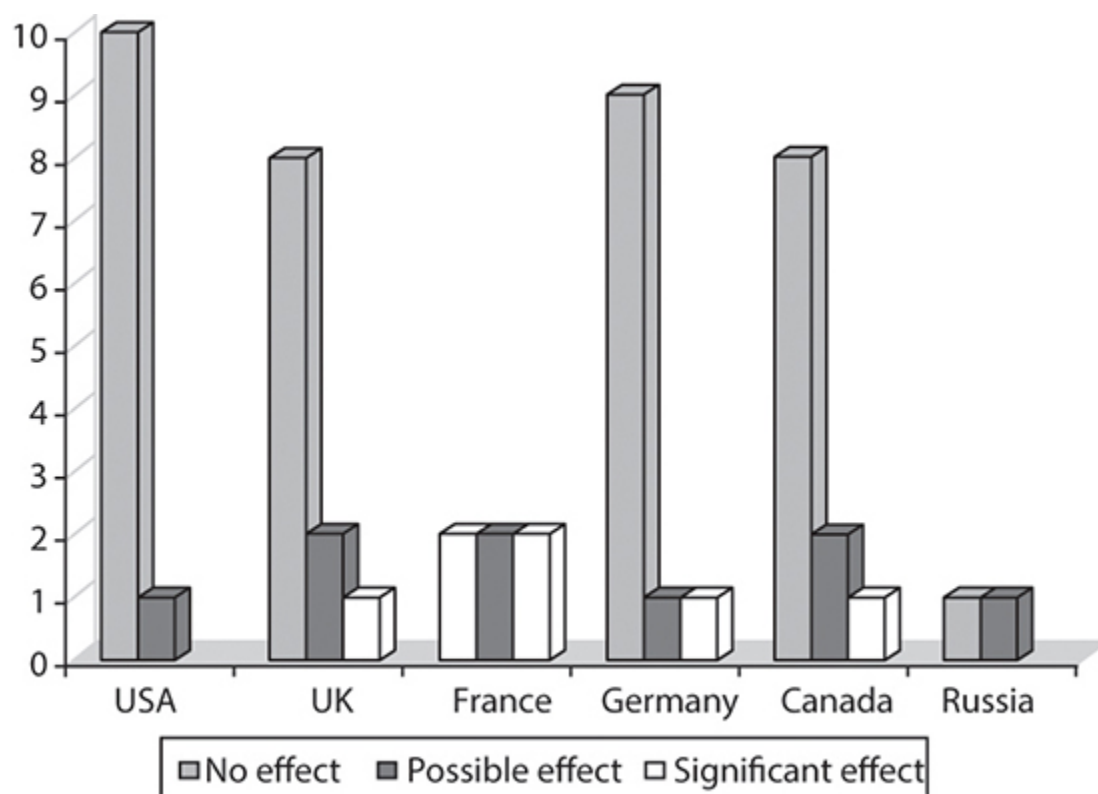
Nevertheless, the contested nature of charisma, both in terms of its origins and existence, leaves unresolved the yearning for perfection in leaders that perhaps also reflects our collective dissatisfaction with the lives of unacknowledged followers – the gods of small things. As Albert Schweitzer (1998) remarked in his autobiography *Out of My Life and Thought*,

Of all the will toward the ideal in mankind only a small part can manifest itself in public action. All the rest of this force must be content with small and obscure deeds. The sum of these, however, is a thousand times stronger than the acts of those who receive wide public recognition. The latter, compared to the former, are like the foam on the waves of a deep ocean.

This is a critical assault upon the idea that leadership can be reduced to the personality and behaviour of the individual leader and implies that we should recognize that organizational achievements are just that – achievements of the entire organization rather than merely the consequence of a single heroic leader. Yet although it is collective leaders and collective followers that move the wheel of history along, it is often the formal or more Machiavellian individual leaders who claim the credit, leaving most people to sink unacknowledged by history, nameless but not pointless. George Eliot (1965: 896) makes this poignantly clear at the end of her novel *Middlemarch* in her description of Dorothea:

Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.

It is the unearthing and ‘blasting’ of ‘unhistoric acts’ (unhistoric because they had been subdued or maligned by particular accounts) that was the concern of Benjamin’s historical materialism we referred to in [Chapter 1](#). When consuming historical accounts that celebrate the heroics of leaders, it is after all worth reflecting on who is being served through such narratives. In effect, as the Roman lawyer Cicero often said in his investigate analysis: ‘cui bono’ – who benefits from this? All of this does not mean that individual leaders play no role, but it does suggest that their role is often quite limited. For instance, although we still tend to reconstruct the competition between democratic political parties as if it could be reduced to a personality contest between the various leaders, the empirical research (see, e.g. King (ed.), 2002) suggests that party leaders often have little or no major effect upon elections (see [Fig. 2.2](#)).



**Figure 2.2** Leaders' personalities and elections (per cent).

Source: Reconstructed from King (ed.), 2002: 213.

In reviewing the evidence for American Presidential elections between 1980 and 2000 Bartels (2002: 65) suggests that the percentage difference to the vote made by the personality traits of the candidate never generates

more than a 3.5 per cent advantage and seldom provides a sufficient swing to make a difference to the final figures (for example, Bartels claims that Reagan's personality added 1 per cent to the Republican vote in the 1980 election but since the Republicans won the vote with 55.3 per cent of the total votes that personality bias was irrelevant. On the other hand, the only time it has made a difference was in 2000 when George W. Bush's personality traits (allegedly) added 0.4 per cent to the total Republican vote – and since the Republicans 'won' with 49.7 per cent of the vote that 0.4 may have been critical.

Leaders may be important but there are whole rafts of other elements that are also important, and it is often these that make the difference between success and failure. Perhaps the least understood or evaluated of these other elements is the role of the followers, without whom leaders cannot exist. A useful way to consider the all too easily overlooked role of followers in the construction of a leader's power is to envisage the difference between a domino-run and a Mexican wave. In the former all the power resides in the first movement that stimulates the dominoes to fall in sequence, generating a 'run'. Thus, power lies with the pusher, the leader. But a Mexican wave that runs around a sports stadium does not depend on an individual leader to make it work; it works without apparent leadership and it 'dies' when the collective decides not to engage in further 'waves'.

Notions of waves lead us in our thinking back to strikes, which are often described as coming in waves – one sector or group draws inspiration or agency from another, generating further strike action, often defying boundaries of occupation and nation. Strikes clearly divide opinion – they are by their nature divisive, disruptive – they force a confrontation, seek to create an 'event' (Badiou, 2011) that realigns people's sense of where power should lie, of who is entitled to recognition and material dignity. They also make inescapable the folly of overlooking the power of followers through illuminating a vital contradiction in workplace relations. If pay and conditions, an employment contract or lack of one, are forms of communication to workers, then the message received can be that certain people are not valued as much as they should be. Indeed, such messages can be re-enforced through social norms and the everyday articulations of people in authority – for example, in 2020 the UK's Home Secretary Priti Patel dismissed a large swathe of workers, including care workers, as

‘unskilled’ in her categorization of those able to enter the UK post-Brexit (Lothian-McLean, 2020).

Dramatic events like the Covid-19 outbreak are further evidence of the power of an ‘event’ to force a reconsideration of social norms of value, and therefore also by extension the relative power of leaders and followers. Consider the jobs included in Priti Patel’s category of unskilled – cleaner, carer, paramedic, farm worker. Crises such as viral pandemics have a certain way of forcing reconsideration of value – in times such as these we do not so much rely on the digital marketer or hedge fund manager, or even the chief executives of pub chains or budget sporting goods retailers – but on those who ‘care’, in its broader sense, who maintain our life and health. A radically different account is provided by the designated aesthete of free market ideology, the author Ayn Rand, who fantasized in fiction of a strike of business leaders grinding a cliched bureaucratized social democratic society to a halt (Rand, 1992). Evidence of such centrality of leaders is to date, absent, however; far more likely would be followers simply carrying on regardless.

In effect, power is a consequence as much as a cause of followership: if – and only if – followers follow do leaders become powerful, but that act remains contingent not determined, and certainly not determined by any future imaginings because acts are quintessentially indeterminate. This focus on contingency is what informs Benjamin’s hope – even if history usually favours the imperialist and powerful, and official histories re-enforce the cycle by glorifying its leaders, things may always be otherwise. Followers always have the choice not to act, and though they may pay the consequences of not acting, the point is that no leader or situation can guarantee followership – leaders are neither omnipotent nor omniscient – but irresponsible followers can make them appear both. Worse, irresponsible followers allow irresponsible leaders to take us to their private and unachievable utopias via three-easy-steps that usually include (1) blaming someone else for everything; (2) leaving all decisions in the hands of the leader and ceasing to take personal responsibility for actions taken in their name; and (3) taking on trust the leader’s version of the ‘truth’. Responsible followers may not be able to lead us to utopia, but they can prevent us from ending up in the dystopia that irresponsible leaders usually end up in, and perhaps that pragmatic foundation is the best way forward.

There is another criticism of Leadership as Person that needs addressing at this point; thus far the discussion has been limited to leaders as People – assuming that the Person is a human. But all the examples used illustrate that leadership is never simply human because no human leader operates independently of non-humans. Thus, we need to go beyond the criticism that leadership is essentially related to followership to the point where leadership is analysed in the contexts within which it operates – where hybrids rule, not humans.

## Leadership and hybridity

Let us return to the definitions of leadership to assess whether the substitution of a hybrid leader for a human leader can be achieved without violating some overriding principle of coherence in the term ‘leadership’. If we can establish that viewing the identity of leadership as essentially hybrid rather than person-based is a legitimate approach, then the conceptual space that ‘leadership’ inhabits becomes significantly more open to debate. On the one hand this may make the debate even more complex and confused, but on the other hand it might also explain why that debate is so contested – because what counts as leadership cannot be shaped into a consensual form.

We can stray back into the prior definitions here to demonstrate the issues. Perhaps the easiest case to deal with would be Positional Leadership. Recall that this definition of leadership can relate to informal leadership, a horizontally based position within a heterarchy. If a human can lead others by being a guide, by showing the way, then it seems hybrids can too. A dog, for example, can lead us home – providing the dog knows where home is – and is therefore part of a home–human–dog hybrid; a lighthouse can do the same, as can a satellite navigation system, or a self-driving car.

But can an ‘ideal’ also proffer leadership? This seems a reasonable extrapolation, for instance, many of the Marxist guerrillas of the 1960s and 1970s were ‘led’ or ‘misled’ by the ideal of equality: a non-human that had little formal authority over them. Similarly, many members of the German SS were ‘led’ by the racist ideals of National Socialism or by their ‘oaths of obedience’ to Adolf Hitler. Here the oath, the verbal utterance, led them – even if most of us would insist that it led them ‘astray’.<sup>12</sup> That ideal might also be materialized as a flag or symbol – the Hammer and Sickle, the

Swastika, the Stars and Stripes or the Union Jack, hence their perceived 'desecration' by burning. Indeed, the Regimental Colours, the military unit flag, is often regarded as 'leading' soldiers, as were the Roman Legions' standards, for they symbolized in dramatic and intense form all that the soldiers stood for. We can go further than this to suggest that it is the leadership symbol itself that is critical and not just what it symbolizes. If this were not the case then when the Romans lost their legionary standards, they would simply replace them with new ones – rather than disband the legion, as they tended to do (Grint, 2010a; Warry, 1980: 136–7).

But is the volitional element an insurmountable problem here after all? That is, is the inability of the flag to invent a future and to act in a volitional manner, the issue that marks the boundary between leadership and symbolism? Certainly, the flag can represent a future, but it cannot invent one. Thus, if leadership is defined as the invention of a future and the mobilization of followers to achieve that future, then surely the flag can only lead in the second sense? Well, a flag might embody the future, as Figes and Kolonitskii (1999: 1–2) suggest, at the beginning of the Russian Revolution:

Language was used to define identities and create new meanings in the politics of 1917 ... songs and texts, symbolic flags and emblems, pictures and monuments, banners and slogans, common speech and rumour, dress and body language, ritualized demonstrations by the crowd, parades and other ceremonies [were used] to represent and show allegiance to the idea of 'the revolution'. ... Each faction fought to control the symbolic system of the revolutionary underground ... Whoever mastered the red flag, or monopolized the meaning of its lexicon, was in pole position to become the master of the revolution too. ... Flexibility was a cardinal advantage in this symbolic battle: the party whose political language was able to accommodate the greatest number of different idioms and dialects, and yet unite them all in a common understanding which had real significance for people's daily lives, was likely to attract the most support and dominate the revolutionary discourse.

Of course, *what* particular future is embodied in the flag is still up for debate, so it is not that the flag leads because of *what* it symbolizes but that its followers attribute to the flag a future that they find attractive – even if that attribution is not consensual amongst the followers. Aesthetic objects (paintings, pictures, musical compositions) can, after all, have effects that cannot be entirely controlled by their creators, they can evade their initial context and intention. As a particular case in point, when two mutinies broke out in the British Navy in 1797 the mutineers ran up the red flag, but the Admiralty interpreted the flag of the first mutineers at Spithead as representing an industrial dispute, while the second, at Nore, was



interpreted as the red flag of political rebellion akin to the French Revolution; the first mutiny was settled as an industrial dispute and the second resulted in mass executions (Grint, 2001; 2021).

The contradictory interpretations of what appear to be the same thing also relates to the ability of things to lead – or even follow – us. For example, we might distinguish between cars that lead us and cars that follow us. The latter are rooted in market research and focus groups that apparently reveal what *we want*, while the former are designed by people who allegedly ‘know’ what *we need*. Thus, cars that lead us have to persuade us that the status quo is inadequate and that they embody the future. The rise of Tesla is a case in point. As far back as 2006, its founder and chief executive Elon Musk shared what he mischievously termed his company’s ‘secret master plan’ on its website (Musk, 2006). Basing his company’s plan around a view of a driver appears key, envisaging the electric car driver as someone who does not need to mediate between car performance and reducing environmental impact – creating an ‘electric car without compromises’ – squaring the circle of environmental activist and speed enthusiast, in other words. Musk’s ambitions have since evolved, of course, now envisaging a consumer of outer space as well as the outer ring roads of cities. Here, in leadership terms, car users are being ‘configured’ by the car designer (see Grint and Woolgar, 1997).

We might even consider how we can be led to do things by as yet unseen technologies. How, for example, many German soldiers were persuaded to fight on to the bitter end in the Second World War on the promise of German ‘wonder-weapons’ which would, they were informed, turn the tide against the Allies. Such weapons had no formal authority over the soldiers, but they promised a utopian future for all those that ‘followed’ them. Take, for example, Helmut Altner, a 17-year-old German recruited at the end of the war to defend Berlin. On 12 April 1945, just three weeks before the end of hostilities, a second Lieutenant explained to him that the new wonder-weapons which would save Germany were on their way to the front and included rifles that shot round corners (Altner, 2002: 44).<sup>13</sup>

Historically, critics of the status quo have often asserted that technology offers the possibilities of a utopia hitherto unavailable. The Italian Futurists, for example, a right wing artistic and political group in the post First World War era, insisted that technology and its associated speed and violence, would transform Italian life. As their *Manifesto of Futurism* (1909) insisted,

‘We will glorify war – the world’s only hygiene – militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for woman.’ In the realm of socialist politics, Karl Marx’s historical materialist case that communism would not be possible under conditions of scarcity adopts an ambivalent relationship to capitalist technological innovations – while these inevitably lead to an increasing alienation of worker from products produced (Marx, 2005a), technological developments also hold open the promise of future emancipation through creating the technological conditions that can enable people freedom from the necessity of toil (Marx, 2005b). This perspective sees work not as a good in and of itself but instead invites us to view technology as one route through which workers can enjoy more autonomy and freedom (e.g. Bastani, 2019). Similar concerns inform contemporary techno-communists who see in the development of artificial intelligence and automation possibilities for ever greater worker autonomy and freedom in a kind of ‘fully automated luxury communism’ (Bastani, 2019). Such technologies are not yet fully integrated and developed to the extent that they may transform utterly the nature of work and social relations, but the promise inspires radical thought and speculation about alternative societies of greater leisure and freedom.

So in this sense a hybrid (for these technologies are not autonomous of humans) can exhibit Positional Leadership in exactly the same way that Joan of Arc led the French against the English: she was not an ‘isolated peasant girl on foot’ but a woman in the uniform and armour of a man, mounted on a horse and carrying her mythical banner and sword in front of a French army. In short, she led through a complex ensemble of symbols and practices which her followers and to some extent her English opponents recognized.

But what about apparently human-less technologies – can they lead us? Take, for example, traffic lights which have formal authority embedded in their legal significance; if you were to ignore the ‘lead’ provided by a red light, you could be prosecuted, and for most of the time at least, the results of traffic light leadership are that most drivers follow their ‘lead’. The same occurs for speed cameras, roadblocks and doors that mark the boundaries of property and so on. In short, traffic lights and technologies can be ‘in charge’ of us – they can demonstrate leadership by persuading us to follow their lead. But note again that their ‘leadership’ – their ability to get

followers to follow their ‘lead’ – is not autonomous but hybrid. A traffic light system without the legal support and police enforcement cannot lead us.

Another example might be the cropping machines that the Luddites tried to destroy in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century England. Here the machines were given legal authority and rights that deterred their assailants and punished those that refused to be deterred. Such machines personified the future, where machines displaced workers, and were steeped in the new logic of the ‘rational economy’ – the market – that undermined the logic of the ‘moral economy’ (see Grint and Woolgar, 1997).

But can non-humans that do not embody formal authority lead us? Ironically this is probably the easiest case to make. Take, for example, the case of a derailed train heading in your direction. It has no formal right to the space you are occupying in the waiting room, but you might be well advised to submit to its ‘lead’ and get out of the way as fast as possible. The same can be said for those facing a guided missile, or a tank heading towards them. That missile or tank may be illegitimate in the eyes of the law, it may even be heading your way by accident, but it does have an uncanny ability to persuade most people to follow its lead and move. That does not mean it will *determine* your actions. Altner (2002: 135) recalls learning that a bridge in Berlin was about to be blown up before the advancing Soviet army in April 1945; he witnessed civilians take up positions on the structure, remaining silent as the bridge was destroyed – and with it the people fell to their deaths.

The tank or the bridge wired with explosives may be ‘in charge’, but that does not mean you have to follow its orders.

Leadership might also be manifest in something like a plan. The landing plan for D-Day, for instance, encompassed legal military authority over the subordinate human elements on 6 June 1944, as the plan for Omaha Beach in [Figure 2.3](#) suggests.

Time in minutes from H Hour	Easy Green	Dog Red	Dog White	Dog Green
H - 5			16 DD Tks Co. C 743 Tk Bn	16 DD Tks Co. B 743 Tk Bn
H	4 LCTs (8)Co A 743 Tk Bn	4 LCTs (8)Co A 743 Tk Bn		
H+01	6 LCVPs (200) Co E 116th	6 LCVPs (200) Co F 116th	6 LCVPs (200) Co G 116th	6 LCVPs (200) Co A 116th
H+03	3 LCMs 146th Eng.	3 LCMs 146th Eng. + Oil boat	3 LCMs 146th Eng. 5 LCVPs HQ G,H AA Btry	3 LCMs 146, 2 LCAs Co.C 24Rng
H+30	5 LCVPs Co H 116th. HQ	8 LCVPs HQ Co H&F AA Bt	1 LCVP 149 Eng. Beach Bn 1 LCM 121 Eng Bn	8 LCVPs HQ Co A&B AA Btry
H+40	1 LCM 112th Eng Bn	1 LCM 149 EngBeach Bn 4 LCVPs		4 LCAs HQ 1 Bn, 6 LCVPs Co D 116th 1 LCM 121 Eng.
H+50	7 LCVPs Co L 116th	7 LCVPs Co J 116th	7 LCVPs Co K 116th	7 LCVPs Co C 116 jcm 121 EnBn
H+57		8 LCVPs HQ Co 3 Bn Co M 116th		4 LCVPs Co B 81 Wpns Bn
H+60	1 LCT 121 Eng Bn	4 LCTs 121 Eng Bn 1 LCVP	1 LCVP HQ Co 116th	3 LCTs 121 Eng Bn 5 LCAs Cos A&B 5th Rangers
H+65				7 LCAs 5th Ranger Bn
H+70	1 LCI 149 Eng Beach Bn	1 LCI 112 Eng Bn	1 LCI Alt HQ Co 116th	8 LCAs 5th Rangers Bn 2 LCTs 1 LCM 121 Eng Bn
H+90			5 LCTs 58 FA Bn Armd 1 LCI 6th Eng Sp Brig	
H+100				
H+110	13 DUKWs 111 FA Bn	7 DUKWs AT plats 2, 3 Bns	2 LCTs 467 AAAW Bn	10 DUKWs AT plat 1 Bn
H+120	3 LCTs 467 AAAW Bn, AT Co 116	5 LCTs 467 AAAW, AT Co, 149 Eng Beach Bn	1 LCI HQ Co 104 Med Bn	2 LCTs 467 AAAW Bn
H+150		3 LCTs DD Tk, 12 DUKWs 461 Amphib Truck Co	3 LCTs, 3 LCMs Navy salvage	5 LCTs

Key:

DD Tks: Dual Drive Tanks (Amphibious Shermans)

DUKW: Amphibious trucks

Eng Bn: Engineering Battalion

LCA: Landing Craft (Assault)

LCI: Landing Craft (Infantry)

LCM: Landing Craft (Medium)

LCT: Landing Craft (Tank)

AAAW: Anti Aircraft Artillery Weapon

LCVP: Landing Craft (Vehicle, Personnel)

**Figure 2.3** Invasion Plan H Hour Plus, Omaha Beach, 116th RCT

In fact, this plan led the Americans astray in the sense that it implied a control over events on Omaha beach that proved impossible to achieve, and the assumptions built into the plan effectively inhibited the attempts of others to lead the troops off this beach. Nevertheless, on Utah (US), Sword (UK), Gold (UK) and Juno (Canada) beaches, the plans led the way by imposing a temporal sequence and spatial deployment on those landing. Indeed, it could be argued that the value of the plan lies not in the plan but the process of planning, by which it becomes apparent what might and might not work. Perhaps if the UK and US governments had planned for Iraq beyond the combat phase that country might not be in the bloody mess it is today.

At the ‘product’ end of Hybrid Leadership we might consider the atomic bomb. When dropped on Japan the bombs represented not simply enormous death and destruction in an instantaneous flash, but perhaps more importantly, that the future was related to the success of American leadership and unrelated to what the Japanese may have regarded as their superior leadership. In effect, it could be said to have led the Japanese to surrender – although this point is itself controversial. Again, it was not simply the atomic bomb – the technology – that determined the surrender of Japan because significant internal negotiations occurred between the military and political authorities as to whether Japan should surrender or continue to resist and the attack by the USSR on Japanese held territory also acted to encourage the surrender. Nonetheless, it would seem clear that the atomic bomb was to some extent instrumental in ‘leading’ the Japanese to that decision. In effect, it was not just the willingness of President Truman, the formal human leader, to continue the deployment of the weapon if necessary, nor the assumption that Truman was the individual with the leadership character to go through with the threat, nor that his behaviour would be instrumental in any action, nor even that he was positionally ‘in-front’ of the American people in this, nor that he, and not ‘the system’, could continue the action. Rather it was because it was Truman situated in a particular Allied envelope of space and time with the requisite material and symbolic resources at his disposal, and because he faced the Japanese in another contiguous envelope, and because of their mutual interpretation of each other’s situation. Truman’s leadership did not win the war against the Japanese, the Allied – and primarily American – leadership was an effect of their superior hybrid.<sup>14</sup>

As we enter a world of ever-increasing automation, however, it is quite possible that the hybridity between human and non-human tilts in favour of machines. Italian workerist Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi’s case (2019) is that significant social change in the hyperreal, hyper-fast era of knowledge work, the proliferation of social media memes and artificial intelligence, results in a kind of automation, a locking in of neoliberal ideology, where social and political responses to challenges and crises are predetermined and beyond the power of any individual or group to influence. Such a situation can lead to forms of psychoses and neuroses, as people are simultaneously prompted to hop impotently yet promiscuously from feeling to feeling, in an abstracted way that never settles and dwells. With every

further step towards more digital and automated social relations, we seem to be ever nearer the realm of simulacra posited by Baudrillard (1994), that is, a copy without original, e.g. a proliferation of memes, stylized and captioned images of a leader, ever more virtual financial transactions and so on, where the relationship to the ‘original’, the leader’s connection to a history of thought and ethics, or the grounding of money in objects of use value and connection to labour time, is dislocated. The example *par excellence* of such simulacra is the proliferation of algorithmic trading. This form of financial speculation requires humans to write code and to make some modifications but the aim is to allow the code to learn, to adapt and for the human to become ever more backgrounded. Capitalism may survive with or without humans, even if only virtually.

Hence the troubling contemporary hybrid of the human-pharmacological subject, humans dosed on anti-depressant and stimulant medication as a (synthetic) means of coping with the increasing and persistent dislocations of affect from embodied experience, their most obvious manifestations being anxiety, melancholy and rage (Berardi, 2015). Such alienation can ‘lead’ people to absorb themselves in alternative lives online, in role-playing games or compulsive social media use; it can lead to people seeking out explanations and solutions for the contemporary ‘desert’ of experience (Baudrillard, 2010), in the form of extreme ideologies and accompanying violence/suicide, which offer lures of ‘real’ meaning and connection.

Yet some humans do seem to be able to navigate and thrive in this world of simulacra and these tend to be the autocrats adept at influencing and moving with the flow of postmodern hyperreality. Former US president Donald Trump is, of course, the prime example. In the middle of March 2020 he was underplaying the dangers of the coronavirus, comparing it to the common flu, stating that car crashes killed more people than the virus – even though 25,000 die annually in car accidents in the United States and 250,000 died in the first ten months of 2020 alone from Covid (about 42,000 Americans die annually from flu). Yet, having demanded that the economy be ‘open for Easter’ Trump suddenly switched his rhetorical strategy on March 31st, earning plaudits from many in the US media for a more ‘sombre’ tone. Yet many commentators were less impressed. Daniel Dale from CNN noted the obvious, seemingly split personality on display from the president: highlighting that on February 26th Trump had stated, ‘this is a flu’, but a month later claimed, ‘it’s not the flu. It’s vicious.’<sup>15</sup>

The British journalist based in the United States for Al Jazeera, Mehdi Hasan, pointed to the unreality of claiming a potential loss of 100,000–200,000 deaths from the virus as a victory (at the time of writing – 27 January 2021 – the United States has 425,000 deaths and the United Kingdom has 100,000). Mehdi went on to ask, exasperatingly, whether the Democrats might care to offer some kind of opposition: ‘are Dems gonna call him out on it in real time? Is Biden gonna nail him for it? Will the opposition party run scathing attack ads on this? Or will they, once again, bring a butter knife to a gunfight?’<sup>16</sup>

Emily Nussbaum of the *New Yorker* drew attention to the broader strategy at play from Trump, claiming that his goal is ‘to erase history [...] & nudge the definition of success so he meet it.’<sup>17</sup>

Nussbaum here highlights the hybridity of Trump, who had become adept at not only influencing but riding with the more fleeting attention spans of contemporary medias and societies, fuelled by short cable news and even shorter social media attention cycles. Throughout his presidency he managed to move media attention on through various shock tactics, layering mistruth upon outlandish or racist statement – anything to keep the hyperreal flow of information and attention moving. The most obvious example of this tactic was when he told Democrat congresswomen of colour to ‘go back and help fix the totally broken and crime-infested places from which they came’ (Pengelly, 2019), the racist insinuation being of course that they were not real Americans. Widely acknowledged at the time as a distraction technique from his brutal immigration policies, which were gaining notoriety and attracting severe criticism, he nevertheless succeeded in moving the agenda on: a lord of chaos in the simulacra of social media. Yet the question remains of who was leading here, Trump or the technology? Did Trump’s postmodern bullying and racism lead the medium or did the medium enable and lead the practice? A case can be made for both simultaneously and inseparably. What we have is a case of intra-action, in Barad’s (2007) terms, where it becomes impossible to differentiate between technology and person to the extent that they are each within the other, generating a new form of subjectivity and agency. The implications of such thinking were perceptively noted as early as 2005, when Boje and Rhodes drew our attention to the rise of the ‘virtual leader construct’, where it becomes impossible to think of certain ‘leaders’ and indeed their leadership outside their digital production and consumption



(see also Liu, 2016). Further proof of this inseparability lies in the decline of Trump since losing the 2020 election. While he and his movement retained hegemony over the Republican Party, broader appeal was severely choked off when Trump was ejected from Twitter in early 2021. Does the leader 'Trump' really exist outside the digital realm? Before we get too carried away by notions of responsible tech companies defending the public realm from hateful ideology, however, we should pause for thought and remember that it was only once he had lost the election that Twitter finally removed Trump.

Indeed, the tech billionaires have themselves proven to be adept at managing their images via social media. Tesla chief executive Elon Musk is a case in point, oozing a hyper-masculine aura through his Twitter feed, through bold statements and often controversial posturing. But the phenomenon also stretches as far as the digital manipulation and generation of followership. We will return to Amazon and its dominance in more depth in [Chapter 4](#), but for now we consider the appearance of the 'Amazon FC Ambassador', which emerged on social media in 2018, at a time when the company was facing negative media coverage for its working conditions and threats of its workers unionising. Shrouded in mystery, these accounts, ostensibly from Amazon workers, popped up to counter negative claims and to promote the company as a model employer. Such lavish praise was also showered on the then chief executive Jeff Bezos, with the below from 'AmazonFCCarol' a case in point. 'I can safely say that none of MY ideas have panned out anywhere near what Jeff Bezos has accomplished. I am more than happy, though, to continue working here, at BFI4, in WA. I receive a (more than fair) wage and work with some really good people. Making history, every day.' @AmazonFCCarol, replying to @LibertyLou4, Twitter, Aug 23, 2018, 7:32 PM. 'Carol' downgrades her own abilities while simultaneously extolling the company and Bezos: perhaps a model Amazon employee? To date Amazon has yet to reveal whether this 'Stepford-like' (Coldewey, 2018) group of digital promotion workers are financially rewarded, although some have stated that they 'work on social media in lieu of warehouse work, and can receive perks such as free gift cards or days off' (Sainato, 2021a).

Bezos himself runs an active Twitter profile, a conspicuously visual offering of photos and positive messaging, presenting himself as an environmental champion deeply concerned with developing countries and



equalities issues. Such a virtual leader construct sits poorly against Amazon's record on tax (Neate, 2021), health and safety in the workplace (Press, 2021a), union busting (Press, 2021b) and eye-watering '440 million-metric-tonne carbon footprint [which] rivals that of competitors, such as Walmart, and even the world's largest energy companies' (Alimahomed-Wilson et al., 2020: 20). Of course, critical scrutiny and truth matter, as do the efforts of trade unionists to keep Bezos and Amazon in check; yet Bezos and Amazon have near unlimited resources, making resistance challenging to say the least.

However, we can also adopt a more positive counter to this wave of hyperreality and simulacra. There are examples of technology fuelling a more responsive, creative and real connection between leaders and followers (Bloom et al., 2021). Owain's current research on precarious workers who take strike action is a case in point. Before the advent of mobile digital communication, workplace grievances might have lingered for days or weeks before meaningful action was taken. Now, however, union representatives are able to respond and dispense advice in real-time via digital messenger services, either providing assistance themselves or asking groups to crowdsource solutions to workplace problems as they unfold. These forms of leader-responsiveness are not hemmed in by place or time – they can be late-night or early morning dialogues between workers coming off a night shift or in the middle of a delivery round and the representative(s) and peers in their pyjamas at home.

Of course, not many of us work for or with hyperreal leaders in the sense of a Trump – and we hope that only a minority of us will need to contact a union representative in the dead of night – but we are all caught up in organizations that navigate complex socio-technical worlds and we now therefore turn to explore the notion of an unfolding hybrid leadership practice in more depth. In what follows the notion of hybrid leadership is evaluated against a case study where the very idea of leadership embodied only in human form was never really appropriate – D-Day, 6 June 1944 – hence the resonance with the chapter's subtitle: putting the 'ship' back into leadership. However, the different approaches of the combatants towards technology in general, and boat technologies in particular, generated quite different approaches to the problems involved.

# Hybrid leadership on D-Day: Putting the 'ship' back into 'leadership' II

D-Day was the most complex single operation of the Second World War, the most significant aspect of the Battle of Normandy, and the most important battle for the Western Allies against Germany. A 40-mile stretch of the Normandy coast was the site and the object was

to carry out an operation from the United Kingdom to secure a lodgement on the continent from which further offensive operations can be developed. This lodgement area must contain sufficient port facilities to maintain a force of 26–30 divisions and to enable this force to be augmented by follow-up formations at the rate of from three to five divisions a month.

(quoted in Pitcairn-Jones, 1994: 11)

Within 24 hours the Allies had landed over 175,000 troops in eight divisions (five by sea and three by air), 1,500 tanks, 3,000 guns and 15,000 other vehicles.

It was not the largest single operation of the war. Operation Bagration, the Soviet offensive timed to coincide with D-Day, deployed 1.7 million troops, 4,000 tanks and 6,000 aircraft against the German eastern front. Within a week the Soviet offensive had caused the Germans to lose 154,000 troops, 2,000 tanks, 10,000 guns and 57,000 vehicles (Kilvert-Jones, 1999: 28). By comparison, in the first *month* of the Normandy campaign the Germans lost just over 80,000 troops. Thus, reflecting the overall war effort, it was the Soviet Union, not the Western Allies, that took far more casualties (probably around 8.5 million direct Soviet military casualties versus 210,000 Allied military casualties in Western Europe) and inflicted more human casualties (70 per cent) upon the Germans (roughly 607 German divisions versus 176 by the Western Allies [Furtado, 1992: 57]). However, Normandy was a catastrophe for the Germans. By the end of August 1944, three quarters of a million German casualties had been incurred and one quarter of a million German troops captured, double their losses at Stalingrad (Reynolds, 1999: 32).

But it is the complexity of the D-Day operation that defies the imagination because everything had to be transported across the Channel for D-Day and not simply pushed further west as with the Red Army's operations. Indeed, Rommel was well aware of the difference in the two fronts:

Our friends from the East cannot imagine what they're in for here. It's not a matter of fanatical hordes to be driven forward in masses against our line, with no regard for casualties and little recourse to tactical craft; here we are facing an enemy who applies all his native intelligence to the use of his many technical resources, who spares no expenditure on material and whose every operation goes its course as if it had been the subject of repeated rehearsal. Dash and doggedness no longer make a soldier.

(Quoted in Kilvert-Jones, 1999: 32)

And as far as Churchill was concerned: 'This war is not ... a war of masses of men hurling masses of shells at each other. It is by devising new weapons and above all by scientific leadership that we shall best cope with the enemy's superior strength' (quoted in Delaforce, 1998: 15). In effect, there was a clear recognition that the raw courage of human leadership-in-front was no longer adequate in the new war of hybrids. And what a hybrid! Planning Overlord was hardly a routine operation: it required plans to move a city the equivalent of Birmingham in the UK across the Channel, under enemy fire, and keep it moving until it got to Berlin (Turner, 1994: 26).

Churchill began his search for a hybrid solution to the problem of invasion by recruiting Frederick Lindemann, Professor of Experimental Philosophy at Oxford University (Fort, 2003); Millis Jefferis, a major in the Royal Engineers; and Percy Hobart, a recently retired general of an armoured division, to his 'toyshop' and between the four of them many of Britain's 'new weapons' evolved.

The first problem facing the initial assault troops was the obstacles and mines that littered the beach area itself. Any attacking amphibious force would have to face row upon row of defences even before landing on the beach. First, at around 225 metres from the high-water mark (HWM), 3-metre-high iron obstacles tipped with Teller anti-tank mines were supplemented by an occasional example of 'Element C': an array of large steel girders welded together to form a mined obstacle 15 foot long and 12 foot high. Second, at around 200 metres, there were rows of logs, supported by an 'A' frame and tipped with mines and driven into the sand at 45 degrees. Third, at 120 metres, were deployed rows of 'hedgehogs' – constructions of metal rods designed to rip open the bottom of the landing craft.

If the invading troops got through this deadly maze, they would then face rows of concertina barbed wire interspersed with minefields and tripwire mines of various kinds. Rommel had 6.5 million land mines laid along the French coast (one million a month for four months between February and

D-Day), though he had originally wanted 20 million. Where mined beach defences remained submerged, specialized underwater demolition teams were to be sent in to make sea-lanes safe and to mark them for the following landing craft. However, 'safety' had a cost: the casualty rate of these teams was amongst the highest of all. On Utah beach, the safest of all, only 13 of the 40 underwater demolition engineers survived the day, and only two of these were uninjured despite the use of Kapok Jerkins, a novel protective suit designed to resist the destructive power of underwater explosions (Neillands and de Normann, 1994: 156–7; Turner, 1994: 37).

Following the underwater demolition squads were the combat engineers. The engineering requirements for D-Day were two: first to open up 50-yard gaps in the wire and minefields to allow initial exits from the beaches. These were to be opened up by special engineering assault gapping teams. Second, behind the gapping teams, support engineering teams would widen the gaps, set up the communications to link the beach to the ships (including radios, semaphores and heliographs with coloured lights to inform the ships what to send in the next wave), and generally ensure an adequate traffic flow.

After D-Day the beach would be cleared by the engineering battalion beach groups who would also be responsible for establishing ammunition and fuel dumps. So important were the engineering tasks that 25 per cent of all the troops landed on D-Day were engineers of some kind. For example, on Omaha the first wave involved 1,450 assault infantry and 546 engineers (including 126 American navy demolition experts), though the normal proportion was 8 per cent (Ambrose, 1995: 143; Forty, 1995: 52; Fowle, 1994: 216).

Omaha was 7,000 yards long with between 70 yards of sand at HWM and 400 yards at low water mark (LWM). It was covered by the fifth and sixth Engineering Special Brigade making up the 5,632 members of the Provisional Engineer Special Brigade Group. Another 2,500 engineers landed with other units. (Utah was covered by a single unit, the first Engineering Special Brigade.) Omaha's obstacles comprised two main lines: 250 yards from the HWM was a 50-yard-deep line of Element C, Belgian Gates, covered with Teller mines. Fifty yards closer to the beach was a 50-yard-deep line of wooden posts and ramps supported by three staggered rows of hedgehog obstacles. (Fortunately, there were no Teller mined posts on Utah [Fowle, 1994: 215–16].)

By nightfall, about 34 per cent of the combat engineers on Omaha were dead or wounded and 60 per cent of their equipment had been lost or destroyed (Neillands and de Normann, 1994: 193). Moreover, they had been unable to complete their task of blowing 16 gaps in the beach defences, though four had been opened. Partly this was because the initial Allied aerial and naval bombardment left many defenders alive and fully capable of making the beach a no-go area. This then slowed the demolition down so much that the rising tide covered many other obstacles before they could be dealt with. Partly it was because the fire was so intense that many infantry soldiers crouched behind the obstacles, thus preventing the engineers from blowing them up (Ramsey, 1995: 353).

Getting the troops and equipment to the beaches, rather than across them, was the responsibility of the Royal Navy and was achieved through an array of specialized boats and ships. The Landing Ship Tank (LST) was the largest, at 4,000 tons and 327 feet long with a maximum speed of 10 knots. Depending on the precise size (the British-built versions (the Mk1) were 288 feet long, the US-built versions (known as the Mk2) slightly shorter) they could carry between eighteen and a dozen tanks, or between 500 and 1,400 tons of stores, or 25 three-ton trucks. And since the ships were flat-bottomed, they could be landed directly on shallow beaches, usually grounding in a metre of water. The American version carried traffic lights for unloading instructions: red – unhook your vehicle from the chains it was held by for the voyage; amber – start your engine; green – bow doors open and go! (Bruce, 1999: 105). The first 200 LSTs to land in Normandy also carried emergency medical kits which were dumped ashore before any hospitals were set up (from D-Day +2). LSTs also ferried casualties back to England, some of whom were operated on in transit within a small operating theatre at the back of the tank deck.

LCLs (Landing Craft Large) were the next largest specialist vessels at 110 feet long, capable of carrying about 200 troops or up to 8 tanks or 75 tons of material. These were also capable of direct beach unloading. Wherever possible ‘balanced loading’ was adopted which ensured that, for example, guns and their ammunition went together to avoid the problem encountered in Norway – where anti-aircraft guns were shipped separately from their ammunition and the loss of one disabled the other (Doughty, 1994: 84). It was also necessary to ‘combat load’ the craft so that the materiel was unloaded with the critical elements first. This required some

considerable driving skills in reversing heavy equipment up a small and steep ramp and guns in particular proved almost impossible to load except with the help of human muscle power. David Robertson, with the US 119th Field Artillery, was involved in such efforts when a brigadier general arrived and demanded that the unit adopt standard loading procedures – at which point the supervising lieutenant told the brigadier to ‘go away and leave these people alone’. He did (quoted in Bruce, 1999: 158).

In total, around 304 of the large landing craft of various forms were lost or disabled in the initial assault on the Normandy beaches, half to mined obstacles and the rest to artillery and accidents. The numbers included 131 Landing Craft Tanks (LCTs) which were smaller than the LSTs (97 on the Anglo-Canadian beaches and 34 on the American beaches),<sup>18</sup> and 21 LCLs [carrying 200 soldiers] (9 Anglo-Canadian and 12 American). The differential implies that the heavy US casualties on Omaha were caused more by problems on the beach rather than getting to the beach (Pitcairn-Jones, 1994: 107).

Indeed, while the troops tiptoed carefully around the mined obstacles, and even before they tried to cross the triple line of concertina barbed wire that was strung out along Omaha beach, the whole beach area would be under fire from the gun emplacements and the machine guns. Since these were often set at oblique angles, the defenders were protected from attackers’ fire directly in front of them, while being able to provide enfilading fire along a pre-set angle of the beach to the side. Should the attackers appear to be gaining a foothold, the defenders could often retire through a maze of concrete tunnels back to safety some distance from the beach, often to the mortar units whose mortars were already zeroed in onto specific beach positions (Neillands and de Normann, 1994: 33–4). In fact, one analysis suggests that the most lethal German weapon was the 81mm mortar with an effective range of 2,500 yards which caused three times more casualties than machine gun bullets (Ramsey, 1995: 527), and there are claims that two-thirds of all the Allied casualties in Normandy were due to mortars (Delaforce, 1999: 53). Most concerning to the Allied troops seemed to be the fact that the mortar shell, unlike most other shells, was almost inaudible in flight (Balkoski, 1999: 94–5). Certainly, very few Allied soldiers were killed or wounded by the German’s secret beach weapon – the Goliath (Leichte Ladungsträger [SdKfz 303]) which was a remote-

controlled (wire-guided) tracked container filled with 75 or 100 kilograms of explosives (Ramsey, 1995: 386).

The dangers of invading a fortified coastline had already been demonstrated by the failure at Dieppe in August 1942, and it had become clear, at least to some people, that human flesh was inappropriately vulnerable as a method of leading soldiers ashore under such circumstances. Instead, some form of hybrid leadership was necessary – not in the form of remote-controlled machines like the German Goliaths but through armoured assault vehicles. Here the two main Allied armies (Anglo-Canadian and US) used the same technology to get *to* the beaches but different technologies to get *across* the beaches. In both cases the technologies formed an inherent element of hybrid leadership – the beaches were not invaded by naked soldiers and not ‘led’ to and across the beaches by naked officers. But neither were they led by independent automatic machines. Instead, they were led to the beaches by hybrid leaders comprised of boats with sailors and soldiers and they were supposed to be led across the beaches by hybrid leaders of tanks and their occupants, even though on Omaha Beach the tanks generally failed. It is this that largely explains the disproportionate losses at Omaha for there was little of the specialized armour used on the Anglo-Canadian beaches to lead the invasion – the so-called Funnies.

One might be forgiven for thinking that leading the Normandy invasion in a boat of any kind on 6 June 1944 was an extraordinarily dangerous thing to do, but why make it worse by leading the invasion in a hybrid composed of wooden boats with unarmoured soldiers? What was even crazier was that an armoured boat that would have offered far better protection, at least from small arms fire and shrapnel, though not from a direct artillery shell, could have replaced this self-evidently weak hybrid. So why did the Allies lead with such a weak hybrid?

## **Landing craft**

With the United States Navy heavily involved in the Pacific Ocean against Japan, the British navy took prime responsibility for the transportation, and the operating procedures had been established for many years through the experience of previous amphibious operations: HWOST (High Water of

Ordinary Spring Tides) marked the dividing line above which the navy's role ceased and the army's responsibility started.

Responsibility for actually providing the landing craft mainly fell on American shoulders, since most British capacity was involved in the repair and construction of merchant ships and warships. However, the American Pacific supremo, Admiral King, remained wedded to the Pacific theatre and ensured that most American-built landing craft were diverted there: for example, on 1 May 1944 only 2,493 of the 31,123 existing US landing craft were destined for Operation Overlord (Botting, 1978: 48; Neillands and Normann, 1994: 67). Eventually, the overall US commander, General Marshall, intervened to force Admiral King to release some of the landing craft being stockpiled for the Pacific campaign but only on 15 April 1944 did King release a number of naval ships for support (3 battleships, 2 cruisers and 22 destroyers) (Lewin, 1998: 176).

Paradoxically, then, one of the most critical factors in determining the date of the invasion was the provision of such landing craft, allegedly because the difficulties of design and production ensured that not until 20 March 1944 were the theoretical numbers settled, and not until May 1944 were sufficient numbers of such craft actually available. Yet the numbers available in the Pacific were more than adequate for both theatres so the most significant problem was not the technical problem of production but the political problem of distribution. The numbers had to be huge because Eisenhower required 175,000 troops (of whom 2000 were allocated just for record keeping), 1,500 tanks, 3,000 artillery pieces and 10,000 vehicles to be on French soil in the first 24 hours (Neillands and Normann, 1994: 71; Turner, 1994: 54).

The naval plan required 4,126 landing craft (of which 98 per cent actually sailed on the day), 736 support ships and 864 merchant ships. All of these were to be protected by 1,213 warships of various sizes. Of the latter, 189 minesweepers would sweep the channel of mines (29 mines were swept) in the biggest minesweeping operation of the war to provide 12 safe lanes initially 15 miles wide broadening to 30 miles nearer Normandy (Pitcairn-Jones, 1994: 51).<sup>19</sup> There were also 6 battleships, 2 monitors (heavily armoured gunships), 23 cruisers and 56 destroyers that would provide fire power to destroy beach defences and gun-emplacements that might endanger the landings (Neillands and Normann, 1994: 69; Turner, 1994: 54–71). Specialized landing craft and transport vessels were also



required in large numbers, and from the base line of just six in 1939, owned by the largest navy of the time, the British Royal Navy, the requirements were clearly large.

But perhaps the most pressing problem as far as the initial landings were concerned, was how to protect the troops as they disembarked under fire from the first personnel carriers to land (the larger landing craft were destined to land after the smallest assault craft). There was already plenty of information available from the failed Dieppe raid in August 1942 about what was likely to happen when unarmoured troops landed on exposed beaches facing a heavily gunned and emplaced enemy. Nevertheless the 1,089 leadership hybrids that deposited the first vulnerable humans onto the beaches at Normandy were the American LCVs (Landing Craft, Vehicle and Personnel) also known as the Higgins Boat and the British built version of the same boat, the LCA (Landing Craft, Assault). Both boats were fabricated entirely from wood with the exception of the bow that had some armour plating after the Dieppe fiasco had demonstrated that all-wooden landing craft were strangely ineffective against bullets and shells.

The Higgins boat derived from a boat designed by Andrew Jackson Higgins, an Irish American who set up Higgins Industries in the 1930s, to deal with the Louisiana swamps. The boat had a very shallow draft (18 inches) and a strong pine 'headlog' that could brush aside any floating debris in the swamp and allowed the boat to land onto sand bars without damage. It was relatively fast (12 knots) and manoeuvrable and could carry 36 troops or a jeep and 12 troops. Over 23,000 were built during the war; indeed, by September 1943 Higgins industries had built almost 13,000 boats for the United States Navy – almost 92 per cent of the total. At its peak Higgins Industries employed 20,000 workers and built 700 boats for the United States Navy every month.<sup>20</sup> Higgins – whose creations included the catchphrase 'The man who relaxes is helping the Axis' – was much admired by Eisenhower, even if the former could demolish a bottle of whiskey a day, as the commander once said of Higgins: 'He is the man who won the war for us.... If Higgins had not designed and built the LCVs, we never could have landed over an open beach. The whole strategy of the war would have been different.'<sup>21</sup>

The Anglo-Canadian LCAs carried twenty soldiers and were crewed by two Royal Marines, one to operate the ramp and the other to operate the engine and steering. LCAs were built across Britain in numerous factories,

many of which had previously built furniture. The largest single producer in Britain was J. Bolson & Son's shipyard at Poole that had previously made leisure boats and yachts. At the height of production Bolson's produced one LCA per day and adopted what was, for then, a revolutionary production strategy: the assembly line and specialized division of labour was replaced by single work squads who produced a complete boat (Legg, 1994: 28). But it wasn't just the lessons of Dieppe that were ignored on the whole; the entire experience of the 'Island Hopping' strategy of the American Marines and Army in the Pacific provided not just further evidence of the problems but a possible solution: the amtrac.

## **(Not) learning from the Pacific**

In the invasion of Betio Island in the Tarawa Atoll in the Pacific, between 20 and 23 November 1943, the US Marines faced 26,700 Japanese troops, 1,000 Japanese labourers and 1,200 Korean labourers ensconced, it was alleged, in the most heavily fortified area in the world. At just two miles long and one mile wide, the Japanese had installed 14 large coastal defence guns, 40 other artillery pieces and more than 100 machine guns firing through a four-foot coconut log wall. In all there were 500 pillboxes. As the Japanese commander, Rear Admiral Keiji Shibasaki, boasted, 'A million men cannot take Tarawa in a hundred years' (quoted in Steinberg, 1998: 106). Some of the emplacements had concrete walls eight-feet thick which proved to be impervious to the largest naval shell fire despite the pre-landing bombardment from the sea and air that saw, on average, ten tons of high explosives fall on each of the 291 acres. If ever there was an impregnable hybrid, this was it.

The US Second and Eighth Marine Divisions were carried to the beaches either on the conventional wooden LCVP (Higgins Boats) or the newer LVTs (Landing Vehicle, Tracked). The LVTs or amtracs (amphibious tractors), or 'alligators' as they were known, had originated in civilian tractors built for working in the swamps of the southern states. In 1936 Donald Roebling, an engineer who had retired to Florida, witnessed a disastrous hurricane and re-designed a vehicle with his son, John, that they had first dreamt up in 1934.<sup>22</sup> The tracked vehicle, the 'alligator', was one of the few that could traverse the Florida swamps or the marshy everglades

to rescue the beleaguered population on behalf of the Florida Red Cross. That rescue mission was covered by *Life* magazine in 1937 and one individual who immediately saw a greater use for it read the article: The Commanding General of the US Fleet Marine Force in the Pacific. Using diagonal track cleats and an aluminium construction, the Roebling alligator or amphibian was first prototyped in 1939 and could reach speeds of 10 mph on land and 25 mph in the water. It had a cruising radius of 400 miles and steered either by disengaging the tracks on one side or by reversing the tracks on one side. The prototype drew only 5 feet of water fully laden with well over 20 people and could drop 6 feet from land to water without capsizing. The provisional cost was put at £3,600 and by 1940 the US Marine Corps was convinced the vehicle was critical for them. In November 1940 the United States Navy and US Marine Corps ordered 200 to be made with light steel rather than duralumin and by 1941 the first 100 were delivered. By the end of the war 18,620 had been made.

The first military amtrac, LVT1, was one of 1,225 built by Roebling and FMC (Food Machinery Corporation) in July 1941. It had a capacity of 24 troops plus a crew of three and it travelled at 6 mph in the water and 12 mph on the land. The slow speed of the vehicle and the short life of the tracks led to a two-month delay while the design was redeveloped at the California Institute of Technology. In June 1942 demonstrations of the new prototypes were held for the United States Navy, Army and Marine Corps.

Most of the LVT1s went to the United States Navy and Marine Corps but 485 went to the US Army and 55 were sent to the Anglo-Canadian forces. Its first operational use was at the battle of Guadalcanal on 7 August 1942 and some – especially those for transporting personnel rather than materiel – were fitted with appliqué armour (armour plate ‘applied’ to the existing structure). Of the 2,936 LVT2s, 1,507 were used by the United States Navy and 100 sent to the Anglo-Canadian forces. From 1943 the LVT3s had their engines moved forward so that a rear-loading ramp could be used but the most popular British use was of the LVT4 which could carry 30 soldiers, had a rearward-loading ramp, and could mount four machine guns. Most of the LVTs used in Europe, however, known in Britain as the Buffalo, were unarmoured with a trapdoor exit at the front. As many as 500 were sent to Britain or Canada.

Tarawa, in November 1943, was the first assault that used amtracs in large numbers to carry troops (Bruce, 1999: 200, 273). Fitted with

propellers and tracks these amtracs could travel at four knots in the water and 20 mph on land – and they had rearward facing doors. Critically, this meant they did not have to disgorge their vulnerable contents straight into the sights of enemy gunners at the water's edge, but could travel across some reefs, sand and barbed wire right up to the enemy emplacements and unload their occupants from the relative safety of the back of the vehicle. In effect, these amtracs operated as hybrid leaders, leading their humans to and across the beaches in a much safer environment than the wooden LCVPs.

The Marines' commander, General Smith, had demanded more amtracs to carry his troops forward but Admiral Turner, the amphibious force commander, had overruled his request, insisting that the LCVPs were quite adequate for the task. Given that Rear Admiral Kingman, the commander of the ships, had promised to 'obliterate' Tarawa before any Marine landed, Turner presumably thought Smith's request unnecessary. Nevertheless, Turner eventually accepted the request and 50 more amtracs were delivered before the invasion bringing the total to 125 – just enough for the first three assault battalions but leaving the follow up units to land in LCVPs.

The execution of the plan left much to be desired – and much to be learned for Overlord. The disembarking Marines were forced to delay their exit from the carrying ships when it was realized that they were directly under the bombing route. Then the failure to co-ordinate the naval and airborne bombardments led to a 35-minute gap between the two and a radically shortened aerial assault. As the Marines approached the beach, the smoke caused by the bombardment prevented the naval ships from firing right up until the landing and, although Japanese communications lines were cut, precious little material damage had been done to the defenders. Thus, at a distance of 3,000 yards the line of 125 amtracs came under direct fire from the beach guns which destroyed half of them. Meanwhile, the LCVPs could not even cross the reef, leaving the follow-up forces to wade ashore or transfer into one of the few remaining amtracs returning from the beach. The only area where the defensive ring was penetrated was on Red Beach 3 where two destroyers put the large Japanese guns out of action, allowing the amtracs to move through the sea wall. Eventually, after three days of fighting, the defenders were overcome. Only 146 of the 4,700 defenders survived (including just 17 Japanese). Of the 12,000 attacking Marines 1,027 were dead or missing (as were 29 naval personnel), 2,292 were wounded. But significant lessons had been learned and on 1 February

1944 these new techniques and technologies were deployed against Kwajalein Atoll when all the infantry from the 7th Infantry Division landed in amtracs, and after three days and 334 deaths the atoll was captured (Steinberg, 1998: 104–19). For the rest of the Pacific war vital lessons were learned: amtracs were fitted with thicker armour and some upgunned to carry 37 mm or 75 mm guns in turrets while those invading Okinawa on 1 April 1945 often carried four 30 calibre machine guns.

Despite this experience only two amtracs were shipped to Normandy and both these appeared on Utah, although it had been clear from the Pacific and Dieppe, that conventionally propelled and unarmoured landing craft with bow-facing doors exposed the assault waves to considerable enemy fire, and – although no vehicle was immune to artillery fire – an armoured amtrac with a rearward opening door could lead troops across the most exposed part of the assault, the beach, much more successfully than an LCVP. Such vehicles were already available by D-Day because 500 LVT(A)1 – amtracs with an enclosed and armoured hull supporting a 37 mm gun – were supplied to the United States Navy and Army between 1942 and 1944. Indeed, they were used again en masse at Saipan in the middle of June 1944 when 150 LVT(A)1s were deployed in support of the 600 LVTs carrying 8,000 US Marines in the first wave on a four-mile assault of the beach. Even more useful was the LVT(A)2 which was like the LVT(A)1 except the armour was increased and the 37 mm gun removed – thus providing a well-armoured personnel carrier – of which the US Army used 200 between 1943 and 1944. These had originally been used just for carrying stores and troops and were photographed in *Parade* on 15 August 1942 carrying troops – so their availability was clearly not unknown to the Overlord planners.<sup>23</sup>

Nor was the utility of this vehicle questioned by those using them in combat. When the ten-thousandth LVT rolled off the assembly lines at FMC on 14 May 1945, Vice-Admiral Cochrane, Chief of the (US) Bureau of Ships, speaking of their ability to navigate the coral reefs in the Pacific, claimed that ‘the war against Japan would be far from its present reassuring stage had it not been for the thousands of Amtracs’ (quoted in Campbell, 1988: 35).

That lesson seems to have bypassed most of the Normandy planners, but not all of them. Major General Corlett, for example, had commanded the US Seventh Infantry Division against Japanese forces on the Kwajalein

atoll which had fallen for a fraction of the cost in casualties of the attack on Tarawa and he had suggested the D-Day assault use the new amtracs (Parker, 1995: 335). But Corlett was, in his own words, 'squelched' by both Eisenhower and Bradley when he suggested it to them in a meeting (Kilvert-Jones, 1999: 76). A response that Corlett put down to himself being 'A son-of-a-bitch from out of town' (quoted in Balkoski, 1999: 124). Admittedly, it was probably too late to provide large numbers of these vehicles but even a few would probably have proved invaluable and two were certainly operating off Utah beach (one of them is still there). After all, at least 24 were stockpiled in England by 23 March 1944 (the photo of them was embargoed until after 6 June 1944) (*Wheels and Tracks*, No. 24, 1988: 26–7).

Even after Omaha the Western Theatre commanders avoided any significant deployment of amtracs, though three 'Buffaloes', as the British called them, were used on 1 November 1944 by 41, 47 and 48 Royal Marine Commandos, supporting the First Canadian Army in clearing the Westkapelle end of the Dutch island of Walcheren which blocked the route to the sea from Antwerp (Bruce, 1999: 185). Thus, the lessons of inadequate naval and air bombardments against deeply entrenched beach artillery, and the advantages of using amtracs over unarmoured personnel landing craft to lead amphibious assaults, were never learned by the Normandy military leaders – except perhaps by those who became casualties on the Normandy beaches on D-Day. For the latter in the American LCVPs rather than the Anglo-Canadian LCAs, being part of a leadership hybrid comprising soft human bodies and only marginally stronger wood was just the first problem on D-Day.

As it was the US Fourth Infantry Division losses at Utah on D-Day were put at 197. The casualties at Omaha for the Fourth and Twenty Ninth Infantry Divisions were approximately 2,000 on the first day (Ambrose, 1995: 43; Kilvert-Jones, 1999: 10). On Juno beach the Canadians suffered 805 casualties and there were another 243 casualties in this area from the British Commando units involved on or near Juno, to bring the total for the Juno area to at least 1,204 (and this excludes casualties taken by the commando units operating inland) (Holt and Holt, 1999: 169, 181). On Gold beach itself the British suffered 413 casualties (Delaforce, 1999: 151). On Sword the beach casualty figures totalled 630. It is self-evident that some casualties would have been incurred under any circumstances

imaginable, but the point really is to consider whether different leadership hybrids could have significantly reduced the casualties. The casualty rate amongst the leading waves of infantry and engineers was the highest of all and, given the developments in the Pacific of the amtrac, it would seem clear that the leadership hybrids deployed by the Allies on D-Day left soldiers unnecessarily exposed: unarmoured humans make extraordinarily ineffective leaders on invasion beaches.

## Conclusion

This chapter explored the possibility that leadership could be defined not just by the person of the leader but that such leaders first, need not be individuals and second, need not even be human. The first part of the chapter traced out the connections between leadership, followership, commitment and independence to construct a hypothetical schema of four ideal types of leadership: the ‘white elephant’, to represent the leader who is born a god, who is omnipotent, omniscient and as rare as an albino elephant; the ‘cat herder’, where leadership proved impossible in the face of individually oriented and independently minded ‘followers’; the ‘emperor’, where an assumed superiority acted to generate irresponsible followers; and the ‘wheelwright’, founded upon the acceptance by the leader of his or her limitations, his or her need to learn how to lead through an apprenticeship, and rooted in a dependence upon the advice and support of responsible followers who were both committed to the community but retained their independence of judgement from the leader. The role of the last type was then explored in some detail through various examples where the role of the followers – responsible or otherwise – supported or undermined the success of their leaders through an accumulation of small acts. Indeed, it was suggested the leadership was better understood as the god of small things because of the importance of this relationship between leaders and followers.

Having argued that the notion of leader as person was severely constrained by the actions of followers, we then proceeded to question whether even this expansion of the definition of ‘person’ was sufficient to explain leadership and proceeded to suggest that leadership, far from being the consequence of human acts, was much better explained as a

consequence of hybrids rather than humans. Today's contemporary context of the simulacra and hyperreality fuelled by social media, automation and artificial intelligence, further blur the distinctions between human and machine, who is leading and who is following. While such technological developments hold the promise for more equal and emancipatory forms of leadership, they also threaten to dislocate the masses and further concentrate power and wealth in the hands of a few. Nevertheless, leaders *qua* humans are seldom 'naked' and are usually enwrapped by significant forms of clothing and supported by more or less robust technologies. And even if in the case of the Nigerian women protesters at the Chevron-Texaco Escravos site described in the first chapter, they did enhance their leadership by threatening to remove their clothes, this was hardly likely to be effective on D-Day.<sup>24</sup> If leadership cannot be reduced to a naked and individual human then we should start to consider both the collective and the hybrid nature of leadership.

Casualties were always going to be relatively heavy on D-Day, though Allied casualties were smaller than expected by the planners. Nonetheless it is also highly probable that some of these resulted from the weak hybrids that led the troops to and over the beaches. It is inconceivable to think about how such an invasion could have occurred without some form of hybridity, though remarkably most of the texts consider leadership only in its human embodiment. Of course, this still implies that we have resolved the volitional problem of leadership – as opposed to sidestepping it – nevertheless, the point is to consider whether a volitional act by a naked human would have been sufficient in and of itself to have 'led' the Allies to success, or even the Germans to defeat. This, surely, is the point: what matters in this approach to leadership is not to be side-tracked into philosophical disputes about volition and causation and to focus on the pragmatic aspects of leadership: neither human-less networks nor thing-less networks could have succeeded on D-Day. Thus, our discussion in the second part of this chapter has focussed less on the human element in leadership than on the way different leadership hybrids are constructed and deployed – where these hybrids originated (in machine or human) seem less important than their ongoing effects and better understanding their implications for how we envisage leadership in the future. In both the hybrids that led the first Allied assault troops to the beaches of Normandy – the LCVPs and LCAs (to say nothing of the hybrids that led them across the



beaches) – significant weakness in the hybrids were cruelly exposed by the defenders and some of them were the consequences of political infighting and cultural blinkers rather than rational decision-making. But these cannot be separated from the technologies themselves because they form inherent parts of it; they are, indeed, hybrids of intra-acting people and things.

## Notes

- 1 Mission Command, which has long played a role in some aspects of the British Army, has become a critical aspect of the British military's Defence Leadership Centre doctrine. See Watters (2004).
- 2 Arundhati Roy has since become an esteemed activist, living in practice the themes of her novel in the real world – connecting everyday acts with big issues of environmental justice and human rights.
- 3 Thanks to Jack Nasher-Awakemian for reminding us of this distinction.
- 4 <http://aboutscilly.com/sir-cloudesley-shovell-scilly-naval-disaster-1707/>. It is, of course, intriguing that, despite everyone drowning, news of this story managed to survive; yet another example of the power of myth.
- 5 <https://www.navygeneralboard.com/the-sinking-of-hms-victoria/>. It is to inhibit the powerful influence of rank that contemporary British Courts Martial precede the final verdict with a discussion of individual conclusions by the most junior officer first, and the senior officer last (thanks to Group Captain Graham Evans for pointing this out to us).
- 6 Edmund Burke (1729–97) is alleged to have said that 'all that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing'.
- 7 <https://jdasolutions.aero/blog/palm-90-tragedy-solace-crm-aviation-safety-advance/>. In 1994 Boeing published research into airline safety that used Hofstede's cultural categories to examine the link between culture and air crashes. That research suggested that those countries deemed to be high on power-distance and low on individualism (specifically, Panama, Colombia, Venezuela, China, Korea, Pakistan, Thailand) had an accident rate 2.6 times the average. See Phillips, D. (1994), 'Building a Cultural Index to World Airline Safety', *Washington Post*, 21 August 1994, p. 8. (Thanks to Adrian Wilkinson for alerting us to this research.)
- 8 'Provided Vincristine is administered intravenously (IV), it is a powerful and useful drug in the fight against leukemia. However, if the drug is administered, in error, through an intrathecal injection (IT) the result is usually the death of the patient or, if the patient does survive, then they typically suffer from severe neurological trauma.' *External Inquiry into the adverse incident that occurred at Queen's Medical Centre, Nottingham, 4th January 2001* by Professor Brian Toft. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/3133076.stm>.
- 9 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/1284244.stm>.
- 10 Hedge funds (which started with LTCM in 1994) are limited partnerships with a maximum of ninety nine partners and are almost unregulated. About 4,000 existed in 2004, and that number has increased to between 10,000 and 15,000 by 2020. They are usually financed by very wealthy institutions and individuals and with very high leverage/gearing. The debt to equity/capital at LTCM was between 50:1 and 250:1 while most operate at around 2:1.
- 11 See Heifetz (1994) on the issue of follower responsibility.
- 12 Much has been made of the oath of allegiance sworn to Hitler by all members of the German armed forces and the SS. Allegedly this prevented such individuals from abandoning their

positions or even rejecting Hitler's increasingly erroneous orders. Yet the German Army's officer corps had previously demonstrated the fragility of such oaths when General Groener (who succeeded Ludendorff) told Kaiser Wilhelm II in November 1918 that he was no longer bound by his oath to the Kaiser – it was 'now just a notion' (quoted in May, 2000: 26).

- 13 Some of these rifles with a 90-degree bend in the barrel and a special mirrored sight were captured by US forces towards the end of the war. See Russell (1981: 183).
- 14 Had the Japanese not surrendered after the first atomic bombs, the Allied strategy contained two invasion plans: Operation Olympic, to be deployed in November 1945, was the invasion of Kyushu, the most southerly of the Japanese islands, and was the responsibility of American forces alone. The second part, Operation Coronet, for early 1946, would see the invasion of the rest of Japan by American and Allied forces, including the British. The estimated casualties for these operations were between 1.7 and 4 million Allied casualties (including 400,000–800,000 deaths) and between 5 and 10 million Japanese fatalities.
- 15 <https://www.nps.gov/articles/trumanatomicbomb.htm>.
- 16 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tommybeer/2020/09/10/all-the-times-trump-compared-covid-19-to-the-flu-even-after-he-knew-covid-19-was-far-more-deadly/?sh=1ef70ac1f9d2>.
- 17 <https://twitter.com/mehdirhasan/status/1125064027208597504>.
- 18 The last surviving LCT from D-Day (LCT 7074) is now on exhibition at the Portsmouth D-Day Story Museum.
- 19 Kilvert-Jones (1999: 40) puts the number of minesweepers at 278.
- 20 <http://www.higginsboat.org/html/higind.html>.
- 21 <https://cs.stanford.edu/people/eroberts/courses/ww2/projects/fighting-vehicles/higgins-boat.htm>.
- 22 The earliest known amphibious craft was the 'amphibious battle wagon' designed by Agostino Ramelli (1531–1600). Several amphibious military vehicles were tested by the British and American forces in the 1920s, including an amphibious tank, the British 'Johnson Light Infantry Tank' in 1922 and Christie's two US models (*Wheels and Tracks*, No. 24, pp. 53–4 (1988)).
- 23 *Parade* was an illustrated weekly published by British troops for British troops from August 1940 until February 1948. Examples can be seen in *Union Jack* (London: HMSO/Imperial War Museum).
- 24 Celtic warriors, however, did tend to fight naked in battle, at least until around 300 bce.

## Leadership as product: Putting the subjunctive back where it belongs

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### Introduction

This chapter is concerned with examining the perspective that takes product, in a fairly loose sense, to mean the ongoing or final result, as the critical aspect of leadership. ‘Product’ evokes notions of the commodity and commodification, of objects or services bought and sold for use value (what we can do with a product to sustain and fulfil ourselves) or exchange value (the financial worth of something, often independent of its use to us) (Marx, 2005b). We can therefore think about the ways in which the notion of leadership and its product operate within a larger ‘industry’ (Ferry and Guthey, 2020; Guthey et al., 2009), where the product and promised results have a market value. We can also consider the extent to which leadership products transcend use and exchange value to accrue a kind of symbolic value, where it is the allure and exchange of competing shiny products that should compel our attention (Baudrillard, 2005). The points arising here are threefold. First, whether it is possible to discern which leadership products seem to thrive in the marketplace of ideas. Second, whether these products are the ones of value to our organizational work or indeed to societies more generally. Third, whether the industry and marketplace of leadership ideas are productive, leading us to optimized forms of leadership, or unproductive, bearing little relation to real value-adding activity.

A focus on end products became very popular towards the end of the twentieth century, marked by the rise of all forms of audits, measurement

systems and leadership development programmes that purported to improve the performance of leaders and their organizations. In what follows we approach this phenomenon by first evaluating the extent to which results can be traced back to the actions of leaders or the leadership products they are purported to enact, before proceeding to analyse the significance of product-based leadership for ethical behaviour.

When leaders attain a significant cultural status and media saturation occurs – when their images and snippets of their words are reproduced by a wide range of people representing a range of interests – it is common that they are presented to us in very neutral ways, with controversies and any kind of radical lessons they could offer stripped from their stories. For example, in the wake of Nelson Mandela's death, his past as a radical engaged in armed struggle against a brutal racist government was 'whitewashed' in favour of a saccharine, generic 'inspirational' figure who could be appropriated by people of all political flavours, regardless of their history (Milne, 2013). Our focus on ethics here, then, is deliberately provocative, as ethics have become an increasing source of market value, as witnessed in the proliferation of corporate social responsibility units and initiatives from large businesses. In particular, in the case of three leaders usually lauded as embodying the highest ethical standards, Greta Thunberg, Gandhi and Mother Teresa, we also note a significant commodification of their purported products, the results of their leadership. The narrative then moves to less commercialized domains and seeks to 'blast' (Benjamin, 2015) 'failed' products of leadership from history, seeking to learn from the leadership of slave revolts. Analysing the revolts led by Spartacus in the Third Servile War against Rome, and the rebellions and resistance organized against Nazi slave labour, we argue that any simple notion of assessing leadership by its alleged end product is doomed to fail: leadership theory may circulate within a commercial marketplace but the products are as contested as the definitions, and one way of avoiding being defeated by the proliferation of leadership objects is to consider leadership as a subjunctive verb – as something that may, or may not, produce a definitive marketable product, which may or may not have a market or social value, rather than something that definitely does or does not.

# Product, responsibility and culpability: soft shell, hard shell

In Douglas Adams's *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul* the first chapter ends with Kate Schechter at Heathrow Airport when an explosion knocks her unconscious. Chapter two begins thus:

The usual people tried to claim responsibility. First the IRA, then the PLO and the Gas Board. Even British Nuclear Fuels rushed out a statement to the effect that the situation was now completely under control, and that it was a one in a million chance, that there was hardly any reactive leakage at all, and that the site of the location would make a nice location for a day out with the kids and a picnic, before finally having to admit that it wasn't actually anything to do with them at all. No cause could be found for the explosion.

The point at hand is how quickly we attribute cause and effects, often with little or no evidence to support our attributions. Moreover, the precise cause and effects of leadership are also subject to reconstruction over time and in different places to the point where we can never really finalize the argument about the end product of leadership with any kind of hermetic seal. Put another way, we might usefully configure the results of leadership through a subjunctive verb – something that *might* occur, rather than something that has occurred or will occur, something for which leaders might, or might not, be responsible. Thus, as in Douglas Adams's novel, something happens and we need to find someone to blame or congratulate: we sack CEOs and generals if the stock falls or the battles are lost, even though it may have nothing to do with them; we lavish executives with extravagant salaries, stock options and bonuses even if success may have very little to do with them or if notions of 'success' are contested; companies continue to pay exorbitant amounts of money on leadership development programmes, even though the end product in terms of more effective leadership (and then by extension whether that 'leadership' is tangible enough to identify and make a difference) is uncertain. Indeed, as suggested in the previous chapter, leaders can be likened to saints and scapegoats in that they do not need to be physically or morally responsible for an event, but we feel more secure if (1) we can establish a cause for an event and (2) we can establish an individual or group that we deem responsible for that event. In other words, we hold leaders *responsible* even if they are not *culpable*. The distinction between bearing the blame or credit for others' mistakes or victories and

being personally guilty of making a mistake, or responsible for a success, may be legitimate if the leaders are also directly involved in the recruitment, training and guidance of subordinates, but often they are not, and it is in this sense that leaders provide the ritual role of sacred hero or scapegoat: someone needs to be sacrificed or deified to assuage the gods' or market's wrath.

For Durkheim (1883) the sacred role of leaders also related to their function in society, as iconic embodiments of all that society held to be good and noble, and as a yardstick for followers to measure themselves against. Without such leaders, Durkheim suggested, 'ordinary' people have no method of measuring themselves and no result to aim for. Hence the symbolic reward due to leaders – the respect of followers – was not to privilege them, nor was it necessary to encourage people to undertake the responsibility of leadership, instead the respect of followers was functionally necessary for followers in the same way that the sacred ritual of a funeral is necessary for the grieving but not for the dead. Indeed, the symbol of sacrifice is often manifest in the representations of the deaths of leaders – for example, Benjamin West's portrait 'The Death of Lord Viscount Nelson' specifically reconstructs the admiral's death to reflect the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Thus, when we are attempting to establish the importance of Leadership as Product it is worth remembering that 'product' has multiple meanings and the word should not be reduced to some matrix of Key Performance Indicators.

The latter form of product-based leadership came to its apotheosis in the quality control movement, particularly in standards such as ISO 9000 and one of its predecessors BS 5750. Both of these systems of quality control had their origins in the attempts by various governments, but particularly the British, to maintain engineering standards in munitions factories in the Second World War. But what started out as a beneficial method of avoiding accidents at work and ensuring munitions did what they were supposed to, according to Seddon (2000), not only failed to deliver the promised improvement in quality but actually undermined the ability of organizations to improve quality by replacing an engineering standard with a management standard, a learning environment with one rooted in 'command and control'. In effect the focus of concern shifts from quality to the standard, and thus satisfying the standard becomes more important than improving the quality of the product. The development of the 'audit society' (Power,

1999), itself rooted in ‘the tyranny of numbers’ (Boyle, 2001), has various manifestations of the debilitating effect of conformance, including universities who concentrate on satisfying government demands rather than those of their profession (research and teaching), hospitals that shift resources around in time to comply with specific medical audits rather than concentrate on medical improvements, and the removal of non-ISO 9000-registered companies from authorized suppliers’ lists. In sum, achieving the *required* results may not be the equivalent of achieving the *desired* results and the same shift from trust to conformity often inhibits leadership.

One example from Seddon’s (2003) renewed attack upon results-based models will suffice to cement the criticism that the problem is not the measurement but whose results are being measured? The answer is usually the managements’ rather than the customers’ and the separation of the planning from the execution of work – in true Taylorist fashion – often leads to organizational misbehaviour designed to satisfy the management hierarchy and its fetish for results that can be easily measured, rather than their desire to provide good service or products. Moreover, the consequence is often a determination to blame the poor performers rather than restructure the system that is itself usually responsible for the problems. The consequential fragmentation of the system generates extraordinary acts by the employees – but only in their ingenious methods of compliance and conformity, not in service provision. For example, Seddon notes how a local authority developed a house repair system that required customers (tenants) to ring a call centre that diagnosed the problem, decided a Specification from the Schedule of Rates that determined how the trade workers would be paid, and who would undertake it. This system was evaluated by results in terms of budget and ‘time to repair’, and the Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPI) that were mandated by central government were the percentage of ‘emergency’ repairs undertaken in 24 hours, the percentage of ‘urgent’ repairs done in seven days, and the percentage of ‘non-urgent’ repairs done in 28 days. The result was not an efficient and effective system for undertaking repairs as quickly as possible but a raft of skilful game playing devices to play the system: jobs were ‘closed’ and then ‘reopened’ to avoid delays being measured; jobs were reclassified to turn ‘emergencies’ into ‘urgents’ and ‘urgents’ into ‘non-urgents’; a single repair often required different trades thus generating multiple BVPIs for the same repair. As a consequence, 40 per cent of the

calls to the call centre were complaints about the tardiness of repairs – even if the BVPIs showed the required progress. A reconstructed system that shifted the emphasis from ‘working the system’ to ‘responding to demand’ routed the calls straight to the responsible and appropriate trades workers who negotiated their own visiting schedules directly with the tenants and the elimination of the paper targets.

Another way of understanding this problem is to consider a biological analogy. Living creatures tend to exhibit either a ‘soft-shell’ or a ‘hard shell’ solution to the problem of protecting themselves.<sup>1</sup> Exogenous skeletons, that is hard shells, invest their trust in an external armoured body – such as a crab or lobster – which is very strong but liable to shatter and rupture if sufficiently damaged. Endogenous skeletons, that is soft shells, – like those of many animals – embody flexibility at the cost of sustaining reparable damage. In effect, the surface tissue is easily damaged but it usually repairs easily too. Neither of these is essentially better than the other but some are more appropriate than others in certain circumstances.

Take the exoskeleton approach; here the object is to maintain the integrity of the boundary at all costs, even if that means losing the flexibility offered by the endoskeleton. In this case we might consider the results-based approach of ISO 9000 and equivalents as concerned with maintaining the standard, the boundary, to the point where what the standard is for may be forgotten. In contrast, an approach more concerned with how organizations learn to cope with diversity and danger – even if that means accepting some damage and danger along the way – is closer to an endogenous skeleton. In short, while the endogenous skeleton approach is concerned with leading by learning, the exogenous skeleton approach is concerned with leading by maintaining the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable action and results. Unfortunately, the learning that tends to accompany leadership by results is learning how to manipulate the system to ensure individual survival and prosperity, rather than learning how to enhance the survival and prosperity of the organization by the systematic application of knowledge.

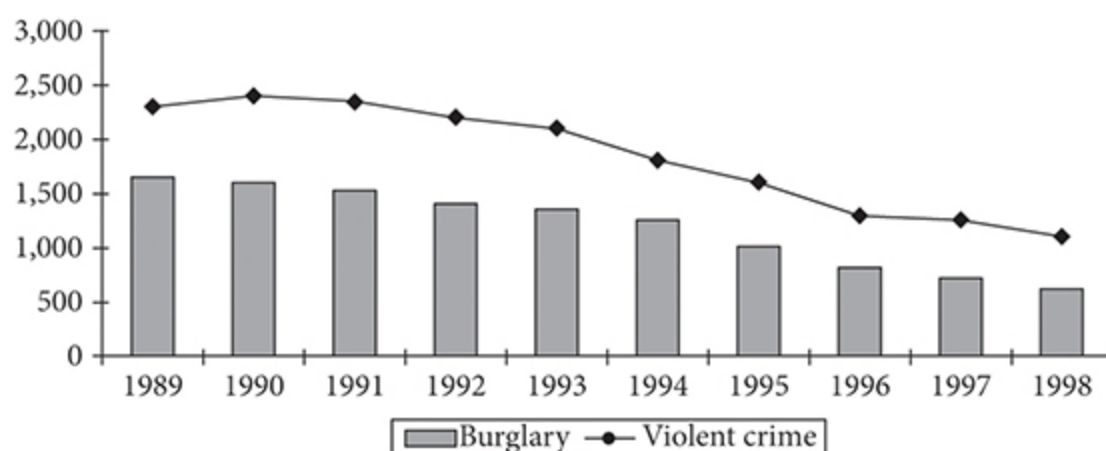
But if leaders do not achieve anything, can we regard them as leaders? This, of course, bears witness to the assumption that leadership is necessarily related to movement of some kind: leaders change things or stop things changing; those that fail to instigate change that is required, or fail to stop change that is not required, are simply failed leaders. Hence for all that



individuals or groups or hybrids may achieve positional leadership – ‘in charge’ or ‘in front’ – if the results of their position are negligible then they will not be regarded as successful leaders. And there clearly are examples where results have both improved and been associated with particular leaders. Perhaps one of the most visible is that associated with William Bratton, the 1994 New York Chief Police Commissioner whose policy of zero-tolerance and making individual officers responsible for the end product on their patch has, allegedly, turned New York from a city where, as Bratton recalled, ‘the NYPD was demoralized and the ethos was: “Stay low and keep out of trouble”’, to one where, by 2003 according to Howard Saffir (Bratton’s Replacement), New York was the ‘safest city in the world’. This had all been achieved by a judicious combination of focusing on the results, not the process, of policing using clear targets, using IT support to track crime, local accountability, rapid deployment, zero-tolerance, the saturation of crime ‘hot spots’, the removal of departmental barriers and weekly meetings between precinct commanders when anyone of them may be called upon to explain any problem or anomaly.

There is little doubt that crime rates, including violent crimes, have dropped over this period but as [Figure 3.1](#) suggests, the fall in crime rates was already underway before Bratton arrived in 1994. So, what did Bratton do? Well, within a month, 4 of the top 5 operational heads had been replaced, and while the goals and strategy were set centrally there was a significant level of discretion about the means. Perhaps equally important, the Street Crime unit doubled in size and between 1994 and 1998 an extra 6,000 police officers were appointed and local tax increases were used to pay for it. In addition, the police handguns were upgraded, as was body armour, and new uniforms were issued just as corrupt officers were publicly arrested. In effect, the results were not just achieved through Bratton’s ‘charismatic’ leadership, but through a whole raft of material and symbolic changes, all of which cost money (Moore, 2013). We also need to add that one of the main products of Bratton’s leadership – the zero-tolerance approach, manifest in following the ‘broken windows’ model which suggested cracking down on petty crime would deter greater criminality – drew heavy criticism from racial minority groups in the city who claimed they were being unfairly and violently targeted by the police (Baker and Goodman, 2016). This is hardly surprising: one of the first attempts at this kind of policy were the so-called ‘Black Codes’ passed just as slavery

ended in the United States which criminalized vagrancy, absence from work and other minor offences in an attempt to coerce and control the now free Black population in the south (Jaffe, 2016: 232–3). Reductions in crime and the zero-tolerance approach also need to be interpreted against the ‘gentrification’ phenomenon, which has been pronounced in New York. Gentrification is usually taken in loaded and pejorative terms to equate to an uplift in property prices, a lowering in crime and a proliferation of up-market small businesses, which can have the effect of changing the demographics of an area. In the United States, and similarly in London, gentrification can have a racialized overtone. The movements of Black, Asian and other minority ethnic people around cities are heavily policed – for example, Black people are more likely to be stopped and searched by the police than white people; in the United States, it is undoubtedly the case that protests led by Black people, such as Black Lives Matter, are more aggressively policed than those led by white people, such as the insurrection and invasion of Congress by Donald Trump’s supporters on 6 January 2021. Meanwhile, gentrification also means that Black people, who tend to be poorer on the whole than white people, are priced out of certain neighbourhoods, even when such neighbourhoods draw much of their broader appeal (and real estate value) from Black history and culture – Brixton in south London being a prime example of this.

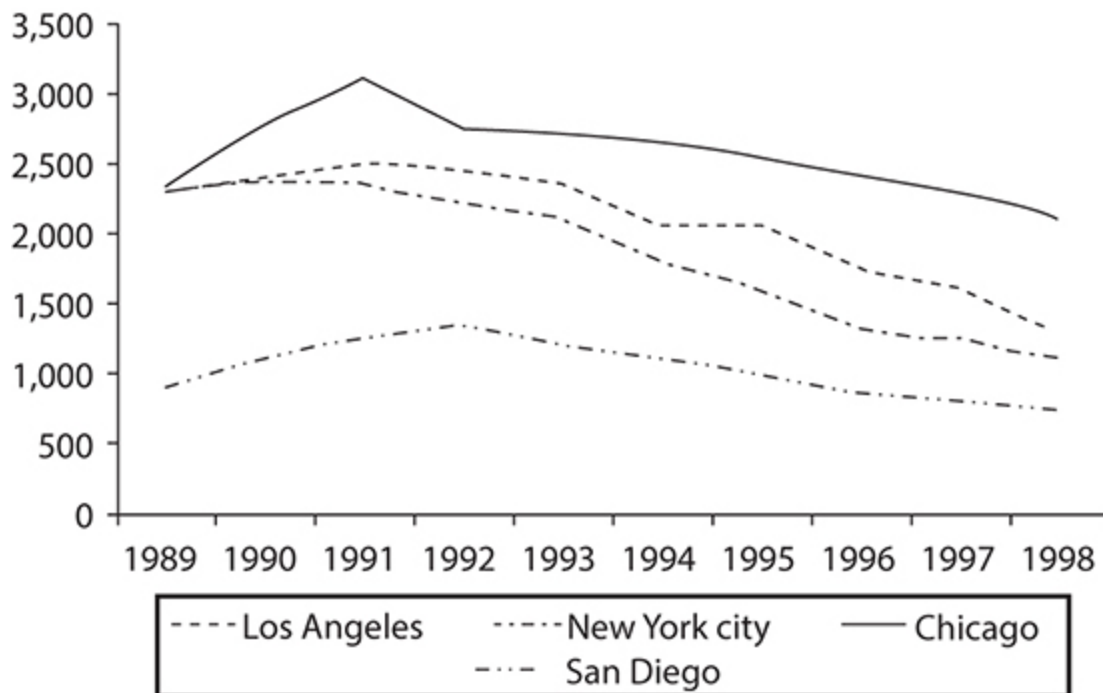


**Figure 3.1** Zero-tolerance and crime in New York City, 1989–98 per 100,000 population.

Sources: Bureau of Statistics, *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics*, 1990, 1997.

Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Uniform Crime Reports*, 1996, 1997, 1998. Reconstructed from Brereton, 1999.

Returning to zero-tolerance, it is worth noting that crime rates have dropped in cities that have undertaken radically different police methods such as San Diego, Los Angeles and Chicago (Brereton, 1999), as [Figure 3.2](#) suggests. So, the issue is not whether it is possible to lead by evidence of what delivers a product but whether (a) the product itself is the right one we should be evaluating; (b) whether results can be traced back to the leadership; and (c) whether the method tends to generate unplanned and deleterious outcomes.



**Figure 3.2** Violent crime in US cities, 1989–98 per 100,000 population.

Sources: Bureau of Statistics, *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics*, 1990, 1997. Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Uniform Crime Reports*, 1996, 1997, 1998. Reconstructed from Brereton, 1999.

Let's now briefly and finally consider the more commercial aspects of product suggested in the introduction to the chapter, which is a related matter to the one of targets, results and measurement. The key claim of Karl Marx's early writing was that workers were becoming increasingly 'alienated' within capitalism of the nineteenth century (Marx, 2005a). By alienation Marx meant that the repetitive, segmented, demeaning and unfulfilling work people undertook in factories, plants and mills, combined with the horrors of slum life, of poverty accentuating ill-health, misery and

domestic violence, progressively led people away from an essence of sorts, a 'species-being'. By this he did not mean that we all share a universal inner core of authenticity, of true values or personalities we are born into, but that we are deprived of the fulfilment we can enjoy by producing, living and loving together: our species-being is our sociality. Alienation is perpetuated by the ever abstractness of capitalism – that money, value and exchange become ever more separated from use and the products required for collectively living a good life. As gains made by workers, especially in the global north, such as shorter working days, more holidays, public healthcare and welfare systems, came into being, alienation increasingly became as synonymous with the petty distractions of everyday life (Lefebvre, 2014) and culture (Adorno, 2001) as much as dreary forms of work. People are therefore alienated at several different cuts – physiologically, psychologically and sociologically – and within various spheres of their lives – at work, in the home and in leisure.

A good example of an alienated life and work can be seen in the notion of click-bait journalism, which is a form of attracting viewers to a web page with a tempting headline or link – such hooks often come in the form of top-5 lists of things (best hottest new bands from Montreal, or similar) or promises of hilarious/cute videos, preferably featuring animals. Journalists are assessed according to how many clicks they can generate because click-throughs generate advertising income. In bygone eras of journalism, it was harder to judge which stories sold the newspaper, with judgments largely confined to what the lead story of the paper was on a particular day and some broader marketing research. Now that jobs in journalism are harder to come by and those jobs available are increasingly becoming associated with advertising revenue, you have the twin prospect of journalists who presumably entered the profession to investigate and break news feeling alienated from that mission and readers being deprived of more serious and patient content, which may be of more social use but does not generate commercial revenues. Readers have also now become consumers and their attention spans stretched thinly as they navigate between listicles and 'hot takes' rather than spending more time digesting a story and its implications. Such engagement can create a superficial but nevertheless (im)potent and often toxic type of online, circulating rage (Seymour, 2019).

Alienation as a concept has been extended to account for the contemporary digitally mediated world of work and consumption. By this

account we live and work within a ‘proliferation of images’, ‘a world of visual simulation and nervous stimulation’ (Berardi, 2015: Loc 101) where our capacity for sensibility (tactile connection with others) and empathy has eroded (ibid.). This is the victory of a parade of fleeting, ‘obscene’ objects over human subjects (Baudrillard, 2005), where the inability of people to engage deeply and meaningfully generates a form of precarious living – depression, anxiety, desensitization (Berardi, 2015: Loc 637). It is with this filter that we can analyse what passes in the realm of culture for leadership ‘stimulation’. A glance through the top results for ‘leadership’ on Amazon reveals a dizzying array of choices – as we have stated, more than a small town could consume in a normal life span. When faced with such a mass of offerings – each with catchy titles and compelling hooks, it is easy to feel overwhelmed, even anxious. And this is before we even look for what passes as leadership development programme offerings online – again, thousands to choose from, each with its own allure.

Leadership can therefore be packaged up as a commercial product and sold on for a profit, its value extracted to maximal effect: such processes continue apace regardless of whether the leadership being sold bears much relation to our real-life experiences. The play of leadership language therefore becomes inseparable from the broader operation of capitalism, with the aspirational identity of leader and leadership going hand in hand with exploitation of people’s aspirations (Ford et al., 2008). Hence on a recent trip to his local supermarket, Owain noticed that the store was advertising for a ‘shift leader’; upon further investigation he discovered that this job was barely better paid than a normal supermarket worker and indeed simply involved some minor administrative tasks over and above shop floor work. Language can therefore be used as a manipulative tool to drape mundane and difficult, if essential, work in romanticized language (Collinson et al., 2018). Such naming can bear more sinister traces, to the extent that positive and aspirational language can be used as a substitution for material reward and more tangible forms of empowerment. So, the shift leader will be on low pay and without many of the workplace rights that are necessary for a fulfilling life (proper sick pay, parental leave, a decent pension); they will carry a job title announcing responsibility but in reality have little power to change anything meaningful about the way the organization works – a fact that may or may not be accepted by frustrated junior colleagues or customers. Being named a leader, an identity act on the

part of an employer, is assumed to compensate for material losses elsewhere. In one sense we do welcome such naming acts because working in junior management is difficult and essential work (we have both been there) – caring for colleagues and managing customer frustrations while also managing your own tight household budget. Yet there is an important contradiction at play in the way that leadership is named as a workplace product that we need to interrogate and critique so that workplaces can become imbued with more dignity and fairness.

There is one final effect that we need to address in terms of leadership being packaged and sold as a product, and that is the unreality of the product. The leadership industry is notorious for people placing an adjective ahead of the word ‘leadership’, with the product sold on in potentially lucrative ways. The pre-eminent examples of such packaging are transformational and authentic leadership – the ethical dimensions of which will be addressed in [Chapter 6](#). Adjectives are grammatical units that supplement nouns and verbs with feeling and evocative quality. Yet when many ideas claiming the status of new leadership theory are more closely interrogated, they often bear no real trace of what people actually do at work or who they are as people. We often wonder where such ideas of leadership emanate from and the answer is often from the casual observations of a consultant or academic-consultant, who proceeds to name a particular phenomenon free from any serious philosophical, sociological or psychological grounding (Alvesson and Einola, 2019). When we watch leadership at work, we rarely see examples of the more popular adjectival forms of leadership, simply because these are often unreal or insincere expressions of who people really are and what they really do. When studying leadership you should always bear in mind the origin of a particular theory and in the case of adjectival forms of leadership these are nearly always conceived in the context of corporate America, with its commitment, even sacred commitment, to free markets. This is not to say that such theories are real representations of what happens in these contexts, far from it; instead, we need to interpret them as idealized representations of harmonious, positive and expressive leadership – as celebratory tracts lauding the corporate chief executive and their powers of persuasion. The realities of work, as we know, are quite different.

Leadership theory, when it goes too far down the adjectival rabbit hole, risks separating itself from the realities of experience. In the terms of Jean

Baudrillard, leadership becomes a signifier without a signified, meaning a word without a corresponding reality. Hence, adopting the language of Baudrillard (1994), leadership theory can be interpreted as a play of simulation or simulacra. Simulation is the representation of a really existing practice, or part of one and we can perhaps consider some adjectival forms of leadership as synonymous with this category – an aspect of being authentic, or real, in the workplace, for example, could be simulated within a theory and perhaps imitated elsewhere in practice, although its roots in sound theory or empirical evidence would remain a concern. Simulacra, however, are purely virtual – they are copies with no original. Living in a world of simulacra is an unreal experience and, in this logic, developing leadership theory becomes purely wordplay, or a marketplace of language. Hence when various behaviours assumed to be good for organizations are packaged under an adjectival title, together the effect can be one of simulacra – and the effect is intensified when researchers try to cross-pollinate adjectival theories, placing authentic with transformational with spiritual and so on. They creep further and further away from practice but deeper into simulacra: leadership objects talk to leadership objects rather than to people's experiences. The root of this play of simulacra is of course the industry we mentioned above – simulacra can be big money and there lies the power of the leadership product. Not all adjectives are devoid of value for practice, of course, but the challenge for scholars and practitioners is always to ponder whether or not the words they use bear relation to practice. As a side note, we accept that some readers will note that we have adopted an adjective of our own in [Chapter 6](#) – organic – and we simply say in our defence that we have done so through trying to ground the adjective in political theory, while also drawing on our study of real social movements and political groups at work. The theory is of course provisional, and it is for others to decide on its merits or to develop it further.

In summary, then, a profusion of adjectives can be thought of in terms of a flood of objects that bear little to no resemblance to real experience, an effect that can be disorientating for people who work in practice, but also for those of us trying to make sense of leadership theoretically. It is at this level of object saturation that we reach a new juncture, the advent of the ironically positioned commodity as salve to commodity overload (medicine to cure the effects of other medicine): this is the explosion of leadership

books that offer simplicity and clarity within the fog of choice. Hirst (2020) offers us *No Bullsh\*t Leadership*, is ‘full of simple and direct approaches’. Radcliffe (2012) promises leadership that is ‘plain and simple’, with the book description telling us that ‘leadership isn’t complicated – keep it simple and make it count’. Meanwhile the retired and very successful football manager Alex Ferguson’s (2016) book is simply titled *Leading*, connoting a streamlined elegance of simplicity. The marketplace of leadership ideas is indeed a playful, if baffling one.

## **Products and ethics: Greta Thunberg, Gandhi and Mother Teresa**

The difficulty of correlating end products with the actions of leaders is often more difficult than it might seem: it may be clear that the share price has risen, that the school’s performance has improved, or that the army is victorious – but in what sense can we be certain that these successes were the direct result of the leader? And if we are certain that the leaders were responsible for the product, rather than they were simply in post when the product was created, is this necessarily beneficial? Take as an illustration the response of Jeffrey Skilling, one-time president of Enron to this question:

*Questioner:* What would you do if your company made a product that caused harm or even death?

*Skilling:* I’d keep making and selling it. My job is to be a profit centre and maximize return to the shareholders, it’s the government’s job to step in if a product is dangerous. (Quoted in Fusaro and Miller, 2002: 27)

The ethical consequences of this kind of, literally, irresponsible leadership have been well documented in relation to Enron (Edwards et al., 2018; McLean and Elkind, 2003; Tourish and Vatcha, 2005) and need not detain us here – you do not need to be an expert in Machiavelli to recognize unethical leadership. But what interests us here is a rather more complex issue: do ethical leaders necessarily generate products that are beneficial? Certainly Ulrich, Zener and Smallwood’s very popular book, *Results-based Leadership* assumes that the adoption of a Balanced Score Card method of measuring results takes care of any ethical problems because it is *balanced*, and, as they suggest, Enron is a prime example of what can be achieved:



Enron has created significantly more shareholder value [than Florida Power and Light]. Why? Again, we suggest that Enron's leadership plays a significant role in achieving the larger multiple for the company's earning. Enron provides a prime example of a company whose leadership has created an organization that can effectively implement a strategy for meeting shareholder expectations and thus a larger valuation from and for those shareholders. Enron's thoughtful leaders deftly balance the many necessary results levers. (Ulrich et al., 1999: 155)

Unfortunately, this says it all – the results are only those of interest to the shareholders and the consequence, in this case at least, was the catastrophic collapse on Enron and the disgracing of its executives. In contrast, Florida Power and Light, at least in 2020, were still in business.<sup>2</sup>

Machiavelli would not necessarily have insisted on a negative response to the question connecting ethics to beneficent leadership: his concern was that leaders could only succeed if they recognized the kind of environment they worked in. Hence in an ethical world it was conducive to success to act ethically, whereas in Machiavelli's time, to have acted as ethically as the Christian scriptures and church leaders insisted at the time, would have doomed the population to the rapacious conquests of unethical invaders. Or, as he put it far more eloquently in *The Prince*,

The fact is that a man who wants to act virtuously in every way necessarily comes to grief among so many who are not virtuous. Therefore, if a prince wants to maintain his rule, he must learn how not to be virtuous, and to make use of this or not according to need. ... Cesare Borgia was accounted cruel; nevertheless, this cruelty of his reformed the Romagna, brought it unity and restored order and obedience. On reflection it will be seen that there was more compassion in Cesare than in the Florentine people who, to escape being called cruel, allowed Pistoia to be devastated. (Machiavelli, XV, XVII)

In effect, Machiavelli was not suggesting that leaders should act immorally but that to protect the interests of a community, a prince has to do whatever is necessary for the greater good. Thus, the act should be contextualized and not analysed against some mythical moral world. The problem, of course, is defining 'the greater good' and relating this to the product of leadership. This task of identifying a clear leadership product becomes more challenging when the leaders we examine are themselves interpreted as contested, marketed products and these issues will now be explored through three ostensibly similar cases: Greta Thunberg, Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Teresa.

## Greta Thunberg

Greta Thunberg's journey from a troubled child to probably the most prominent leader of the global environmental movement is truly remarkable and has inspired millions of people. Her family memoir speaks of an 11-year-old girl who had become depressive, selectively mute, refusing food and without laughter (Ernman et al., 2020), a girl who was being bullied at school. After struggling with support and diagnosis, Thunberg was eventually confirmed as having Asperger's and channelled her growing incomprehension at the discrepancy between rhetoric and deed on climate change ('our planet is in trouble' but we won't take any of the necessary systemic decisions to save it) to activism aimed at closing the rhetoric-action gap. In August 2018 she therefore began her school strike for climate, standing outside the Swedish parliament. The movement became global and with it Thunberg became synonymous with climate activism, a leader with whom elected global leaders have wanted to be seen, invited to address major global gatherings and protests to address climate change but also vilified and mocked by climate change denialists – from the petty social media trolls through to the presidents of nations, such as Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin and Jair Bolsonaro.

But how did Thunberg become such an appealing leader? Thunberg's leadership is intimately connected to her Asperger's, age, ingenuity and personality. Striking images of a child on strike outside a parliament, combined with Thunberg's intense and direct form of communication, evoke the feel of a herald from the future sent to deliver a potent message to us before catastrophe strikes. Her presence disrupts and shames the dominant order of our societies – a child speaks with more clarity, knowledge, force and fluency than adults four or five times her age. The more her antagonists on the populist right bully and mock her, the more they undermine their own programme and status: how insecure and small must a fully grown man in charge of a major global nation be to feel threatened by a teenage girl? Thunberg acts as a symbol of moral clarity for environmental activists, the force of whose arguments are inescapable, as was captured by the Swedish Green Party MEP Pär Holmgren. He shared a meme comparing Greta Thunberg to an asteroid, silently contemplating a blustering President Trump, likened to the dinosaurs who had no awareness of their fate.<sup>3</sup>

Yet the product 'Greta Thunberg' has, of course, become a contested one. First, we have the usual merchandise hawkers who commodify Thunberg –

those selling cheap consumer goods emblazoned with Thunberg's image or words in the form of mugs, T-shirts and even prayer candles. Similar to the case of Nelson Mandela mentioned earlier, Thunberg is reduced to and incorporated within a symbolic universe of capitalist aspiration: if Greta can 'make' it, we all can – as long as we're courageous, determined, passionate and so on. This is clearly a cynical ploy, of course, exploiting the image of an environmentalist to produce and sell more goods that harm the environment. By the metrics of the marketplace of symbolic visibility and celebrity, where fame is a victory in and of itself, Thunberg has been highly successful (she has 14.5m followers on Instagram, 5m on Twitter and 3.5m on Facebook).

The status quo technocracy of trans-national institutions (diplomats, governmental policy professionals, political staff and more mainstream political leaders) has certainly sought to co-opt the figure of Thunberg for their own ends, despite her often resisting such a positioning. These are the people who design and implement the policy of governments on climate change and who negotiate global agreements. One obvious interpretation of the performance of such leaders is that they have offered us a case study in abject failure – greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise exponentially, with associated global warming set to easily exceed the tipping point proffered by scientific consensus as triggering catastrophe for the planet and mass extinctions. When Thunberg was invited to address such an audience on 23 September 2019, at the UN Climate Action Summit, her speech included the following opening remarks (Thunberg, 2019a).

We'll be watching you [audience applause, followed by laughter, more clapping and some cheers]. This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here ... Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you! You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words ... All you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you! [audience cheering and applause] ... How dare you continue to look away and come here saying that you're doing enough ... If you really understood the situation and still kept on failing to act, then you would be evil. And that I refuse to believe [audience gasps of 'Woah, ooh', followed by scattered applause, cheering and sustained applause].

This is one of the most powerful political speeches of contemporary times. Absent of rhetorical flourishes, it delivers a clear and straightforward message to a clearly defined antagonist – policy and decision makers, the very people in the room Thunberg was addressing. She begins by telling them she does not trust them and will therefore be 'watching' them. Inexplicably, they applaud and cheer. Perhaps thrown by the response she

continues by telling them that ‘this’ (presumably the spectacle of a child missing school to deliver obvious messages to adults who should know better) is ‘all wrong’. The target of her speech is unambiguous – ‘you’, the people in this room. She tells them that they distract with ‘fairy tales’ and indulge in concerns of ‘money’ (code for greed, undoubtedly) and directs a pointed accusation their way: ‘How dare you!’ Instead of responding with anger or even silence, the audience cheers and applauds enthusiastically. Why? The speaker has essentially just told them that they are responsible and to blame. The message apparently not hitting home, Thunberg continues, reasoning that as they seem to offer no viable policy solutions that they must either be ignorant or ‘evil’, and she prefers the explanation of ignorance because she does not want to believe that they are malign. The audience response now shifts to one of shock, but these initial gasps are gradually overcome by more cheering and applause. It is a baffling exchange, a little like a convicted criminal welcoming with delighted enthusiasm the guilty verdict of a judge, applauding and cheering every condemnatory adjective: ‘Depraved behaviour, oh yes, that’s quite right, hooray, well done, good on you for pointing that out.’ Were the audience simply not listening or did they think the speech was directed at others? Such a conclusion is difficult to substantiate because of the directness of the speech – ‘How dare *you*!’ More likely is a move of co-option, where the figure of Thunberg, much against her will, is pulled in as a symbol of the efficacy of international policy consensus, which is essentially to operate within existing market systems, structures and logics (which Thunberg casts as a failure bordering on ‘evil’).

The political right has also sought to produce its own Thunberg ‘product’. The right-wing think tank, the Heartland Institute, which has been financed by fossil fuel companies, has sought to manufacture its own Thunberg-symbol in the shape of a German teenager by the name of Naomi Seibt, who regularly opposes and seeks to antagonize Thunberg (but has also been associated with problematic views concerning race) (Kirchgaessner and Holden, 2020). Donald Trump, in a characterization many commentators saw as problematic, asked Thunberg to ‘chill’ and ‘work on her Anger Management’, in a tweet on 12 December 2019. Meanwhile the far-right president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, labelled Thunberg a ‘brat’ at a press conference after Thunberg criticized growing anti-Indigenous violence in the country (Phillips, 2020). It is possible, of

course, to judge the success of a radical leader promoting systemic change by the degree to which they are able to draw out hostility on the part of the powerful and by these metrics Thunberg appears to be successful indeed.

It is more difficult to attribute the leadership of Thunberg to the broader successes of the environmental movement globally, as the two seem to have risen simultaneously. One can certainly acknowledge that she has been a powerful symbol and advocate alongside other groups and movements, such as Extinction Rebellion, even if her 'leadership' cannot definitively be attributed directly to the growth of the movement (nor would she make any claims for it to be). The larger question of the salience or effectiveness of her leadership is therefore perhaps too early to judge, and we also need to situate her case within the broader and highly complex terrain upon which she campaigns. The climate emergency is in some ways straightforward – we know that the climate emergency is created by a profusion of carbon dioxide into the earth's atmosphere and we also know how to slow and then reverse the damage, through reducing emissions. Yet the path to such an outcome is multi-layered and tied to the actions and practices of numerous agents and interests, and any solution to the climate emergency would seem to require systemic intervention beyond the capacity of any one leader. By these systemic metrics, Thunberg will of course fail, but the point of her speech to the UN was that her very presence at the event – and indeed in the public spotlight at all – was a symbol of system failure: 'I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean.'

## Mahatma Gandhi

Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) rose from an obscure and unsuccessful small-town lawyer to become the self-appointed champion of the rights of Indian workers in South Africa to the nationalist leader *Mahatma*, 'Great Soul', leading the struggle for Indian independence from Britain through the use of non-violent resistance. In one sense his leadership by product or results is clear to see: India did gain its independence from Britain – but it isn't at all clear either that he was directly responsible for this or that the result resembled much of his vision for a future free India. So, for example, his desperate efforts to prevent partition between India and Pakistan failed; his attempt to embody the leadership of all faiths was limited to the

leadership of (some) Hindus; his attempts to stop violence between Hindus and Muslims either failed outright or were short-lived because over 1 million died in the ethnic violence accompanying partition; his economic ideals of autarchy and the rejection of a modern economy were, in turn, rejected by most people; his theories on women were not regarded by feminists as in any way liberating and the results of his strategy for limiting the effects of caste were themselves extremely limited. Thus, on a strictly result-based analysis, Gandhi seems to have failed on many counts despite maintaining an ethical stand and being categorized as a successful leader. However, his real achievement cannot be assessed in this way and his role is better articulated through the words of his erstwhile friend and then the prime minister, Nehru, speaking on the evening of Gandhi's assassination on 30 January 1948 (Nehru, 1948/2020):

The light has gone out of our lives and there is darkness everywhere ... The light has gone out, I said, and yet I was wrong. For the light that shone in this country was no ordinary light ... that light represented something more than the immediate present, it represented the living, the eternal truths, reminding us of the right path, drawing us from error, taking this ancient country to freedom.

This kind of epitaph spills over the edifice of any results' matrix and proclaims a value that is both beyond that matrix and subversive of it: some 'results' are extraordinarily difficult to measure but that does not mean they are irrelevant, much in the way that Greta Thunberg's impact on the political imaginations of young activists is probably beyond the capability of any measurement tool.

## Mother Teresa

The case of Mother Teresa looks similar but generates a different lesson. Even if Gandhi's direct results are relatively poor compared to his hopes and dreams, he remains the consummate ethical leader whose iconic acts of bravery and non-violent resistance inspired, and still inspire, many political activists and leaders today. But can the same be said for Mother Teresa? Her beatification – the first step on the Catholic journey to sainthood – by Pope John Paul II occurred on 19 October 2003 and she was canonized in 2016 after two 'miracles' were accepted by the Catholic Church. According to the EWTN, the Global Catholic network, 'Mother Teresa founded the

Missionaries of Charity and devoted her life to the care of “the poorest of the poor.” She began her work in Calcutta, India and her sisters now continue work and ministry throughout the world bringing food, medicine, care and Christ’s love to those in most need.’<sup>4</sup> She was born Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu on 26 August 1910, in Skopje, Macedonia, in the former Yugoslavia, joined an Irish Order of Nuns at 17 and moved to Calcutta in 1944 where she taught in a convent school. By 1950 she had left the convent to ‘look after’ the poor of Calcutta and established the Missionaries of Charity which expanded to over 450 centres in 133 countries led by 4,500 nuns, tending the poor and the dying. She won the Pope John XXIII Peace Prize and the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 ‘for work undertaken in the struggle to overcome poverty and distress, which also constitute a threat to peace’. A great leader indeed, if we are to judge her by these results.

However, according to Aroup Chatterjee, a doctor who used to work for Mother Teresa and author of the book *Mother Teresa: The Final Verdict*, Mother Teresa’s main concern was not helping the poor but proselytizing the Catholic faith and accumulating huge sums to further the spread of the Catholicism, rather than to alleviate the poverty she found all around her. Similarly, for Christopher Hitchens, Mother Teresa remained uninterested in solving the poverty of the poor and far more concerned to generate huge financial resources for the spread of the Catholic faith.<sup>5</sup> Yet if we adopt a commercial metric, the ‘product’ of Teresa was very successful.

For our purposes which of these two images prevails is less relevant than that the image is clearly contested. Hitchens’s account of her is entitled ‘Hell’s Angel’, so it would be difficult to find two more diametrically opposed view of a leader. But note that both positive and negative images accept her as a successful product-based leader, albeit that success is deemed positive by one account and negative by the other. But this is precisely the problem with notions of ethical leadership criticized in [Chapter 1](#): what counts as ethical depends not upon the actions that are taken, nor even the context within which the actions occur, but rather the perspective of the perceiver. For dedicated Catholics, successful proselytization is deemed by definition to be an ethical endeavour; but for believers in other religions or atheists it cannot be regarded in the same light: product-based leadership is not so much dependent on ethical behaviour as a component of it. This does not mean that Mother Teresa was an unethical leader – but it does imply that we cannot separate such

assessments for their own cultural milieu: what counts as ethical leadership depends not upon some universal set of ethics and most certainly not on some alleged definition of 'Human Nature', but on what counts as ethical behaviour in the view of the observer in a particular envelope of space and time.

In effect, it does not matter whether we regard the acts of leaders as unethical; what matters is whether the followers of those leaders regard their leaders as unethical; and if they do whether this is less relevant than the results of their leadership. Take slavery, for example, surely there are few people today who regard slavery as an ethical form of relationship, though many may have done so in the past. But since there are probably more slaves alive now than ever before at one time even this assumption cannot be true. As Bales (2000: 3) suggests:

Slaves are of course themselves products, humans dehumanized and degraded to such an extent that they are objectified as commodities with the single goal of maximising the profits, power or esteem of their 'owners'.

But since the power of the enslaved is so severely inhibited by their condition and since there have been so few successful enslaved leaders, is there anything to be learned about product-based leadership by considering slavery? After all, what have slave rebellions and their leaders ever achieved? What happens when the commodity refuses their objectification and fights back?

## **Slavery and leadership**

### **Slavery, coercion and results**

Since slavery is essentially rooted in a coercive relationship, what possible place does it have in leadership? Perhaps the first thing to question is whether leadership is associated with non-coercive relationships. Weber certainly argued that charismatic authority was the only non-coercive form since followers wanted to follow rather than had to be forced or persuaded. But even the religious charismatics that Weber focused on rooted their authority in their gods, all of whom promised some form of punishment for non-believers. We also need to consider here the ambiguities separating



slavery and paid work. The continuing phenomenon of in-work poverty, where people work full-time but still do not have enough money to live healthily and securely, and the use of child labour and forced labour in globalized supply chains, display aspects of slavery dynamics to one degree or another. People are forced to work often under difficult or dangerous conditions for a financial reward that keeps them captive to a small geographical area and in living conditions that are not sufficient to sustain a dignified and healthy life. If a child has been denied educational and developmental opportunities, one cannot say with confidence that they have the freedom to pursue an alternative life path. That being the case, and since slavery is such an endemic aspect of human history, to remove the leadership of the enslaved by slave-owners and their slave overseers because it is premised on a coercive relationship seems to remove a vast chunk of human history from our purview.

Even if slavery is one of the most coercive forms of ‘leadership’ does this imply that the enslaved are powerless? Well, although the enslaved people destined for the gladiatorial arena had little control over their future, they still had some. Granted, those tied to a stake and eaten by wild animals had only their voices with which to protest or voice their belief in their gods, but gladiators could always refuse to fight – and accept the consequences. For example, Seneca (4 bce–65 ce) noted how two German prisoners choked themselves to death on the sponges used in lavatories, while another put his head between the spokes of a moving wheel. Three hundred years later Symmachus (ad 345–410) describes how twenty German prisoners, destined for the gladiatorial arena, killed themselves just before their appearance (Wiedemann, 1995: 113).

Nonetheless, the power to commit suicide, to refuse to allow others to kill you, is significantly more limited than the power to organize a rebellion against the enslavers. The important word here is ‘organized’ because individual resistance does not necessarily require leadership, since there may be no followers – and followers are the *sine qua non* of leadership. And because the enslaved have so few resources with which to resist their enslavers, leadership of resistance amongst slaves must rank amongst the most difficult of all leadership tasks – and one of the most difficult to trace by its effects because so few revolts were either successful or recorded.

In what follows we examine this most difficult form of leadership through examining slavery in Ancient Rome and Nazi Germany<sup>6</sup> and select

particular aspects to illustrate issues important for leadership rather than just slavery in and of itself. What unites Rome and Nazi Germany beyond their reliance on slave labour is the red thread of Spartacus. As the leader of a slave rebellion in Rome of the first century bce, he may well have threatened the very bedrock of Roman 'civilization', though ultimately he failed in this; and as a symbol of the resistance of the oppressed he became the political icon of the Spartacist League (subsequently the German Communist Party) in the heady days of Germany just after the end of the First World War. In turn the communists, especially in Hitler's construction of them as led by the 'Jewish-Bolsheviks', most represented all that the Nazis sought to exterminate after 1933. In both cases the leadership of slaves and prisoners proved only partially successful in terms of direct material results – neither Imperial Rome nor Nazi Germany were toppled by slave rebellions – but in both cases the examples of leadership provided hope to others that even military dictatorships are not omnipotent. This is a critical lesson for leadership as product: the results are often difficult to determine, are often rooted in narratives provided by the victors, and may occur long after the leader has theoretically 'failed'.

From the existing records it would appear that slavery has been an endemic aspect of most human civilizations. Gravestones in Lower Egypt, for example, suggest that a Libyan people enslaved a Bushman tribe in 8000 bce (Thomas, 1997: 25). The enslaved are also depicted on memorials from the 'golden standard' of Ur in the middle of the third millennium bce, and slave markets were a regular feature of early Babylonian society (around 1800 bce) where some enslaved people even owned their own slaves. Indeed, Lévi Strauss suggested that writing may well have had its origins in facilitating 'the enslavement of other human beings' (quoted in Dugan and Dugan, 2000: 166), and Marx was convinced that 'direct forced labour is the foundation of the ancient world' (quoted in Rigby, 1998: 150). So great has been the impact of slavery that Patterson (1982: vii) suggests 'probably there is no group of people whose ancestors were not at one time slaves or slave holders' (quoted in Blackburn, 1988: 263). The Ancient Egyptian empires also involved slavery, though they were less important than in their neighbouring societies (Roberts, 1993: 49, 65). Instead, the Egyptian elite, although owners of slaves themselves, tended to rely on indebted labour, often in huge gangs of 20,000 or more workers who migrated from the fields to the infrastructure as demand required (Mann,

1986: 151). Certainly, the ancient Chinese societies of Eastern Zhou (beginning around 770 bce) turned prisoners of war into slaves owned by the aristocratic class and, by the Warring States stage (beginning about 470 bce), by the state itself (Yates, 1999: 19, 28).

Yet it remains the case that slavery is not a topic much visited by scholars of management or leadership. Cooke (2003) made a serious attempt to grapple with the relationship between slavery and contemporary management, but his work is restricted to American slavery. Even here the scale of the issue is significant for ‘by 1860, when the historical orthodoxy has modern management emerging on the railroads, 38,000 managers were managing the 4 million slaves working in the US economy’ (Cooke, 2003: 1895). Thus, the emergence of modern management and leadership can either be located in heroic American railroad engineers or in the cotton fields and rice swamps of American slave plantations. To subdue the history of the latter and romanticize the former seems like an act of dangerous denial (Liu, 2020). As Cooke makes clear, Chandler’s (1977) account of the growth of contemporary management ignores American slavery because there was little separation between ownership and control and there were few large-scale plantations – though in between 1850 and 1860 the number of plantation managers almost doubled to 37,883 and by then 2,279 plantations each used more than 100 slaves. Braverman’s (1974) alternative model denies slavery a role because it was not based on wage labour, but the disciplinary mechanisms used against slaves and the forms of resistance developed by them all have echoes in contemporary management. Indeed, in 1846 the *Southern Cultivator* explained in eerily Taylorist language precisely how to control slaves: ‘the slave should know that his master is to govern absolutely, and he is to obey implicitly ... he is never for a moment to exercise either his will or his judgement in opposition to a positive order’ (quoted in Cooke, 2003: 1911).<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, since slaves could not be coerced entirely, their forms of resistance manifest an important aspect of the issue of power – it is seldom total. Writing in 1860, Olmsted noted not just that the slaves worked more efficiently if they were given an occasional day off, but that they ‘cannot be made to do their masters’ will. ... Not that they often directly refuse to obey an order, but when they are directed to do anything for which they have a disinclination, they undertake it in such a way that the desired result is sure not to be accomplished’ (quoted in Cooke, 2003: 1905).

The Ancient Greeks and Romans, of course, were slave-owning societies, though we do not know much about them before Herodotus, himself a slave-owner, began writing in the fifth century bce and by this time many places that Herodotus visited used enslaved people (Harvey, 1988: 42–3). The Greeks were surprised to learn in 300 bce from Megasthenes, a Greek ambassador to India, that no enslaved people existed in India. In fact, there were indentured labourers in India at this time who were, in all but name, enslaved (Roberts, 1993: 339). Likewise, as we stated earlier, we can think of the scourge of in-work poverty globally and ask to what extent many people are in reality ‘free’ followers and the extent to which some of the dynamics of slavery are evident in other forms of leader-follower relations.

Homer’s period coincided with most slaves being captives from war and therefore mainly women, since their menfolk would have been slaughtered, but this practice was gradually displaced by one of enslaving men too, so that by the fifth century bce, the height of Athenian power, between 25 and 35 per cent of the population were slaves, undertaking a variety of tasks from working in the fields, to running messages, carrying water and preparing meals (Harvey, 1988: 49). Some acted as teachers and one of these was Aesop. The word *pedagogue* is derived from the Greek description of a slave who accompanied a wealthy boy to school, and this is richly ironic given that the Ancient Greeks often justified slavery on the basis of their barbarian nature, that is, they lacked intelligible speech and reason. But in reality, most Greeks probably did not concern themselves with justifications for slavery because slavery was apparently endemic throughout the world and more often simply a consequence of defeat in battle. Anyway, since many influential Greeks regarded ordinary labour as only marginally better than slavery, their concern for justifying slavery would have been minimal, after all, neither the enslaved nor those who were dependent upon another for their livelihood were ‘free’ in any sense recognized by Athenian citizens, who were, of course, all men.

The Romans called a slave *servus*, literally an object (*res*), a thing, as indeed did Aristotle before them, for he considered a slave to be ‘an animated instrument’ (*The Politics*, 1253b). Note here also that the Latin *servare* – to save, to conserve – had close links to the word for slaves, *servi*, because to enslave military prisoners was literally to decide *not* to execute them, to save them from their ‘deserved’ death (Wiedemann, 1995: 103). Following this logic, the Romans appeared to have recruited the enslaved

into their armies for the Second Punic War between 218 and 202 bce (Santosuosso, 1997: 13, 150), but, importantly, Roman armies were not reliant upon enslaved or indebted labour for camp or fortification building, and instead were self-sufficient (Mann, 1986: 276). Such was the military success of Rome that by 50 bce of the one million people living in Rome, between 100,000 and 200,000 of them were enslaved (Köhne and Ewigleben, 2000: 127).

Coincidentally, as naval warfare became predominant at this time, the Athenians reintroduced the practice of destroying a city after capture, executing the men and selling the women and children into slavery (Raaflaub, 1999: 142). Athens also produced both a philosophical justification, and a critique, of slavery. The justification came from Plato and Aristotle's argument that some people were 'naturally' suited to slavery,<sup>8</sup> though Greeks should not enslave other Greeks. As far as Aristotle was concerned, 'Humanity is divided into two: the masters and the slaves; or if one prefers it, the Greeks and Barbarians, those who have the right to command; and those who are born to obey' (quoted in Thomas, 1997: 28). In effect, the issue of leadership was not restricted to any individual or class but common to an entire ethnic group, as long as they were Greek and male.

Athens also produced one of the first philosophical critiques of slavery in stoicism, though slavery here was defined as being in bondage to one's own faults and lusts, rather than relating to the legal condition of slavery (Ste. Croix, 1988: 29). Nevertheless, the stoics also suggested that humans and animals were differentiated by reason, and thus all humans were in this sense equal. It is but a short step from this foundation stone to argue that humans are all subject to the same 'natural law' and that arguments that distinguish between slaves and non-slaves on any fundamental basis are unjustified. The ideological problem facing slave owners was resolved by different forms; the Romans tended to suggest that providing the local civil law permitted slavery then slavery was legitimate; some early Christian authorities often sidestepped the problem by insisting that original sin was the root cause of the problem, but others in some of the monasteries took their religion rather more literally and enslaved themselves to a life of property-less poverty and prayer (Anthony, 1977: 15–38).

Yet one of the greatest threats to the Greeks derived not from philosophy but from the slaves themselves, in particular from Sparta. There the 'helots' or 'slaves' of Sparta not only outnumbered their Spartan rulers but

themselves posed a considerable threat to Spartan domestic security. In fact, the helots were bonded to the land not to individual owners and were thus closer to a serf than slave, and, unlike the enslaved of Athens, Helots could only be freed by the Spartan state and not by individual slave owners. But the relative absence of slave revolts in Athens, and the constant fear of a Helot revolt amongst the Spartans, tell us something about the importance of organizational factors for collective resistance: domestic slaves simply did not have access to the mechanisms normally required to organize collective resistance.

The Spartans had good reason to fear their own labour force – it seems to have been the only known society that required its principal judicial leaders to declare war on the Helots on taking office each year, making the killing of Helots beyond the criminal law. In Rome, the murder by a slave owner of the slave of another slave owner usually resulted in a fine of twice the value of the dead slave; after all, the owner had some property rights in the deceased, if nothing else (Blackburn, 1988: 276). By contrast, Persians were forbidden to injure, let alone kill, their slaves for a single offence. But even such Spartan hostility could not guarantee quiescence: in 369 BCE the Helots of Messenia successfully overthrew their Spartan controllers and established their own state (Cartledge, 1988: 38).

Only in Rome did freed or manumitted<sup>9</sup> slaves acquire political rights and their children, if born after freedom was attained, acquire Roman citizenship. Freed slaves in Rome were likely to have a chance of acquiring wealth, and even enslaving others (Ste. Croix, 1988). But we need not assume that rebellious slaves would be any better treated in Rome than in Sparta: in ad 61 the murder of Pedanius Secundus by one of his slaves resulted in the traditional punishment – all 400 of his slaves were executed, a legal punishment that persisted for another 500 years (Blackburn, 1988: 273).

But even if individual resistance to slavery was actually far more apparent than we might surmise, and certainly Bradley's (1994) summary of individual slave resistance from the works of Cato, Cicero and Pliny the elder, for example, implies that it was an endemic feature of slave relations, it is also clear that collective revolts aimed at overthrowing the Roman slave system were notable for their general absence. However, there had been two slave revolts (the First and Second Servile Wars) in Sicily (134–32, 104–101 BCE) prior to the revolt led by Spartacus (known by the

Romans as the Third Servile War), so it was not unheard of. The accounts of the revolt are both minimal and, of course, tend to be written by Romans like Sallust whose *Histories* was written thirty-five years after the events but have since been lost. However, the works of Greeks like Plutarch's *Life of Crassus* and Appian's *The Civil Wars*, and the *History of Rome* by Florus (an African-born Roman) from the early second century CE give us enough to consider the difficulties of leading such a rebellion against Rome.

## **Spartacus and leadership in the Third Servile War**

Appian suggested that Spartacus was a Thracian<sup>10</sup> by birth and had served in the Roman army, possibly as an auxiliary, before being enslaved and then sold at auction into the gladiatorial school of Cnaeus Lentulus Batiatus in Capua. As we shall see in the case of revolts inside Nazi Concentration and Death Camps, the discipline, skills and cultural affinity spawned by military service provided some groups with a much greater capacity for organizing and leading collective resistance.

For Spartacus it is notable that the revolt spread from the gladiatorial school at Capua rather than simply from ordinary slaves, again implying that the cultural or community affinities of the 74 gladiators (Florus suggests 30; Plutarch suggests 78), together with their martial skills were important in their initial break out in 73 bce and escape to Mount Vesuvius, roughly 30 kilometres away. There the gladiators elected three leaders: Spartacus, Oenomaus and Crixus, and Lendering (2003) suggests they represented the three main ethnic groups: a Thracian, a Greek and a Gaul respectively. After a local Roman militia was beaten off, Rome – already involved in major wars on two fronts (Pompey in Spain and Lucullus in Macedonia) – sent the Propraetor (Roman magistrate in charge of a province) Caius Claudius Glaber with a small legion of 3,000 hastily conscripted and untrained soldiers. Glaber trapped the slaves on top of Mount Vesuvius, but the slaves abseiled down vines, moved to the rear of the Roman camp and looted it, driving the soldiers back to Rome. Appian says many slaves and some freemen then joined them 'Since Spartacus divided the profits of his raiding into equal shares, he soon attracted a very large number of followers' (quoted in Shaw, 2001: 140). Moreover,



according to Appian, Spartacus forbade the import of gold and silver into the slave camp to maintain a basic level of equality and to focus on collective survival and tried with less success to prevent the mass looting undertaken by Crixus and the Gauls.

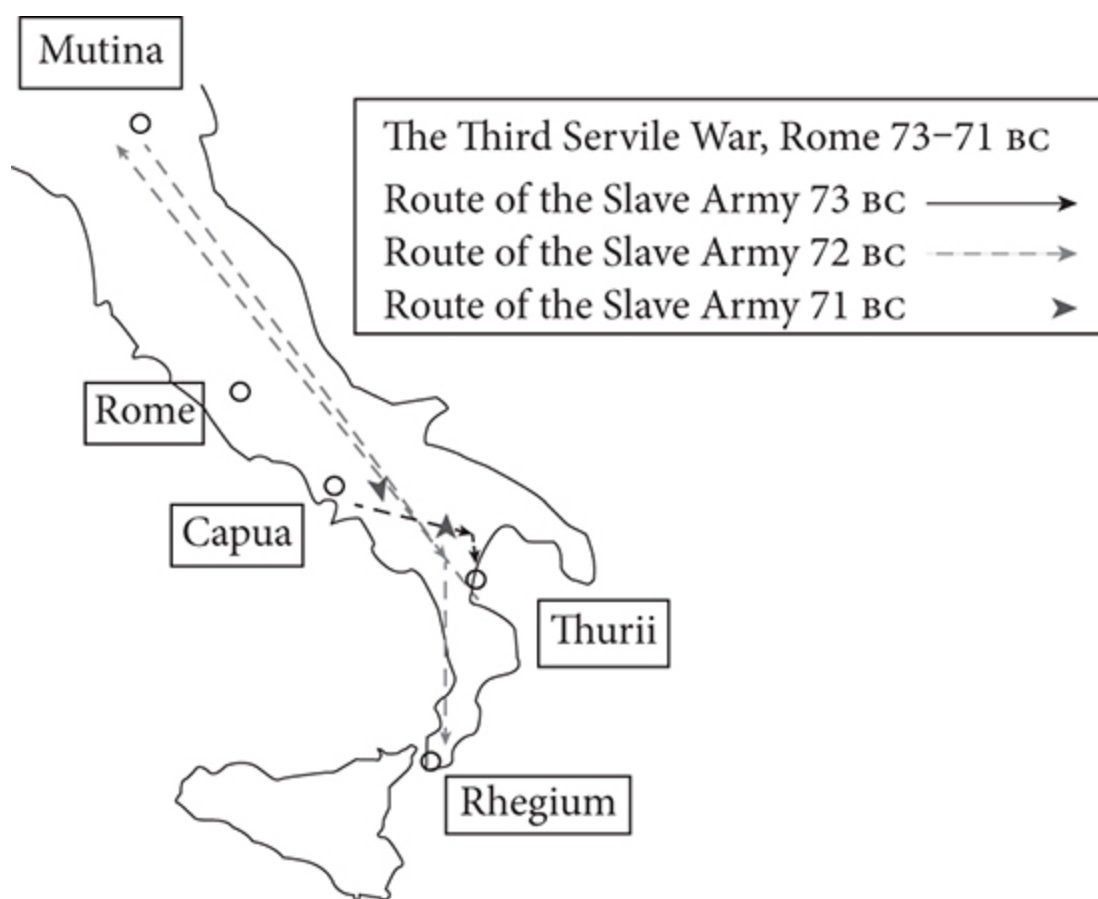
A Roman army of 6,000 under the Praetor (Roman magistrate responsible for the administration of justice) Publius Varinius was then despatched bearing the symbol of the Roman senate, the *fascēs*, but this too was destroyed and Varinius humiliated. As Florus suggests, ‘they [the rebels] ranged over the whole of Campania. Not content with the plundering of country houses and villages, they laid waste to Nola, Nuceria, Thurii and Metapontum with terrible destruction’ (quoted in Lendering, 2003).

Appian suggests that the slave army rapidly increased to 70,000 in number and it spent the winter of 73 bce in the south of Italy before moving north, apparently seeking to escape over the Alps into Gaul (present day France, then not under Roman control). At some point in the journey the slave army was divided between Spartacus and Crixus. Rome sent two legions to defeat the slaves and although the 20,000 Gauls under Crixus were defeated, Spartacus’s main army destroyed both Roman legions (a legion varied between 3,000 and 5,000 men and was around 5000 at this time) and then killed some of the prisoners by crucifying them and making others fight each other in a makeshift gladiatorial arena in a parody of their own world. As Spartacus’s army increased to 100,000, according to Appian, he defeated another Roman army of two legions led by Cassius Longinus at the battle of Mutina (now Modena). However, for reasons unknown, the slave army turned back at the foot of the Alps and returned to Rhegium (now Reggio Calabria) just off Sicily defeating yet another Roman army of two legions under Marcus Licinius Crassus on the way.

Crassus had already ordered the decimation of the army he inherited (one in ten drawn by lot executed by his comrades)<sup>11</sup> and as the slave army dithered for some reason at Rhegium, Crassus had fortifications built across the strip of land, effectively blocking the rebellious slaves in. After a brief foray against the fortifications, Spartacus ordered the crucifixion of a Roman prisoner and then broke through the fortifications to reach the port of Brundisium (Brindisi) only to find that the Roman General Lucullus was disembarking his army from Macedonia. In the chaos that followed, a Roman army of ten legions (around 50,000 soldiers) led by Crassus finally



defeated Spartacus's army near the source of the River Silarus, killing perhaps 30,000 of the 36,000 who chose to fight (Appian puts the Roman losses at 1,000). At the same time Pompey's army arrived from Spain to kill those fleeing from the battle northwards. Although 3,000 unharmed Roman prisoners were subsequently discovered at the camp of the slaves, Crassus had all 6,000 surviving slaves crucified along the 200-mile route of the Appian Way between Capua – where, as [Figure 3.3](#) suggests, the revolt had started – and Rome, where the fate of the slaves was sealed (Bradley, 1998: 124).



**Figure 3.3** The Third Servile War.

The final aspect of the Third Servile War that throws a critical shadow over the entire episode is to note how important slaves were to the undermining of hubris – the Roman Senate authorized a *Triumph* for Pompey for his previous success in Spain but not for the victory over Spartacus by Crassus who received the lesser award of an *Ovation*.<sup>12</sup>

That Spartacus did not set out from Capua with his fellow gladiators to seek personal immortality or overthrow slavery in the Roman world seems incontrovertible, but that his army of slaves survived for two years under harsh conditions and defeated as many as nine Roman armies is a testament to their collective military skill and his political leadership. But is it the achievements of Spartacus that encourage us to perceive him as a leader?

Under this line of enquiry, we should note that Spartacus deployed an array of astute tactical moves that significantly enhanced his chances of a successful result even if he never achieved that. Thus, he instilled discipline into the rag-tag army of the enslaved; he refused to allow Roman Army deserters to join, for fear that they would jeopardize the solidarity of the slaves; and he ensured the equal division of spoils and limited the acquisition of gold and silver for personal advancement. Moreover, some of his actions were resonant of Sun Tzu's admonitions about putting your troops into 'dead ground' where they have no option but to fight; thus, he slaughtered his own horse on the eve of the final battle, made Roman prisoners fight each other as gladiators and even crucified Roman soldiers in full view of the Roman army knowing that the consequence could not be anything other than the prevention of surrender and the death of all captives. To have survived at all as a gladiator was an achievement in itself but to have led a rag-tag army of many thousands comprising Gauls, Thracians, Greeks, Germans and probably many other ethnic identities for two years, most without any form of military training and against the greatest army the world had then known, was a significant achievement of leadership.

It is also worth pondering whether it was ever possible for a single leader, without formal authority and without the vestiges of a formal military hierarchy, to 'lead' a 70,000 strong army of ex-slaves. Given the limits of the human voice the only way that Spartacus could have imposed his will upon such a large group before – never mind during – a battle, would have been to imitate the Roman system of trumpet calls and flags. We do not know whether the slaves used such methods to control the deployment of groups or whether it was simply a case of the mass bearing down in one gigantic tidal wave to overcome their Roman opponents or be subdued by them.

Perhaps the slave army, imitating their origins as gladiators, embodied a form of organization that relates linguistically to that most feared of

gladiators – the *retarius*. The *retarius* was a gladiator armed with a net and a trident and usually wearing a *Murmillio* helmet, common to Thracia from where Spartacus came of course. The *retarius* usually fought the *secutor* (armed with a semi-cylindrical shield and the sword common to Roman soldiers, the *gladius*) in a combat traditionally associated with the *retarius* as the pursuer and the *secutor* as the pursued (Connolly, 2003: 77–8). The *retarius* was the lowest ranked gladiator and was at a distinct disadvantage unless he (there were some women gladiators, but they were more common in Britain than Rome) could compensate for his vulnerability through greater agility and speed. *Retarius* comes from the Latin *rete* – a net, or having veins, from which we derive the word reticulate: a network of parts; a net; having veins. Ironically, then, the net that the *retarius* used may have been how the slave army operated because it would have had to operate as a loose and decentralized network under distributed leadership rather than a well-oiled military machine under the central control of Spartacus. It is no doubt a great irony that we are only now returning to consider the value of the networked organization over 2,000 years after Spartacus may have been obliged to develop it.

Whatever the organizational method that was deployed the result was, temporarily at least, successful. On the one hand he facilitated the short-term freedom of perhaps 70,000–100,000 slaves against the most formidable empire the world had then experienced. He also defeated the might of nine Roman armies with a rag-tag army that had virtually no military training, with limited weapons, and with a group of immense ethnic diversity and heterogeneous interests. Of course, the revolt failed, and slavery continued but it is at least questionable whether that defeat was inevitable and whether that implied failure for those who gained at least a couple of years of freedom rather than living and dying in chains.

Indeed, so great was his achievement that even his enemies explained his success through his similarity to them. For example, Plutarch (*Life of Crassus* 8) suggests that Spartacus was unusual for a Thracian:

Spartacus was a Thracian from the nomadic tribes and not only had a great spirit and great physical strength, but was, much more than one would expect from his condition, most intelligent and cultured, being more like a Greek than a Thracian.

It may well be that Plutarch, like the Romans who fought and feared Spartacus, were loath to accept that a mere barbarian could have inflicted so much upon them, and that attributing Greek-like characteristics to him may

have rationalized their uncertainties. Plutarch also insists that Spartacus believed himself to be fated after an incident that occurred as he was sold at Rome:

When he first came to be sold at Rome, they say a snake coiled itself upon his face as he lay asleep, and his wife, who at this latter time also accompanied him in his flight, his countrywoman, a kind of prophetess, and one of those possessed with the bacchanal frenzy, declared that it was a sign portending great and formidable power to him with no happy event.<sup>13</sup>

## Leading slaves the Hollywood way

Leaders are routinely commodified in the film industry. In its most obvious sense, this generates sales of cinema tickets, DVD and download or streaming revenue; but there are also tie-ins from films, such as merchandise sales and sponsorship deals with goods' manufacturers. Inevitably, Spartacus has become commodified, not least in the establishing of a genre of gladiator films (most notably the 2000 Ridley Scott-directed *Gladiator* and the 2010 TV series *Spartacus*), and the lessons one can glean from his leadership can depend to one extent or another which Spartacus product one chooses to buy into.

We shall never know whether Spartacus really believed he was fated to 'great and formidable power', though Eunus, the leader of the slave rebellion in the First Servile War, seems to have been associated with a religious cult (Bradley, 1998: 58–9) and Arthur Koestler's novel about Spartacus, entitled *The Gladiators* (1999) and originally published in 1939, suggests that Spartacus may have been influenced by the messianism of the Hebrew prophets. However, Stanley Kubrick's movie version, starring Kirk Douglas and based on Howard Fast's 1952 novel *Spartacus*, implies that Spartacus eventually recognizes he cannot defeat Rome.

It might seem somewhat irrelevant to review the movie version to reconsider the leadership of Spartacus, but there are important lessons in the making and editing of the movie for all students of leadership. Fast's novel envisions Spartacus as a proto-communist whose leadership is critical to taking the slaves to the brink of destroying Rome itself. At the end of Fast's novel (1974: 272) Varinia, the wife of Spartacus and mother of his child, is explaining to Gracchus, a Roman Senator, what Spartacus wanted to achieve:

*Gracchus*: But when he tore down Rome, what would he build instead of Rome?

*Varinia*: He wanted a world where there were no slaves and no masters, only people living together in peace and brotherhood. ...

*Gracchus*: So that was the dream of Spartacus ... to make a world with no ships and none to be whipped – with no palaces and no mud huts.

Koestler does not dispute Spartacus's proto-communist leanings but has a very different timbre to his novel of Spartacus. Koestler, an ex-member of the same German Communist Party that Luxemburg and Liebknecht founded from the Spartacist League, became massively disillusioned with it by 1935 and his novel resonates with the brooding inevitability of failure. Hence his book is primarily written as an investigation into what he called 'the law of detours' which compels the leader on the road to utopia to be 'ruthless for the sake of pity'. In particular, Koestler relates this to an episode that remains confusing in the sources: what happened to Crixus?

All that we really know about Crixus is that he was one of the original three elected leaders and that he and between 20,000 and 30,000 Gauls had separated from the main slave army and were annihilated by a Roman army. However, Koestler suggests in his novel that Crixus was intent on pillaging the Roman lands while Spartacus was keen to lead the entire group to freedom to build the 'Sun Sate' – the slave-less utopia (Fast's version has Crixus intent on destroying Rome itself and with it the entire slave system). While Spartacus toys with the idea of executing Crixus to prevent the break-up of the army, he hesitates over the decision and Crixus leaves with one third of the army, fatally weakening Spartacus's position. As Koestler notes,

[Spartacus] shrinks from taking the last step – the purge by crucifixion of the dissident Celts and the establishment of a ruthless tyranny; and through his refusal he dooms the revolution to defeat. In *Darkness at Noon* [Koestler's novel about Russia under Stalin], the Bolshevik Commissar Rubashov goes the opposite way and follows the 'law of detours' to the end – only to discover that 'reason alone was a defective compass which led one such winding, twisted course that the goal finally disappears in the mist'. Thus, the two novels complement each other – both roads end in a tragic cul-de-sac. (1999: 317)

The result of Spartacus's weakness, for Koestler, is to let slip the chance of success, and the Roman blood-letting that follows the last battle captures not just the rebels but 'whosoever owned less than one acre or two cows [who] was suspected of revolutionary sympathies was killed or kidnapped; a quarter of the Italian slave population was extirpated. The rebels had

squirted blood over the country, the conquerors turned it into a slaughterhouse' (Koestler, 1999: 305). Thus, for Koestler, Spartacus's leadership is almost an irrelevance because he is doomed whichever way he turns: if he is ruthless enough to save the revolution it will become directionless because the law of detours will make it so; but if he retains his ethical position the revolution will be strangled by its enemies.

In many ways Kubrick's (1960) film reproduces this fatalism and its accompanying irrelevance of leadership. For example, a scene in the movie *Spartacus* shows Varinia (played by Jean Simmons) trying to comfort Spartacus (played by Kirk Douglas) as he wrestles with the tragic realization that, despite all his victories, he must plan for a future battle against yet another Roman army.

*Spartacus*: ... no matter how many times we beat them, they always seem to have another army to send against us. And another. Varinia, it's as if we've started something that has no ending.

This deeply pessimistic view of the possibility of leading slaves to freedom against the mightiest empire of the day was also very controversial at the time of making the movie. The facts were in dispute because several accounts of the revolt suggested that Rome was by no means secure and was very close to defeat itself at one time. And the precise words used by the actors in the movie were subject to immense controversy, as the director, scriptwriter and actors all fought over the way the narrative should be explained.

In the subsequent battle, the Romans defeat the slaves and, in the aftermath, Spartacus and his closest friend, Antonius (played by Tony Curtis), discuss the purpose and possibilities of the slave revolt:

*Antonius*: Could we have won, Spartacus? Could we ever have won?

*Spartacus*: Just by fighting them, we won something. When even one man says, 'No, I won't', Rome begins to fear. And we were tens of thousands who said it.

This scene, which appears to offer a rather more optimistic account of the leadership trials of Spartacus, was subsequently retaken to create a very different interpretation for the first public showing.

*Antonius*: Could we have won, Spartacus? Could we ever have won?

*Spartacus*: No! That was the wrong fight. We were doomed from the beginning. But it was a beautiful thing.

In the event, the negative reaction of the audience to the second take forced the reinsertion of the original take but it's important to reflect here on the leadership role of the film makers in constructing radically different images of leadership in the film itself. While Dalton Trumbo wrote the screen play, his left-wing sympathies had ensured he had done little significant work during the previous decade of McCarthyism, and although John F. Kennedy's personal endorsement of the film had undermined the attempt by the right-wing journalist Hedda Hopper and the American Legion to boycott the film, Universal Studios remained sensitive enough to the political context to tread very cautiously through the various rewritings of the script, including cutting three battle scenes and a dozen dialogues that implied that the slaves were very close to eliminating Rome altogether.<sup>14</sup> Were history and leadership such benign phenomena, there would be no need for the powerful to defend their settled meaning so much. We can therefore better understand Walter Benjamin's conceptualization of the contesting of history as a critical contemporary task. Which 'product' is interpreted as leadership, and which not, becomes charged with historical and contemporary energy.

The upshot is that the movie *Spartacus* is not simply an essentially contested account of the leadership of a little-known slave but itself the result of essential contests between different leaders. It might be appropriate, therefore, to leave this account by relating it to the moment in the movie when the Senator Crassus demands to know the identity of Spartacus in return for sparing the lives of the remaining 6,000 slaves. The historical accounts suggest that Spartacus's body was never found but the movie account is important for its playing out of the essential contested nature of identity, for one by one the slaves responds to Crassus's demand by getting to their feet and shouting 'I'm Spartacus!'

We will never know who the real Spartacus was – but that is the point: it doesn't necessarily matter, and the ambiguity of his character also facilitated the legacy of resistance to slavery and oppression that has inspired countless individuals and groups ever since. One of those groups also reinforces the limits of this product of his leadership. The Spartacists were a group of revolutionary socialists led by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, whose actions in the chaos of early post-First World War Germany were intended to tip Germany into a revolutionary cauldron that would result in the end of capitalism. The Spartacists – or Spartacus League

as the party was actually called – were founded in 1915, primarily as a consequence of the support for the war by the Social Democrats, a heterogeneous left-wing political party whose members included Luxemburg and Liebknecht. Luxemburg was imprisoned for her opposition to the war and wrote the Junius Pamphlet<sup>15</sup> whilst in prison, which called for the German Army to mutiny.

On their release from prison in the general amnesty of November 1918 they were both instrumental in the formation of the German Communist Party in December 1918, which was essentially composed of Spartacists. In January 1919 the most radical Spartacists, against Luxemburg's advice, attempted to turn the widespread workers' unrest into a revolution in Berlin against the government of Ebert, a Social Democrat. Ebert immediately withdrew to Weimar and allowed the right-wing Freikorps (comprised mainly of ex-soldiers) free reign to put down the insurrection. On 15 January Luxemburg and Liebknecht were arrested and taken to the Adlon Hotel to be held as prisoners and both were murdered that night; Luxemburg was found in the *Landwehr* canal in May, long after the *Freikorps* had put down the attempted revolution with great violence and bloodshed (Nettle, 1969).

After a lengthy period of disarray, the German Communist Party recovered under Thurman's leadership and went on to gain four seats in the Reichstag in the 1920 election, 62 in 1924 and 54 in 1928. Not until the 1930 election did the Nazi Party secure more votes than the Communist Party but by 1933 the latter had been abolished, having spent most of the previous decade towing the political line from Moscow that the Social Democrats (or at least their leaders) were actually Social Fascists (with some justification, as we discovered in the support for the Freikorps), that is, little better than the Nazis, and believing that the inevitable failure of the Nazis would leave the Communists free to pick up where the Spartacists had left off in 1919.<sup>16</sup>

The 'Product-based' approach to leadership then, could suggest that Spartacus, like the German Spartacists, was manifestly a failure: his actions facilitated the deaths of thousands, few slaves achieved the freedom they had presumably joined the revolt to acquire, and Rome as a slave-based imperial power persisted for a further five centuries after his death. On the other hand, the results of his leadership have inspired many to resist what they perceive to be equivalent forms of oppression. Yet the most famous



inheritors of that iconic leadership also failed and once again left a trail of dead in their wake, even if Luxemburg's writing and story continue to educate and inspire leftist activists. On the grounds of loss, we might conclude that Spartacus was a failed leader but this implies that no further 'inheritors' will ever arise and, if they do, they will also fail, as will all those inspired to action by Luxemburg, and others by the followers of Luxemburg, and so on. In short, irrespective of any existing empirical example of failure, it could still be said that a product-based analysis of the leadership of Spartacus remains potentially significant.

But if Spartacus provided the symbolic leadership to create the Spartacist League and the early German Communist Party, he also provided the excuse for Hitler to re-engage with slavery and several examples of leadership under conditions reminiscent of those facing Spartacus.

## Slavery and leadership in Nazi times

The enslavement of prisoners of war or conquered people has, as we have seen, a long tradition in human history. But the enslavement and extermination of a proportion of one's fellow citizens is unusual, and the policy of destruction through labour (*vernichtung durch arbeit*) at a time when a labour shortage existed is positively irrational, at least in economic terms. That atypicality reached its apotheosis in the twentieth century under the Nazi regime in Germany, though Stalin's assaults upon the Kulaks and various 'enemies of the revolution' puts him in strong contention for a place in this hall of infamy. Stalin also imposed the 'Not One Step Backwards' order (no. 227), which effectively ensured that anyone retreating in battle would be shot by their own side, but this is a different form of coercion from the one we are dealing with here (see Beevor, 1998: 85). This section, though, will concentrate on the issues of leadership for the 7.5 million foreign labourers in Germany, most of whom worked as slaves under Hitler, the several million prisoners of war (POWs), as well as the 6 million Jews who died, some through over work, but most of whom were simply murdered. Very often the groups overlapped, so that, for example, POWs who were Jewish ended up working as slaves in German industry, so what follows analytically separates what was often a collective group.

# Foreign workers/slaves

It is clear from the accounts of survivors that resistance to the Nazi regime on the part of foreign slave labourers, Jews and POWs was endemic but usually individually based, and seldom organized as a means of undermining the Nazi state. Herbert's (1997) review, for example, suggests that work avoidance routines and feigning sickness were common amongst the foreign workers, many of whom were slaves, but that resistance was primarily aimed at buttressing personal survival rather than regime change. Indeed, the consequence of poor productivity amongst foreign workers generated a vigorous debate amongst the Nazi hierarchy as to how to increase work effort, and this included improving food, enhancing punishments and even generating some provision for 'wages' beyond that deducted for tax, board and lodging – which normally ensured that no 'wages' were paid. As a letter found on a French civilian worker in May 1944 suggested, there were Ten (resistance) Commandments for the 'perfect French worker':

- 1 Walk slowly in the workshop.
- 2 Walk quickly after knocking off.
- 3 Go to the toilet frequently.
- 4 Don't work too hard.
- 5 Annoy the foreman.
- 6 Court the beautiful girls.
- 7 Visit the doctor often.
- 8 Don't count on vacation.
- 9 Cherish cleanliness.
- 10 Always have hope. (Quoted in Herbert, 1997: 329).

Hitler's slave labourers were not the first to enter Germany in the twentieth century, for slaves had been used by Germany in the First World War, though they were not described as slaves. But the conscripted Poles were little short of slaves. From 26 October 1939 all Poles between 16 (soon reduced to 14) and 60 were 'subject to compulsory public labour' and something like 85 per cent of those eligible were forced to move to Germany. In all, just fewer than 30 per cent (1,659,764) of the foreign

workers in Germany were Polish, and many lived in large camps near industrial sites. Berlin alone had 666 camps for foreign workers. All Poles had to wear a large purple 'P' on their clothing and were forbidden from mixing with the German population to the point where sexual relations with a German was punishable by death. Even this threat did not deter everyone: between 1942 and 1943 over 5,000 Germans were arrested every month for sexual liaisons with foreign workers (Goldhagen, 1996: 314). Executions were the preserve of the Gestapo and used for murder, political offences and sex with a German, but few if any cases originated with them, and at least half were initiated by 'ordinary' members of the public (Gellately, 2001: 153–5).

By early 1944, the addition of Italian POWs increased the numbers of foreign workers to 5.7 million, of whom 1.9 million were women. Initially women that were pregnant were sent back, but when the Nazi authorities believed that women were deliberately getting pregnant to avoid work, a new policy was developed: children of 'good racial stock' were to be brought up in special German, often SS-related, institutions; children of 'inferior racial stock' were sent to 'homes' which, as expected, had very high mortality rates. In addition, there were 1.3 million surviving POWs. One-third of the foreign workforce worked in agriculture (mainly French and Polish, providing 50 per cent of the workforce in many places), one-third in heavy industry (providing 33 per cent of the workforce) and the rest in light industry. In sum one-fourth of the workforce in Germany were foreign by the end of the war – a proportion that Herbert (1994: 233) suggests allowed the war to continue for at least 18 months longer than would otherwise have been possible.

But despite the paranoia of the Nazis that the foreign workers would foment a revolt to coincide with D-Day – probably using leaders parachuted in by the Western Allies – there were very few organized acts of collective resistance. Partly this was because the regime was so dominant and repressive that personal survival almost always took precedence over political action. Partly it was because only after the German defeats of late 1942 and early 1943 did it become apparent that the Allies might actually win the war, thus providing a long-term political purpose to the resistance. At that point many foreign workers were routinely executed after Hans Kammler, from the SS, suggested it would be a good idea to 'decimate'

foreign workers as the Soviet forces drew closer, simply to ensure ‘general security and good order’ (Gellately, 2001: 240–1, 254–5).

## Jews

Jewish people faced appalling material conditions and very few survived, although the scale of what awaited was not immediately clear. Once it became apparent what was likely to happen to them, Jews became very active in their resistance but initially the apparent irrationality of the controllers made resistance difficult. For example, on Primo Levi’s entry to Auschwitz, which carried the infamous *Arbeit Macht Frei* (Work Gives Freedom) over the entrance, he was made to strip off his clothes and to take particular care of his shoes. These were carefully placed in a corner, alongside those of the other prisoners and then something happened that Levi could not, at first, understand: ‘Someone comes with a broom and sweeps away all the shoes outside in a heap. He is crazy, he is mixing them all together, ninety-six pairs, they will be all unmatched’ (Levi, 1987: 29). But work for Jews, according to Goldhagen (1996: 317–18), seldom had any rationality, let alone economic utility. It was usually associated with low productivity yet incessant and impossibly high work rates, normally involved some retributive element, was associated with boundless cruelty on the part of the guards, and, unlike the work of non-Jewish prisoners, was usually fatal.

Levi was ‘lucky’ in the sense that he was not imprisoned in Auschwitz until early 1944, and thus avoided the fate that most Jews met, but the large-scale corralling of Jews had begun on a systematic basis in December 1939 when Polish Jews were herded in a ghetto in Lodz, with the intent of removing all their remaining wealth in exchange for food prior to expulsion. A similar pattern occurred in the Warsaw ghetto which housed almost half a million Jews by early 1941 when 30 per cent of the population lived in 2.4 per cent of the area. With the food ration of Jews set at 300 calories a day (compared to 634 for Poles and 2310 for Germans) it quickly became apparent that starvation would soon engender wide-scale deaths and hence disease that might spread back into Germany. In Lodz, a centralized economy was developed, employing 80,000 Jews making material for the *Wehrmacht*, but in Warsaw a more decentralized economy was just

beginning to flourish in the June of 1942 when policy changes in Berlin induced the 'evacuation' of both ghettos and the beginning of the end of the Jews.

Initially Himmler had sought a policy of 'destruction through labour' of the Jews and, with Heydrich, foresaw using Polish Jews to build an *Ostwall*, marking the new boundary of Greater Germany. However, the failure of the offensive against the USSR, and the entry of the United States into the war, persuaded some Nazis that, although Jewish labour would be required for the war effort, 'destruction through labour' would ensure the achievement of two contradictory policies: the elimination of the Jews and the expansion of the war economy simultaneously. The policy initially and temporarily foresaw the replacement of Polish and Soviet labour in Poland by Jews, while the former groups were sent to Germany itself. But Himmler became dissatisfied with its results, and those seeking to exploit the Jews, rather than eliminate them, lost ground in the debate until very late in the war (Browning, 2000: 59).

In the event, by late 1942 only those Jewish workers regarded as absolutely essential to the armaments factories were (temporarily) spared and sent to SS-run factory camps. Elsewhere Polish and Soviet workers displaced Jews and not the other way around. For instance, by June 1943 only 21,000 Jews remained in the Galicia district's SS work camps, the other 434,000 had been transported to extermination camps or were already dead. And after the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto in April 1943, Himmler, with Hitler's full support, ordered the closing down of all further Jewish work camps and the removal of all but a few of their inmates who remained in Lublin. In all, 300,000 Jews in Poland who were fit enough to work – and therefore supposed to be 'destroyed through labour' – were just destroyed. As Goldhagen (1996: 296) suggests, in the light of murdering 2 million Polish Jews, the irrational 'waste' of labour in a state under war conditions defies the imagination – except for those whose preference was not to win the war but to destroy the Jews.<sup>17</sup>

However, the value to the German war effort of POW and Jewish labour should be balanced by the problems induced by such labour and it is in this context that we need to evaluate the role of leadership. For example, few Jews were used in the armaments industry until late 1943 to early 1944, when the greater German borders began to shrink, and the supply of foreign labourers started to dwindle. At this point, for example, thousands of

concentration camp inmates were transported to the Harz Mountains to build underground armaments factories. By late 1944, 600,000 inmates were 'available' for work: 140,000 on the secret armaments projects, 130,000 on construction projects for the *Todt* organization (who for example, built some of the Atlantic Wall defences), and 230,000 in private industry. Between October 1943 and March 1944, 3,000 Jews from the Buchenwald camp died in building the V2 rocket complex at Kaunstein in Thuringia, and that after 1,000 had died on the journey. By March 1945, 40,000 prisoners worked in the Dora-Mittelbau I camp producing 600 rockets per month (Burleigh, 2000: 775).

However, contrary to popular assumption, sabotage and other forms of resistance existed and significantly hindered the German war effort. In Dachau, for example, inmates managed to ensure that skilled workers were seldom sent to arms factories where their skills would prove useful to the Germans, while those with the skills and the political will to sabotage production were directed to the automatic rifle production line. The Combat Group Auschwitz managed to reduce armaments production by 50 per cent while the Mauthausen Messerschmitt plant was forced to train up unskilled labourers because a prisoner-clerk in the administration had 'inadvertently' sent all the skilled craft workers to other camps. Another Mauthausen plant, the Steyr munitions plant, was effectively put out of action for several days at a time by various groups of prisoners: French, Italian, Spanish and Polish, the latter by failing to harden the metal in the guns so that, although they all passed the quality inspection, few would have fired effectively for any length of time. The Gustloff Works near Buchenwald was forced to re-engineer nine month's supply of automatic carbines after sabotage, and although the production capacity was set at 10,000 a month – and 15,000 a month was possible – only 8,000 a month were ever produced. So problematic did the situation become that the Nazi authorities began recruiting Soviet and Eastern women workers (who comprised half the foreign workforce from 1943) precisely because they believed them to be less likely to engage in acts of resistance than Jewish men (Herbert, 1997: 340–93).

In fact, the Nazis had only to look in their own backyard to see that quiescence was not inexorably related to women. Indeed, the only public demonstration against the deportation of German Jews during the entire Holocaust occurred on the evening of 27 February 1943 when 200 'Aryan'

or Gentile wives of the 1,700 Jewish men in 'mixed' marriages in Berlin protested outside the holding building in *Rosenstrasse* against the arrests earlier that day and likely deportations of their husbands. What was to be 'the final roundup' of the remaining Jews in Germany turned into a fiasco for the SS and the Gestapo who threatened to shoot the protesters; the numbers of women grew through the following week to 1,000, as did the continuous chant: 'Give us back our husbands!' [The 7,000 Jews without 'Aryan' partners were deported to Auschwitz without any German civilian protests, though it transpired that 35 of these had 'Aryan' wives. The Gestapo would not allow these to be freed since they would have knowledge of the extermination programme, but they were redirected to a Labour camp]. On 6 March after a week of embarrassing protests Goebbels reluctantly ordered the release of the 1,700 men and plans for transporting other intermarried Jews from the rest of Germany were dropped (Johnson, 1999: 422–6). As Stoltzfus (1996: 245) concluded, civilian unity was paramount for fighting a successful war: Goebbels feared that Germans who had family deported would stoke social unrest and undermine the war effort. Furthermore, 'a public discussion about the fate of the deported Jews threatened to disclose the Final Solution'.

Clearly, we have great difficulties in reconstructing the role of leadership in leading the resistance against Nazi assaults on and exploitation of the Jews, but we know enough to suggest that men and women, individually and collectively, Jewish and Gentile, played a role in that resistance. However, if Jews had a significant motivation to resist, it was usually the groups with the most organizational resources that led the most successful forms of resistance.

## POWs

The invasion of Russia in 1941 did not induce any concern amongst the Nazi establishment for what would be done with the Soviet POWs; they were expected to be shipped north to Siberia and were therefore of little initial interest. The inevitable result was a very high mortality rate: over 60 per cent of the 3.3 million Soviet POWs captured during 1941 were dead before the end of the year. Of the 5.7 million Soviet POWs in total, 58 per cent (3.3 million) died in German captivity. Yet for the Nazis, the problem

was not Soviet mortality as much as a German labour shortage. With so many German men in uniform, and by late 1941 little prospect of the Soviet war ending quickly, German industry began to slow down under pressure of a million vacancies, though the proportion of German women employed never varied from about a quarter throughout the war. Göring's response on the deployment of Russians, *Russeneinsatz*, was unequivocal:

The place of German skilled workmen is in the armaments industry. Shovelling dirt and quarrying stones are not their job – that's what the Russian is for. ... As a matter of principle, the German worker is always the boss of any Russian ... The Russians can arrange their own food (cats, horses, etc.) ... Range of punishment: from limitations on food rations to execution.

(Quoted in Herbert, 1994: 222–3)

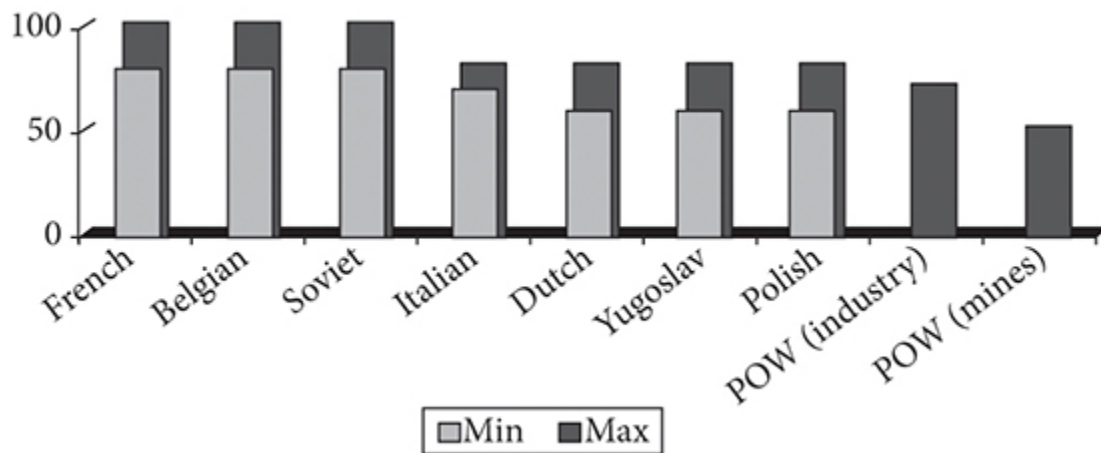
But since most POWs had already died, and few of the rest were fit for work, German labour shortages continued. In February 1942 the decision was taken to use Soviet civilians under the Reich Main Security Office (RSHA), led by Fritz Sauckel, and 'Eastern Workers' (*Ostarbeiter*) were formally recognized. These workers were to wear an OST badge at all times, to be divided by sex and separated from all other groups, especially German workers. They were to be kept in camps, always guarded and occasionally allowed escorted excursions as a reward. A rigorous punishment regime was introduced, including withdrawal of rations, imprisonment and flogging (Herbert, 1994: 220–6).

Some division of labour was introduced: French and Polish workers were primarily deployed in agriculture for example, and 'volunteers' were paid similar rates to German workers, but few foreign workers entered German industry until the failings of the war in the USSR by November 1941 made it necessary. Of course, what also became essential was to replace the Jews that had been transported to the extermination camps in Poland. The Germans then required the Soviet authorities in occupied territory to provide conscript labour, but this proved difficult and the resort to force and wide-scale kidnapping became common. It brought some considerable success: at an average of 40,000 per week over 1.3 million civilian men and women, in conjunction with just under half a million Soviet POWs, were transported from the USSR to Germany between April and December 1942.

However, despite the numbers involved, two problems became self-evident. First, the losses on the eastern front – particularly from Stalingrad in early 1943 – developed into a running haemorrhage on German men. Second, as [Figure 3.4](#) suggests, the productivity of all foreign workers, but



particularly Soviet workers, especially their POWs, proved inadequate to the demands.



**Figure 3.4** Productivity of foreign workers and POWs compared to Germans (100), 1943.

Source: Reconstructed from Herbert (1994: 231).

For example, by April 1942 Krupp in Essen was already reporting that 30 per cent of the Soviet POWs who had been healthy on arrival were already too ill-nourished to do any work, despite being given exactly the set amount of food. Like most things, conditions and food depended upon the place one was allocated in the Nazi racial hierarchy: thus, Western workers did significantly better than Eastern workers, and the food of the latter could be dire. In the summer of 1943 one report recounted the food intake of Eastern workers as:

Breakfast: 1/2 litre of turnip soup

Lunch: 1 litre of turnip soup

Dinner: 1 litre of turnip soup plus 1,300 grams (six thin slices) of bread

1 weekly ration of 50 grams of margarine

1 weekly ration of 25 grams of meat. (Quoted in Herbert, 1994: 246)

By increasing the rations and ‘privileges’ – and the punishments – some increase in productivity was reported from late 1943, but still the problems persisted. Of the 181,764 Soviet POWs in German mines in early 1944, fully 18 per cent (32,236) had ‘left’ by the middle of 1944, the vast majority returned to their POW camp through ill health. This was hardly surprising: a Red Cross report in September 1944 noted that the POWs were regularly

flogged, lived and worked in damp conditions without boots, had one blanket to sleep in but lots of rats to sleep with, were inspected by a doctor at the rate of one every 18 seconds and had inadequate food. Rather better conditions were available in industry – though foreign workers were forbidden to enter air-raid shelters. But the best place was agriculture, for the extra rations usually ensured a higher survival rate (Herbert, 1994: 238–45).

American POWs with Jewish origins fared little better than Polish or German Jews. For example, the eighty who worked at the Berga work camp were forced to dig tunnels for an underground armaments' factory. Their hours varied from eight to twelve a day, but no breaks were allowed, no food or water provided during the shifts, and they were not allowed to wear coats against the cold. Yet, despite the daily beatings and incremental exhaustion, the POWs still managed individual and collective forms of resistance, from stealing the pipe and whip of a particularly hated guard, to going on strike, to singing American songs: all of these incurred some form of punishment but the POWs persisted with their actions. Many of the POWs died, less from the bullets or gas inflicted on their colleagues, but from the diseases induced by overwork, poor conditions and malnutrition (Bard, 1994: 76–90). Many American Jews were also victims of American technology, for IBM sorters, tabulators, printers and the punch card technology that allowed the Nazis to find and trace all their victims, were provided with the help of IBM's founder, Thomas Watson (Black, 2001).

In late 1943 the collapse of the Italian regime persuaded the German authorities to mobilize all those Italian soldiers who refused to continue the war. That turned out to be the majority, and half a million were transported into Germany to work. About 45,000 Italian 'military internees' died through starvation, inadequate medical attention or were simply murdered by the Germans, including 9,500 of the 11,500 Italian occupation force on Cephalonia.<sup>18</sup> And many of the executions of civilians, POWs, Jews and 'undesirables' were carried out in full view of the German public, with little, if any, dissent and a significant degree of support.

But whatever the level of persecution and retribution, there was always some degree of resistance. Perhaps the most important resistance as far as the war effort was concerned, occurred in the Dora camp near Buchenwald, where prisoners worked on the V-1 and V-2 rockets. The camp resistance organizers sent electrical engineers to change the voltage in the relays that

operated the steering mechanisms in the tail; meanwhile Russian POWs urinated on the transformers and carried out acts of sabotage on an individual basis, and groups of Russians, Yugoslavs, French and Czech POWs did likewise. A group of Italian POWs made a public stand against being forced to work on the rockets that led to seven of them being executed. And retribution was never far away: of the 400 people arrested between November 1944 and March 1945 for suspected sabotage, 118 were hanged (99 Russians, 16 Poles, 2 Czechs and 1 Lithuanian). Quite what effect this sabotage had is obviously difficult to establish, but the sacrifice of these slave labourers does not seem to have been wasted. Suffice it to say that 20 per cent of the 11,300 V-1s failed to launch, and 5,000 of the 10,800 V-2s either exploded on take-off or in mid-air or fell into the North Sea. A quality check on 8 December 1944 of 150 items established that 22 failed and the failures were regarded by management as the direct result of sabotage (Langbein, 1994: 279–316).

In terms of a resistance movement amongst the foreign workers and POWs, the most important seems to have been the Fraternal Cooperation of Prisoners of War (*Bratskoje Sotrudnichestovo Vojennoplennych* [BSV]). This was formed in early 1943 by Soviet officers held as POWs in Munich with the help of ‘Josef Feldman’ who was a civilian interpreter in the camp but in reality was Georg Fesenko, an NKVD (Soviet Communist Party secret police) officer who had escaped from Germany and returned on a secret mission on behalf of the Soviet Communist Party. The BSV acted as a typical secret political party with a strict leadership hierarchy but split into cells that remained ignorant of each other’s identities. The group acted to train and arm members for the future Soviet invasion and aided escape attempts before finally being uncovered by the Gestapo in February 1944. By May of that year 383 members of the BSV had been arrested and executed, mainly in Dachau.

Other organized political groups included the Committee for Struggle Against Fascism (*Komitee Kampf gegen den Faschismus*) in Düsseldorf that aided escaping Western pilots, organized sabotage and gathered intelligence, and overall the Gestapo were adamant that the political resistance was almost always led by Soviet POWs. It generally was, but there were no organized attempts to lead an uprising, and although many ‘foreigner gangs’ emerged as the war drew to a close, they were restricted to ensuring their own collective survival rather than facilitating the end of

the Nazi regime. But it was perhaps the combination of the two most important 'resistors' that produced the greatest embarrassment to the Nazi Regime: the leaders of the rebellion at Sobibòr Death Camp who were Jewish and POWs.

## Jews and Jewish POWs: escape from the Sobibòr deathcamp

Sobibòr was situated in eastern Poland in the Lublin district,<sup>19</sup> very near a railroad line but a long way from prying eyes. Over a quarter of a million Jews were murdered in Sobibòr's gas chambers, primarily of Polish nationality but including some from the Soviet Union, some Czechs, French, Germans and Austrians as well as around 35,000 Dutch Jews.

On 14 October 1943 half of the 600 inmates broke out and though only around 60 survived to the end of the war, it was one of the most significant examples of resistance within the extermination and concentration camps. The camp, an area approximately 400 yards by 700 yards, had three gas chambers 'housing' up to 180 people each, and was surrounded by a triple layer of barbed wire, a 15-yard-deep minefield and watchtowers. It was built in March 1942 by slave and local Polish labour, and it began murdering Jews in April of that year under the Aktion Reinhard Program. This was named after the assassinated Nazi Reinhard Heydrich and was aimed at clearing the two and a quarter million Jews of the General Government region in Poland in the three new death camps at Belzec, Sobibòr and Treblinka.

Sobibòr was commanded by Franz Stangl and guarded by between twenty and thirty SS men, supported by a number of Ukrainians. Since the Ukrainians developed a penchant for escaping too, they were only armed with five bullets each. Up to 300 Jews serviced the gas chambers and 1,000 serviced the rail yard and the accommodation. As usual with the death camps, everything was done to ensure a smooth transition from rail wagon to gas chamber, so all the Jews were told when they had arrived was that they were at a transit camp. They were then required to undress, and separated into men, who were murdered first, and then women and children. A train of twenty wagons could be 'processed' in under three hours.

Generally, it seems that the ‘processing’ went without a hitch, until June 1943, just after the death camp at Belzec was abandoned (because its wooden gas chambers could not cope with the increased flow of victims) when the 600 prisoners left at Belzec were transferred to Sobibòr where they were immediately shot. However, in clearing the bodies a note was found in a pocket that warned the inmates of Sobibòr of their own impending doom. The note said:

We worked for a year in Belzec. I don’t know where they’re taking us now. They say to Germany. In the freight cars there are dining tables. We received bread for three days, and tins and liquor. If all this is a lie, then know that death awaits you too. Don’t trust the Germans. Avenge our blood! (Jewish Virtual Library, no date; see also Laitner, 2021)

After this it was obvious that no one would escape Sobibòr alive and immediately two prisoners escaped. The SS then summarily executed twenty prisoners as a warning to the rest. Nevertheless, on another occasion five Jewish prisoners, including two women and two of their Ukrainian guards, escaped, but three were shot in the pursuit and hundreds of prisoners were subsequently executed as a reprisal.

Such a brutally repressive system clearly generated enormous problems for those leaders of the resistance inside Sobibòr. Initially, Leon Feldhendler, the former chair of the *Judenrat* in Zolkiew (Poland) (the Jewish Council that acted as community leaders under German control), led the planning for the break-out, and it was agreed that only a mass break out was viable, since any smaller escapes would have led to further reprisals against those left behind. Several plans emerged: one to get the young Jewish boys who acted as servants to the SS to murder them; another proposed setting fire to the camp; and a third proposed digging a tunnel, but all three were rejected as unfeasible and it became apparent to Feldhendler that no one in the leadership group had the military training or leadership ability to make the plan work. Then a (Jewish) Dutch Naval Officer, probably called Joseph Jacobs, was engaged to lead the project. Unfortunately, the plan was leaked to the Germans by one of the Ukrainian guards who had apparently agreed to assist the Jews, and Jacobs and seventy-two other Dutch Jews were executed as a reprisal. Two more escape attempts were foiled in September 1943 and then finally Feldhendler made contact with an officer from the Soviet Red Army, Lt Alexander Pechorsky, who had arrived with 100 other Jews who were Soviet POWs. Pechorsky took over the project, using Feldhendler as his second in

command, and a plan was hatched for ensuring the escape of all 600 inmates (including 100 women), this time without involving the Ukrainian guards and using both a tunnel, the killing of the SS, and a mass break out.

Heavy rain in early October washed out the tunnel, and Pechorsky then had some difficulties dissuading a group of eight prisoners from escaping on their own. The planning for a mass break-out continued and a group of 40 prisoners agreed to go for 13 October when each of the SS guards would be asked to go to a workshop on a mundane task and then killed by small groups of trustworthy prisoners between 15.30 and 16.45 hours. Simultaneously all the telephone and power lines would be cut, and the camp transports sabotaged while ammunition and guns were stolen and distributed. Next, the usual roll-call would be organized and the prisoners marched off towards the main gate, but this time with the conspirators in the front rank who would seize weapons from the arms shed on the way and fight their way past the Ukrainian guards. Then each prisoner would make his or her way across the minefields to the forests to meet up with the local Partisans.

Unfortunately, an unexpected inspection occurred early on 13 October and the break-out was postponed to the following day. At the allotted start time on 14 October, eleven SS men were inveigled into the workshops and killed while phone and power lines cut, the camp vehicles immobilized and six rifles stolen. But as the still unaware majority of prisoners lined up for roll-call, a German lorry appeared and its driver, seeing a dead SS man, opened fire on the crowd and was himself promptly killed, along with the commander of the Ukrainian guards. At this point the remaining Ukrainians began opening fire and pandemonium broke out as the prisoners scattered through the gate and across the fences, many dying from gun-shot wounds or from mine detonations.

Pechorsky, correctly assuming that there would be no mines around the living quarters of the SS, broke through the fence at this point and led a group into the woods. Three hundred of the 600 prisoners escaped on the day and 100 were killed in the attempt, while a further 50 were killed in the following few days. All those that remained in the camp – whether they took part in the attack on the guards and the break-out or not – were summarily executed over the next 24 hours.

Assuming that the prisoners would move east in a single group to get over the River Bug, the Germans immediately moved around 400 troops in

that direction but most of the prisoners had actually gone north in small groups of around 10 people towards the forests. Pechorsky, however, led his group (which may have taken most of the weapons) across the River Bug on October 19. By 22 October Pechorsky had met a group of Soviet Partisans while Feldhendler stayed in the forest for a fortnight before joining a different group of Partisans. Of the 200 that made the initial successful escape only 50 survived until the end of the war; Feldhendler was murdered on 2 April by Polish fascists, just a month short of the end of European hostilities. Pechorsky survived to return to the Soviet Union. Sobibòr camp was destroyed by the Germans shortly after the break-out.

We will not belabour the point here that resonates with Spartacus's leadership in the Third Servile War against Rome: under the most difficult of material conditions, it proved possible not simply to invoke small-scale acts of individual resistance to the Nazi regime but also to create organized resistance and sabotage. That organization required some kind of leadership and it tended to occur not simply where the 'need' was greatest – amongst those Jews destined for oblivion – but where attributes and experiences of the group coincided with the prerequisite military and political skills. The groups most able to resist tyrannies tended to have similar experiences and a level of military experience that generated sustainable leadership cadres. Individuals could say 'no' and take the consequences from their oppressors, but organized groups could make their oppressors take the consequences too. In terms of end product, the leadership of slaves, POWs, foreign workers and Jews achieved some destabilization and inhibition of the German war effort, though it was modest. But in terms of establishing an icon of heroic resistance their achievements were much greater. This is proven by the simple act of us and others narrating their histories. Such acts are 'blasted' (Benjamin, 2015) beyond their immediate context and retold in contemporary settings in ways that may contribute to change as yet unforeseen. The resisters continue to lead in the present day, decades after their deaths. Such an analysis of leadership holds the potential to escape the market and commodity-based view of the valued product as that which sells (or wins out in the moment), to situate leadership in a lineage of an evolving and elongated history that is never truly closed.

## **Conclusion**

What can we conclude from this review of Leadership as Product? Well, several aspects are worth highlighting.

First, there is now an abundance of leadership ‘products’ in the form of theories, slick leadership development programmes promising wondrous results, popular books from consultants along similar lines and glitzy accounts of business leaders in the media. Yet unpacking how much of this proliferation of leadership objects bears much resemblance to actual results is a different matter, and so we may instead experience something closer to a victory of objects over subjects, of symbols over substance. This is the realm of leadership fetishism, where the profusion of symbols becomes abstracted from the use value of leadership products in practice. Even when one can identify potent leaders worth learning from, by the time they arrive to us filtered through popular and online culture, the difficult lessons, the conflictual and radical elements of their stories, are often airbrushed away in favour of safer corporate ersatz.

Therefore, second, it is often impossible to establish the causal link between leader and results, even if followers and subordinates prefer to attribute the latter to the former because this provides a useful scapegoat or a valuable role model to embody. Ultimately, however, this ordering of the leadership hierarchy in practice merely continues to fetishize leaders.

Third, even where the results or products can be related to the actions of a leader this does not necessarily bode well for organizations: if the results that are monitored are chosen because they are easy to measure and/or because they reflect the needs of the managerial hierarchy or partial elements of it, rather than the whole organization, the customers, clients or followers, then the consequence may distort organizational behaviour as members are encouraged to ‘play the system’ rather than support the system. Under such conditions the organization adopts a ‘hard shell’ strategy and seeks to defend the monitored boundaries rather than a ‘soft shell’ system that seeks to learn and grow.

Fourth, in turning to the case studies of slavery we can find an alternative model of value than the one presented through the more market orientated criteria of product success. In these stories we can recover instructive examples of leadership from instances largely now forgotten because they have been disregarded as ‘losses’. Even under the most arduous conditions imaginable and against overwhelming force, it is possible for subordinate and heterogeneous groups to resist their oppressors and leadership does



seem to have played some role in those results: instigating the rebellion, facilitating its survival, ensuring its elimination and perpetuating its memory. However, the results of leadership are extraordinarily difficult to quantify, not just in terms of establishing whether the aims were achieved but in terms of a much longer term and subtle impact: Spartacus's rebellion failed in its own terms of securing freedom for the slaves who fought against Rome but in terms of generating a symbol of resistance against oppression that motivated subsequent leaders and followers it may well be judged a success. The leadership here continues to the present day and cannot only be judged by the immediate product of the time.

Fifth, our accounts of leaders and leadership are never raw but always cooked (Lévi-Strauss, 1964), that is they never arrive as neutral transparent accounts of the truth but always constructed from particular perspectives and using particular forms of evidence. In this case we have a double cooking because not only do we have contested accounts from the original sources – and nothing from the losing side at all in the case of Spartacus – but we have contested accounts in the novels of Spartacus and even within the writers, editors and producers of the movie. Similarly, as Goldhagen's work has demonstrated, the relatively nearness in space and time to the Nazi era is no proof against contested accounts of leadership and responsibilities. One important task of leadership, and perhaps especially leadership emerging from resistance, is to look outside dominant narratives of victory for inspiration.

There is no objective solution to the problems of interpreting leadership as a product, there is only ever-present vigilance and scepticism – but that does not imply cynicism. We may disagree radically about the nature, role and value of leadership, but it is too important a topic to be left to leaders to resolve on our part.

## Notes

- 1 Thanks to Steve Rayner for suggesting this analogy.
- 2 <http://www.fpl.com/>.
- 3 <https://twitter.com/parholmgren/status/1176763313054781440>.
- 4 <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/beatification-homily-mother-teresa-8021>.
- 5 <https://secularhumanism.org/1996/10/an-interview-with-christopher-hitchens-on-mother-teresa/>.
- 6 Accounts of African and Contemporary slavery can be found in Grint, 2003 and 2021.

- 7 F. W. Taylor, despite his upbringing by abolitionist parents, was notoriously racist (see Kanigal, 2000).
- 8 Aristotle's defence of slavery as 'natural' to some people was extensively used to justify slavery in South America by the Spanish slave owners (Ste. Croix, 1988: 29).
- 9 From the Latin *manūmittere*, to release, from *manū* (from one's hand) and *emittere* (to send away).
- 10 Thrace was centred on what is now Bulgaria but then also included Romania, parts of Serbia, Greece and Turkey and was successfully controlled by Rome by 46 bce.
- 11 Decimation or *fustuarium* is described by Polybius. 'This is inflicted as follows: The tribune takes a cudgel and just touches the condemned man with it, after which all in the camp beat or stone him, in most cases dispatching him in the camp itself. But even those who manage to escape are not saved thereby: impossible! for they are not allowed to return to their homes, and none of the family would dare to receive such a man in his house. So that those who have once fallen into this misfortune are utterly ruined. ... If the same thing happens to large bodies, and if entire maniples desert their posts when exceedingly hard pressed, the officers refrain from inflicting the bastinado or the death penalty at all, but find a solution of the difficulty that is both salutary and terror-striking. The tribune assembles the legion, and brings up those guilty of leaving the ranks, reproaches them sharply, and finally chooses by lot sometimes five, sometimes eight, sometimes twenty of the offenders, so adjusting the number thus chosen that they form as near as possible the tenth part of those guilty of cowardice. Those on whom the lot falls are bastinadoed mercilessly in the manner above described' (Plutarch *Life of Crassus* quoted in <http://classics.mit.edu/Plutarch/crassus.html>). The 90 per cent who survived the decimation were still subject to public humiliation and were forced to eat barley instead of wheat and to sleep outside their tents at night (Goldsworthy, 2003: 162).
- 12 The criteria for a 'Triumph' included a 'decisive victory' (at least 5,000 killed) over a foreign enemy [which is why Crassus had no joy from defeating Spartacus]. An 'Ovation' – a 'lesser victory' or one against a 'base or unworthy foe' – involved the general walking into Rome, wearing a plain toga with a wreath of myrtle, not laurel, on his head, without carrying a sceptre and usually without a procession of soldiers behind. See <https://www.worldhistoryedu.com/what-was-the-roman-triumph/>.
- 13 Plutarch, *Life of Marcus Licinius Crassus*, quoted at <https://www.uvm.edu/~bsaylor/rome/crassus.html>.
- 14 Duncan Cooper's 'Who Killed Spartacus?' and 'Spartacus: Still Censored after All These Years' are the best source for the political intrigues over the filming of Kubrick's *Spartacus*. They can both be found at <http://www.visual-memory.co.uk/amk/doc/0103.html>.
- 15 Available online at <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/~german/gtext/kaiserreich/lux.html>.
- 16 *Spartacist* remains the name of the theoretical and documentary repository of the International Communist League (Fourth Internationalist).
- 17 It was not just with regard to the labour of Jews that Hitler's 'irrational' judgement prevailed. In the second half of 1944, when German losses were mounting very seriously on both fronts, Hitler allowed the withdrawal of 187,000 German troops to take part as extras in the film *Kolberg* – the story of an epic defence by a small Baltic town against Napoleon, or, in the words of the Reich propaganda ministry, a film to 'demonstrate ... that a people united at home and at the front will overcome the enemy' (Kershaw, 2000: 713).
- 18 The executions were the background to Louis de Bernières' *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (1995).
- 19 This section is heavily reliant on the Proceedings of the Fourth Yad Vashem International Historical Conference, Jerusalem, January 1980. These are available at: <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/The-Nazi-concentration-camps-%3A-structure-and-aims%2C-Gutman-Saf/2142b6a7c6f90ef289f0a3fa207221dcf8a8aa20>.

## Leadership as process: Leadership as a reflection of community

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‘THE CHILD is father to the man.’  
How can he be? The words are wild.  
Suck any sense from that who can:  
‘The child is father to the man.’  
No; what the poet did write ran,  
‘The man is father to the child.’  
‘The child is father to the man!’  
How *can* he be? The words are wild.

Gerard Manley Hopkins<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the process of leadership and in particular the process by which leaders learn to lead. Before we get there, however, we need to be real about the contemporary moment in which ideas of leadership process reside, namely the increasing erosion of the power of labour, a process accelerated by the digitalization of work. This is the march of micro-management into the workplace, with control and surveillance the dominant techniques, a digitalized phenomenon we refer to as the Total Management logic. In particular, we look at Amazon as an exemplar of Total Management. Proceeding from this basis allows us to ask what is distinctive about a leadership process. It is not enough to merely substitute machine for human, lumping them both together as ‘leading’ because the

processes of leading and managing are distinct. We therefore defend this proposition and look to what is distinctive about a leadership process, hoping to identify that which can be built upon to develop leadership in these times. Learning, we claim, offers some answers. In the first part we examine various learning theories and consider their utility in the leadership arena. One particular theme that we pursue here is what we call ‘inverse learning’, that is, reversing the conventional direction of the learning from ‘teacher’ onto ‘pupil’ to ‘pupil’ onto ‘teacher’. In this case it implies that leadership may be most appropriately learned from one’s subordinates. Thus, just as adults learn to become parents by interacting with their children, so leaders learn to lead by interacting with their followers. In effect, children teach their parents how to parent while followers teach their leaders how to lead. Algorithms can learn from workers and customers but lack a distinctively human sense of responsiveness to power relations and empathy, hallmarks of a leadership process. The inverse learning model is applied to an RAF leadership course because it most clearly contradicts the traditional process of military leadership: a formal hierarchy of ranks, supported by an extensive network of procedures and rules, is designed to ensure subordinate learning through subordinate compliance, and no inverse learning is necessary.

In the event we suggest that leadership learning occurs through inverse learning and within a Community of Practice but that the limits of the community actively limit the practice and hence the leadership learning; in effect, leadership becomes a reflection of the community within which it operates. This conclusion leads us to consider some of the systemic ways in which communities can develop harmful forms of leadership practice, which in turn requires a thoroughly de-romanticized and critical analysis. We examine this topic through reference to police killings of Black people, viewing it as concerning a contest about the value of life and which lives are considered to matter in a given society and organization. Taking the argument a step further, we explore the ways in which groups can assert a body’s equal right to exist in ways that exceed language and talk. Developing this embodied, extra-linguistic notion of leadership as process through recourse to the Black Lives Matter movement, we state that corrupted processes of status quo leadership themselves require radical disruptions and conflict from outside, offering much needed spurs for change when communities become too self-absorbed or, worse, when they

become hosts for oppressive practice. Here, digital technology can be embraced by people and groups to more emancipatory ends, extending the chains of connection and imagination of leadership processes.

## **Total Management: Can leadership survive?**

Recently one of Owain's high-achieving former students told him that he had been working for one of the world's leading tech companies for some time. Catching Owain slightly by surprise, the student asked him for a catch-up on leadership practice, as he had not been able to 'apply leadership for years' and wanted to be reminded of some of the principles. What was behind this request? At face value, and certainly if we buy into mainstream discourse, leadership is equated with corporate achievement. Yet it is worth applying some critical faculties and pausing to reflect on the extent to which leadership – as described in this book – is in fact something that is particularly relevant to the contemporary economy. In a nutshell, perhaps what we have witnessed in recent decades is a victory of management over leadership. Let's contextualize what we mean by this.

As the Covid-19 pandemic decimated lives, communities and workplaces from 2020, it was the ingenuity, creativity and collaboration of people across the globe that came to the rescue. Previous obstacles and boundaries to transformative and collective leadership were swept aside for the goal of saving lives. Granted this process was not as truly international as we would have liked – as evidenced by the pernicious trend of vaccine nationalism, other racist nationalisms that scapegoated racial and ethnic minorities for the crisis, strongman authoritarianism and disease denial – yet the abiding sense was of people coming together to, and let's not be unnecessarily modest here, save the world. At the level of communities, voluntary organizations integrated and worked with local government to deliver mutual aid for people in need; within organizations, workers pulled long hours to transition and save their employers, working under improvised conditions to reinvent systems and deliver for users and customers; governments abandoned previous neoliberal economic orthodoxy to print money and lend; most importantly, heroic frontline workers in transport, logistics, sanitation, care and of course health put their lives on the line to keep people alive and help us all see a pathway out of the unfolding

nightmare. During the early days of the pandemic many of us wondered out loud whether this was the beginning of a transformed political-economic imaginary, a radical rethink that would re-orientate economies towards rewarding and valuing essential work and that would prioritize life and welfare over the short-term profits of shareholders and investors. Perhaps the value of collective forms of leadership had been proven by simple empirical evidence: when we needed it the most, it had worked in practice.

If only. Unfortunately, the tendency with major crises is not that they lead to radical change but instead act as an accelerant for pre-existing trends. The Global Financial Crisis of 2007–8, for example, caused by out-of-control practices in the finance sector, merely accelerated existing tendencies for upwards wealth redistribution and corporate welfare, resulting in ever more precarious working conditions and lower wages for almost everyone else – even the commodification of housing, ostensibly the trigger of the crisis, continued apace (Blakeley, 2019 and 2020). Similarly, under the surface of the global pandemic, that is beneath the rhetoric of gratitude and care of many organizational and political leaders lay a quite different material reality. Stories of workers being sent to their workplaces without adequate protective equipment were ubiquitous, often with threats of punishment and dismissal in the face of resistance (e.g. Way, 2020). Mercenary employment practices such as ‘fire and rehire’, where workers are let go and taken back on worse terms and conditions, became common, with the union Unite estimating that as many as one in ten UK workers had been threatened with this outcome (Unite, 2021). All of this at a time when many governments funded employers to keep their staff in post.

One inescapable dimension of the intensification of the power and wealth divide between workers and bosses has been the development and implementation of workplace technology to control and monitor worker performance. People working in the gig economy, warehouses or transport, are familiar with this kind of technology. Cant (2019), for example, provides a compelling portrait of life as a food delivery rider in the UK. These workers do not interact with human managers but are instead directed by an app. Portrayed as liberating forms of enhancing economic freedom, such working arrangements are more usually a means of extracting more work for less money from riders, as the app takes little consideration of factors such as local geography or traffic, incentivizing riders to risk their safety by cutting corners – and when accidents occur, workers lose their

already low income. When such workers underperform, according to the standards of their algorithmic managers, they are not fired, as they are not classed as employees by their companies, but instead have their apps ‘deactivated’. The low pay, worker indebtedness and stressful algorithmic targets in the courier industry are by now well known. By way of illustration is the case of Don Lane, a delivery worker for the company DPD. A diabetic, Lane ‘missed appointments with specialists and died after collapsing as a result of his diabetes’ (Temperton, 2018). *Wired* stated that Lane ‘reportedly missed appointments because he felt under pressure to complete his rounds for DPD and faced £150 penalties for every day he failed to find cover’ (Temperton, 2018). The use of surveillance technology to impose fines on workers for missed targets is common in the courier industry. Call centre workers have long been subjected to heavy technological surveillance, low pay and poor job security, a confluence of factors that can make such workplaces claustrophobic and despairing spaces (Woodcock, 2016). At play in these dynamics is the use of technology to enforce, via impersonal forms of micro-management, an ever-increasing erosion of the autonomy and power of labour, something we cannot separate from the decline in trade union membership since the 1980s. Technology is ultimately deployed as a means of increasing the wages of executives and decreasing the wages of workers, a trend that has only intensified since the weakening of organized labour (Mueller, 2021). The illusion of market freedom in this arrangement – workers can technically move to work for another company – is betrayed by similar working arrangements existing everywhere and the fact that many workers find themselves indebted to private finance for the purchase of equipment and vehicles, or the company’s system of fines, which restricts their employment mobility.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the trend of technological control of workers expanded to incorporate even more of us. In a sinister twist on workplace control, people working remotely found that their home spaces were being violated, turned into policed zones where their behaviour and bodily movements were being tracked by algorithms. Use of ‘productivity’ technology for home workers is on the rise, with companies increasingly monitoring keystrokes and using webcams to detect worker absence from their computers (Christian, 2020). *The Guardian* reported the introduction by a global call centre company of technology that used webcams to ‘check

whether [workers] are eating, looking at their phones or leaving their desks while working from home' (Walker, 2021). Facial recognition capability in this instance even recognizes if someone else other than the employee is sitting in front of the computer. If an infraction is detected the algorithm takes a photo, which is automatically sent to a line manager for further action. Here we have an example of what Berardi (2019) refers to as automation in its broadest sense, where technology does more than automate labour processes – in addition it automates economic relations, with alternatives becoming increasingly unthinkable. One result of this is that the discretion of managers is eroded. Managers themselves are often in contracts not much more secure or better paid than their workers and are also subjected to a range of performance measures. A manager who decides to exercise discretion and overlook a worker absence from their screens may themselves face disciplinary consequences, with ensuing harsh consequences in a hostile labour market. Such developments are even more insidious when we consider the uneven gendered experiences of home working surveillance and control. We know that women still bear by far the greater burden of domestic labour and as lines between home and work further erode, we can expect women who face additional demands of housework and care to experience work in more oppressive ways. As a final swipe at worker dignity and autonomy, we noted as we were writing this section an email from a major global consultancy, which seemed to be promoting its ability to use the trend towards home working to assist companies in outsourcing and offshoring more jobs. Move aside leadership and make way for Total Management.

In many ways heavily managerialist tendencies are not new – in fact they bear great similarity to the *Principles of Scientific Management* extolled by Fredrick Winslow Taylor in 1911. In this seminal work, Taylor's goal was to engender systems of management that would make every aspect of a labour process as efficient as possible through careful planning and control – people became extensions of the machines they worked for and with. Underwriting these principles was a view of trade unions, who were in the process of doing things like resisting child labour and serious illness, injury and death through chronic over-work, as the enemy and an obstacle to the generation of greater prosperity for owners, managers and workers, whose interests were portrayed as being in alignment:



The true interests of the two are one and the same; that prosperity for the employer cannot exist through a long-term of years unless it is accompanied by the prosperity for the employee, and vice versa; and that it is possible to give the workman what he most wants – high wages – and the employer what he wants – a low labour cost – for his manufacturers.

(Taylor, 1911/1967: 11)

Under this pact, workers sacrifice autonomy and intellectual stimulation for a pay-off of greater prosperity, and those who cannot make the grade are ‘discharged’ through a system enforced by the keeping of ‘accurate records’ (p. 23). The problem with this formulation, however, aside from the obvious ways in which it alienates human beings by treating them as machines to be manipulated, is the obvious fact that workers and employers have not benefitted equally from improvements in productivity from new technology. In fact, the evidence shows us that in recent decades, productivity gains have rather resulted in sky-rocketing executive pay, larger payouts to shareholders and stagnating and falling worker pay (Blakeley, 2019). The common experience of workers has become that of ‘underemployment’, a term coined by Benanav (2020) to convey the contemporary experience of under-pay but overwork, sometimes between a number of almost equally unfulfilling and temporary jobs, but also through the ‘free’ labour of job hunts, pitching yourself to prospective employers, producing work *gratis* for ‘experience’ and ‘exposure’ and networking.

We will now examine perhaps the exemplar of the Total Management approach, Amazon. Started in 1994 as an online bookseller, but now selling almost anything, it has grown exponentially to a position of near dominance in several major markets. It has become expert in the areas of warehousing and distribution through adopting technology-led approaches. Its biggest source of operating profit, however, comes from cloud computing, with its share of the market ‘some two-and-a-half times greater than that of its nearest competitor’ (Cohan, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic acted as a ‘growth hormone’ for the company (Fox, 2020): its former chief executive Jeff Bezos’s wealth rose by more than \$70bn in 2020 alone, taking his net wealth to \$185bn (Sainato, 2021b). Underlying the success story is a Total Management approach that would make even Fredrick Winslow Taylor blush, with the key difference from Taylor’s rhetoric being that Amazon has failed to enhance the ‘prosperity’ of its workers. As reported by *The Guardian*, Amazon ‘ended hazard pay in June 2020, and instead has provided sporadic one-time bonuses to workers during the pandemic. On average, Amazon workers have seen a \$0.99-an-hour pay bump during the

pandemic, compared with Bezos's hourly wealth increase of \$11.7m' (Sainato, 2021b). CNN reported that almost 20,000 of its US employees had contracted Covid by October 2020, a figure the company had until then 'repeatedly resisted sharing' (O'Brien, 2020). The company was also criticized for its deficiencies in communicating with workers during the pandemic (Press, 2021b).<sup>2</sup>

To better understand the dynamics of Total Management at Amazon, we need to examine its warehouse and transportation processes more carefully. Revealed is a sophisticated hybrid operation of technology and cheap human labour, which is rinsed for quite micro forms of surplus value. First, let's enter the warehouses, known in Amazon-speak as Fulfilment Centres (FCs). Owain recalls the publicity and controversy upon the opening of Amazon's FC near his home in south Wales in 2007. The Swansea FC measures 74,000 square metres, the 'size of 11 football pitches', according to the company (Amazon, 2021). The feeling of driving past the building is one of awe – it takes a long time, even driving along its adjacent A-road at a high (but legal) speed: 'We're still going past', Owain used to say to his fellow travellers after they encountered the FC, which is situated off Junction 42 of the M4 motorway. At the time of its opening, trade unions such as GMB and Unite sounded warnings about the company's track record of accepting corporate welfare from government to move into areas in need of economic stimulus while offering poorly paid and precarious employment. In Swansea, the company took £8.8m in Welsh government grants and in turn offered work described by investigate journalist Carole Cadwalladr, who went undercover in the FC as a worker in 2013 as 'hard, physical work' of 'blisters suffered ... ridiculous targets ... monitored by an Orwellian handset every second of every shift' (Cadwalladr, 2013).

Let's therefore enter Amazon's FCs and look more closely at operations there. Milkman (2020: 13) tells us that 'Amazon's warehouses in many respects resemble the factories of the past: workers are subject to the daily indignities, productivity pressures, and health and safety hazards long associated with manufacturing'. But these dynamics are driven by a form of one-click capitalism predicated on ruthless and technology-driven efficiency: work is measured by electronic scanning devices which demand that work (which is already physically challenging) is completed to a faster pace (Alimahomed-Wilson et al., 2020: 26–7). This seems to increase the rate of workplace injury, shown by records which highlight Amazon's rate

of serious injuries is about double the national industry average (Alimahomed-Wilson et al., 2020).

Amazon's warehouses have pioneered forms of management known as 'alogocratic control' through 'automation, robotics and artificial intelligence' (Struna and Reese, 2020: 111). Key to this alogocratic control are the handsets carried by FC workers. These are used to 'electronically read various kinds of barcodes, worker IDs, or other labels tracking goods and their routes from receipt to storage and shipping' (Struna and Reese, 2020: 117). The handsets guide warehouse 'pickers' to products, setting time targets for each task and cluster of tasks. To the untrained eye, FCs can look chaotic, with items seemingly randomly placed next to one another on shelving. But this is to apply a human sensibility to what is an algorithmic logic: products are located by need and association rather than by type (Bridle, 2019: 98–9). For instance, why keep all of the different models of television together when customers are unlikely to purchase more than one at a time? Instead, the different models of television are located with whatever product the algorithm determines is most efficiently stocked nearby.

Under this system and enabled by the handheld devices, 'workers are docked points – meaning money – for failing to keep up with the machine, for toilet breaks, for late arrivals from home or meals, while constant movement prevents association with fellow employees. They have nothing to do but follow the instructions on the screen, pack and carry' (Bridle, 2019: 99). The machinic direction received by FC workers has received significant media attention, focusing on the way in which the company can force workers to walk long distances to take their breaks and use the toilet, sometimes encumbered further by needing to pass through scanners installed to guard against employees stealing. Notoriously, the investigative reporter James Bloodworth (2019), who went undercover at Amazon, discovered that warehouse workers were urinating in bottles to avoid sanctions for missing targets.

The adoption of technology does not stop at the handset, of course, also incorporating systems of conveyor belts and forklift trucks. Workers' contact with human managers is minimized through the adoption of apps, which allow workers to check their performance against targets and to manage their working patterns (Struna and Reese, 2020: 118). In their study of a warehouse in Inland California, Struna and Reese (2020: 123) quote

two workers who capture something of the workplace alienation brought on by such minimal human contact, mediated by machinic control:

As Alejandro described it, ‘Most of the time you’re by yourself in one station and they’re about 18 feet apart.’ Moreover, ‘It’s, like, five managers and there’s, like, four floors ... When you wanna talk to your managers it’s so hard to find them.’ As Ana put it: ‘Honestly, you can just be there and legit [sic] cry and no one would notice, or you could just hate your life and no one would notice. It was just so big and lonely sometimes. It was the most isolating feeling every single day.’

From the warehouse to transportation. The economic pressure explaining the rise and dominance of Amazon in this area can be traced to the ever-growing consumer demand for more commodities to be delivered to their doors faster, the one-click syndrome. Amazon employs a blend of directly employed and sub-contracted delivery drivers. They work, similarly to warehouse staff, to the dictates of a handheld device, in this case the ‘rabbit’, ‘which tracks a driver’s movements in real time and dictates each step of the delivery route. The rabbit also provides information on each package delivery, access codes to enter apartment buildings, or notes on where to leave packages (in theory). The rabbit also gives the driver information about the Prime customer (i.e. name, address, phone number) along with the size of each of [a worker’s] Amazon Prime packages. ‘The Rabbit stresses me out’, Miguel [a driver] complains, ‘I’m constantly staring at it and thinking someone at Amazon is constantly watching me drive.’ Once a package is delivered, a driver must take a picture of the delivered package to prove it was delivered (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2020: 101).

In pressures redolent of similar conditions for courier drivers more widely, workers report high stress, feeling pressure to skip meals and toilet breaks to meet the rabbit’s targets and avoid sanctions (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2020). As with the food delivery drivers discussed earlier, the algorithm does not account for stumbling blocks like outdated codes to enter apartment buildings and glitches with uploading the data to the device at the beginning of shifts. An investigation by BuzzFeed News and Pro Publica in 2019 found that Amazon packages (driven by direct employees or subcontractors) were involved in sixty crashes since 2015, with thirteen people dying in these. The report cited issues such as the ‘overloading’ of deliveries into schedules ‘while eschewing the expansive sort of training and oversight provided by a legacy carrier like UPS’ (Bensinger et al., 2019). Then there is the environmental harm caused by deliveries,

contributing to significant levels of air pollution. In London, proactive measures such as the congestion charge had decreased the numbers of private vehicles on the roads but an explosion of delivery drivers and platform ride shares has resulted in a return to gridlock conditions (Topham, 2020).

The story of Amazon does not fit with the idealist accounts of techno-enthusiasts, who extol futures of more automated workplaces. The political right overlooks the very real problems of underemployment for the economy; the political left can embrace automation as an opportunity to rid societies of unpleasant work, potentially heralding new economic arrangements that could give workers the freedom of more leisure time, a prospect that seems unlikely at present. Amazon has experimented with automating larger sections of its warehouse operations through the adoption of more sophisticated and comprehensive robotics. A point in case is the acquisition of Quidsi in March 2017. As Bridle (2019) reports:

The centre of Quidsi's operations is a vast warehouse in Goldsboro, Pennsylvania, and in the centre of that is a 200,000-square-foot area marked out with bright yellow paint and ringed with signs. This space is filled with racks of shelving, each unit six feet high and several feet deep, packed with goods – in this case, nappies and other childcare items. The signs are warning signs. Humans cannot enter this space to get to those goods, because this is where the robots work. Within the robot zone, 260 bright orange, quarter-tonne lozenges spin and lift, sliding under different shelving and carrying them to the edges of the zone, where human pickers wait to add or remove packages. These are Kiva robots: warehouse automatons that trundle tirelessly around the merchandise, following computer-readable marks on the floor. Faster and more accurate than human handlers, they do the heavy lifting.

Amazon has also started trialling human-light delivery, adopting an experiment in ground robots through its Scout droid in Washington State. This is similar technology to that which is commonplace in Milton Keynes, UK, where the robots of start-up Starship Technology deliver goods to customers.

Amazon has long had ambitions for sky-born delivery, of course, and in 2020 received US federal approval for its delivery drones (Palmer, 2020). Given the availability of this technology, you might be forgiven for asking why Amazon and similar high-tech companies have not pursued a more comprehensive automation strategy. After all, robots are in many ways less troublesome to Total Management, in the sense that they cannot demand better wages, more break time or take strike action. The answer is probably relatively simple: human beings on low wages and poor benefits are

cheaper, hence the large amounts of money Amazon spends on countering moves from its workforce to unionize. Total Management remains, therefore a hybrid process of humans micro-managed and controlled through technology – an ‘augmentation’ of existing oppressive labour relations (Moore and Woodcock, 2021). Amazon workers ‘are intended to act like robots, impersonating machines while remaining, for now, slightly cheaper than them’ (Bridle, 2019: 99).

Resistance to the ever-greater dominance of Total Management is visible but uneven and sporadic, yet may offer some pathways to a comeback of leadership logics, which hold open the possibility of more radical questioning and realignment of the status quo. After all, there is nothing inherently regressive about accelerating tech in the workplace and society – it is quite possible to see how such technology could be harnessed for emancipatory ends under a leadership logic. Amazon, amongst others, is notoriously accomplished at union busting (Streitfeld, 2021), yet continues to face fresh attempts at unionization, in the United States, Italy and the United Kingdom most recently. Unions in the United States have learnt much about the lengths to which Amazon will go to avoid unionization, such as hiring expensive specialist union-busting firms, deploying union-detecting algorithms, introducing voting procedures more favourable to the employer and waging sophisticated propaganda campaigns (Press, 2021b). In 2021, an attempt at unionization in the United States drew wide attention, as much for its location as for the leadership of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union. Workers at the Bessemer warehouse in Alabama, a notoriously conservative state, managed to secure a vote for unionization, offering a framing of the largely Black workers’ experiences as a civil rights issue. Despite losing the election, under difficult circumstances of sustained hostility from the company and US labour law, more is now known about the approach of Amazon to such efforts, informing future campaigns. Indeed, a new, independent and insurgent union focused only on Amazon has since emerged in New York, winning a crucial battle to unionise warehouse operations on Staten Island. This bottom-up union emerging directly from workers holds the potential to at least be a nuisance to Amazon in the coming years and potentially also to provide exciting and fresh models of leadership for others to follow. Resistance to Amazon is not dissipating, after all. In the UK alone, the GMB union has led attempts to unionize warehouse staff, deploying

imaginative imagery and framing of the struggle that seeks to highlight the company's record on health and safety – proclaiming, 'We are not robots.' The effort is supported by the anti-poverty charity War on Want, which has experience and pedigree of supporting precarious workers in the hospitality sector. It is making global demands of Amazon for a living wage, hazard pay, premium pay for peak times, job security, dignity at work (e.g. having proper breaks for using the toilet and eating) and comprehensive action on health and safety (War on Want, 2020).

For certain, offering a counter form of leadership to a Total Management that is increasingly successful at eroding the power and autonomy of workers is a challenging task, one where unions are adapting to a post-industrial world of a more fragmented and precarious pool of potential members. Recruiting and working with precarious workers is hard because people often move jobs frequently, work less predictable shift patterns and are made more isolated and dispersed through corporate use of technology – not to mention all of the factors of precarity outside work, such as sky-high rent payments for often hazardous housing – all of which can grind workers down and generate feelings of profound alienation, mental ill-health and despair. Yet the (admittedly so far limited) actions against Amazon, allied with multiple industrial actions in the service sector against companies such as McDonald's, Wetherspoons and TGI Fridays, each of which has resulted in some modest victories, indicates that trade unionists are learning and adapting. Indeed, for home workers, the union Prospect has pioneered sophisticated research and knowledge generation into the experiences of home workers, and continues to develop its demands for the contemporary workplace as centred on a 'right to disconnect', where restrictions are placed on how and when workers can be communicated with and monitored by their employers (Prospect, 2020). Such campaigns demonstrate that trade unions may increasingly be pursuing a form of leadership rooted in learning, of building up from a basis of listening to, observing and researching the experiences of contemporary workers, an approach that contrasts with more traditional union approaches developed during a time of heavy industrialization and relatively stable workforces. It is to this topic of learning as the basis of leadership processes that we now turn, arguing that a distinguishing feature of leadership over management – including the Total variant – is the ability to apply an inverse form of learning where

organizations are able to learn from and adapt to needs and demands from below.

## Learning to lead

The claim that leadership is critical to all organizational success (and failure) is almost as commonplace as the claim to have discovered the secret of its success. For McCall (1993) this implies that organizations should first identify and then nurture all those with leadership potential, but this is easier said than done: how do people with leadership ‘potential’ realize it, how do we realize who has leadership potential, and how do leaders learn to lead? As suggested in [Chapter 1](#), this partly depends on how we define leadership and if leadership is defined as an inherited characteristic then we either need to be much more careful about our choice of parents, or we need to think through the consequences of this. It could be, as Cameron (in Doh 2003: 59) suggests, that in these circumstances we should concentrate on laboratory experiments to assess potential. But if leadership is a biological or genetic talent then we probably need not engage in any selection or evaluation because a Darwinian selection will surely leave us to be led by the best. Sometimes these contradictory approaches are conflated; for example, in 2003 a BBC television programme ironically entitled *Born to Win* involved twenty ‘high potential’ young athletes who were actually being ‘coached’ to win, rather than simply ‘selected’ through the survival of the fittest.<sup>3</sup> Of course in reality any notion of leadership being identifiable through one’s genes is fatally flawed. Even if identifying such a gene were possible, all it would tell us is the make-up of people who end up in charge of organizations, not whether such people were any good at their jobs. When we glance around at a world of rapidly intensifying Total Management, where the climate emergency continues to ravage species of animals and humans, and a global pandemic claims the lives of millions, one wonders whether we might be better off identifying and teaching leaders with a quite different set of characteristics.

Learning leadership is not a straightforward alternative, however. As Doh (2003: 54) reminds us, even if we can learn to lead that does not mean that leadership can be taught: it is possible that the process of learning is simply too complex, unconscious or non-replicable to teach. Yet Doh’s review



suggests that it can be learned and some aspects of it can be taught. Conger (in Doh 2003: 59) for example, suggests that leadership comprises 'skills, perspectives and dispositions', hence while 'many skills' and 'some perspectives' can be taught or enhanced many 'dispositions' cannot. That might simply be a self-interested response: if we can't teach any element of leadership then leadership educators will shortly be looking for employment; or, alternatively, if all we need to do is to allow leaders to rise 'naturally' to the top of organizations, then it also suggests that we are content with society's status quo.

Chief amongst candidates for learning is probably experience: the 'school of hard knocks' or the 'university of life' as it is conventionally referred to (Davies and Easterby-Smith, 1984; Hughes et al., 1999: 89–96; McCall et al., 1988; Yukl, 1998: 475–90). But this is primarily restricted to how leaders can learn from their own superordinates, from coaching and observing, not from their own followers. Even experience may be of limited value if every experience and every individual is unique so that no model of learning can predict anything of value, except that next time everything will be different. To some extent this assessment locks into some aspects of complexity theory in so far as the uniqueness of events and the indeterminacy of the future effectively disable the construction of any significant pattern of learning. It also reflects Søren Kierkegaard's assumption that 'Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.' Or in Walter Benjamin's image of the Angel of History, the angel faces the past but is blown backwards into the future. In other words, little of our past experience provides us with the wherewithal to become successful leaders – that has to be acquired through novel experiences, the kinds increasingly automated out of workplaces.

Or it could be, following Popper's 'falsification' claim, that while we can disprove (leadership) theories and models we cannot prove them. Thus, just as the hypothetical black swan invalidates thousands of sightings of white swans as a theory of swan colour, so we may never be in a position to validate any theory or model of leadership, for while it may work a thousand times, we cannot be certain it will work on each and every occasion. We might pragmatically conclude that, since the sun has risen every day since records began, it will probably rise again tomorrow, but this is not the same as objective proof of the inevitability of the rising sun. Anyway, the sun does not actually 'rise' because it is the earth that is

moving, rather than the sun, but our language predates that discovery. More importantly, if we are not able to establish why a particular leadership event turned out the way it did, we should be very wary of simply repeating the process in the hope that there will be a replication of the ending. Here, luck may effectively step between the theory and the practice to unhinge our learning and ‘lead’ us astray. The Roman Army, for instance, was adamant that practice was far more important than anything else and luck was something to be extremely wary of. As Josephus (1981: 197) suggested in his review of the Roman war against the Jews:

Nothing is done without plan or on the spur of the moment; careful thought precedes action of any kind, and to the decisions reached all ranks must conform. ... They regard success due to luck as less desirable than a planned but unsuccessful stroke, because victories that come of themselves tempt men to leave things to chance, but forethought, in spite of occasional failures, is good practice in avoiding the same mistake.

Luck or leadership, it is self-evidently the case that leaders throughout history have succeeded, and failed, without recourse to any leadership text or attendance at a leadership course, though some of our most significant exemplars have had the most impressive education. Alexander the Great, for instance, was tutored by Aristotle and carried a copy of Homer’s *Iliad* with him. But many historical leaders were illiterate, had little or no formal education, and yet managed to learn to lead.

However, we want to suggest that this mysterious inculcation of leadership skills and qualities may derive, at least in part, from an aspect of leadership that all leaders have, irrespective of their identity, time, space or culture: followers. By definition if a leader does not have followers then that individual is not a leader, so some form of relationship between leader and followers is inevitable. Indeed, one could argue that having followers is *the* critical definition of leadership. We want to suggest further, and in an inversion of our common assumptions about this relationship, that it is followers who teach leadership to leaders. In effect, inverse learning occurs in that the relationship of ‘teacher’ to ‘pupil’ is the reverse of that normally assumed and often an inversion of the formal hierarchy that exists between ‘teacher’ and ‘pupil’. Moreover, it is not just experience that counts, but reflective experience. But before we get to that point, we first want to assess the extent to which this inverse learning is replicated in an area where all of us have some experience: the parenting–child relationship.

# Inverse learning: The child is parent to the adult

This counter-intuitive position is mirrored in the way most parents learn to be parents: their children teach them. Or as Gerard Manley Hopkins suggests, 'The CHILD is father to the man.' Hopkins probably means that the 'child' will mature into the adult but here we would consider how the child can teach its parent to be an adult. Although many books and web pages exist on parenting, it is worth pondering the degree to which most of us who are parents or have or had parents or guardians, learn to be parents from books or equivalent media? Of course, parents help their children to become parents but increasingly in the UK, for example, families are far more geographically mobile than they used to be so that parents are decreasingly able to help their own children become parents. The requirement for advice is clear, not just from the huge numbers of books written and sold on parenting (including business-related models such as Jay's *Kids & Co* which promises to deliver 'Winning Business Tactics for Every Family') but, more recently, on the development of parenting websites. For instance, both Mumsnet and Babycentre are extremely popular resources for information, news and discussion on parenting. Both these eschew the conventional 'expert evidence' or 'guru guides' to parenting and instead are firmly based in the interactive sharing of information by parents for parents, or, in reality, mothers for mothers. In other words, less experienced mothers learn to be more competent mothers partly through learning from more experienced mothers. Nor is this explosion in advice restricted to mothers for there is now evidence that fathers are becoming more involved in parenting. For instance, the latest British Social Attitudes survey (Curtice et al., 2019) found that growing support for the proposition that parenting leave from work should be divided equally between parents. Social attitudes to same-sex couples adopting children have also softened and this is certainly reflected in the portrayal of LGBTQ+ families in mainstream culture.

Nevertheless, a large proportion of learning to be a parent can only come from the experience of 'parenting'. After all, you cannot know whether somebody else's method works – even if many people on a web forum vouch for its effectiveness – until you try it on your own child or a child in

your care. And for that to occur successfully an infant is required. In theory parents teach their children how to act as children but of course the latter have a way of ignoring much of this worthy advice. If this was not the case then no parent would ever have misbehaving children, no child would have a tantrum on the supermarket floor, no teenager would experiment with alcohol or drugs and none would come home late or leave their room looking like a burglar has just ransacked the place. Since this does occur regularly, the superior resources of parents (physique, language, legal support, moral claims, source of pocket money, threats of grounding and so on) have only limited effect. What is more important is to understand why this is the case and how it relates to leadership.

The critical issue, then, is that parents have to learn how to be parents by listening and responding to their children. The end result is that we are taught to be parents by our children: if they don't feel comfortable with the way we are holding them as infants they cry, and we adjust our hold; if they are hungry, they cry, and we feed them; if they are tired, they cry, and we rock them to sleep. And when – not if – we get it wrong they tell us, either by crying or struggling or sulking or whatever. Of course, we then have to decide what to do, whether to 'teach them' some self-control or whatever, but whether that works or not is not solely in our control and we often have to negotiate our way through this continually changing relationship. Indeed, although experience might make parenting easier – the more children you have the easier it might become – this need not be the case, either because each child–parent relationship is different, and/or because each new child alters the pattern of prior familial relationships, because some people have problems learning to become parents or because external strains on relationships (finance, marriage or health problems) can intervene. What might be critical is the extent to which parents receive feedback from their children. The difference here between a totalizing mindset is that under such systems, people bend to the dictates of the 'parent' technology and if they don't are ejected from employment, whereas under inverse learning the parent and child adapt to one another.

It may also be that parents learn most from relationships with their children that are not hugely asymmetric. In other words, where children are dominated by their parents – or vice versa – neither side in the relationship necessarily learns much or matures. This is closer to the domination logic of Total Management. Indeed, it may be that one of the reasons why so many

parents do seem to make a relatively good job of a very difficult task is because children are often more open and honest in their feedback than adult followers or subordinates: if parents are not doing something 'properly' – as defined by the children not by the parents – the parents will soon hear about it. This is evident both with toddlers who can be excruciatingly honest in their conversations and when we meet the children of people we perceive as formidable leaders: so often their children seem capable of saying things to them that we poor followers dare not even think about saying to them. As Argyris (1985) insisted many years ago – and as so painfully revealed by Jim Carrey, playing Fletcher Reede in the 1997 movie *Liar Liar* – we are extraordinarily good at not telling each other the truth. And since it also seems apparent that most learning occurs when people do get accurate feedback, and that such feedback gets less likely as individuals move up the organizational hierarchy (Kaplan et al., 1987), it may be that many people are better parents than organizational leaders.

So, while we might think we are just teaching our progeny to be children, they are simultaneously teaching us to be parents through this inverse learning. Since individuals are constantly developing this also implies that the relationship between parents and children changes, so that while parents may find themselves (micro)managing at some points, eventually the children mature and leave home, possibly to become parents themselves. If this is to be a successful process it is more than likely that the child has been given increasing levels of responsibility, a process that is often inverted once students become employees – with predictably 'childish' consequences (Argyris, 1985). Nevertheless, the point is that while parents should not attempt to solve all their children's problems but get them to resolve their own problems, leadership is often configured as a problem-solving activity. Hence, leaders are people who construct and implement innovative solutions to organization problems on the part of their subordinates – and in turn the subordinates learn little from the process except that the responsibility for problem-solving lies with their leaders. Heifetz (1994), in contrast, suggests that this merely perpetuates the problem of irresponsible followers, and therefore leaders should reflect problem solving back onto their followers because only through a collective effort can a collective problem be resolved.

# The follower is teacher to the leader

If we map this inverse learning model onto leadership the implication is that while leaders think they are teaching followers to follow, in fact it is the followers who do most of the teaching and the leaders who do most of the learning. Here then we might reconstruct Gerard Manley Hopkins: 'The follower is teacher to the leader.' It also highlights an interesting reflection on the etymological origins of leadership and its potential bearing on the parenting metaphor. If the English word 'management' derives from the Latin *manus*, the hand that controls, and 'leadership' from the Old German *leader*, to guide, to show the way, then the more leaders shift back into controlling the more likely followers are to resist (a proposition currently being field-tested under conditions of Total Management). Inevitably some leaders fail to learn and some followers fail to teach but it may well be that one of the secrets of leadership is not a list of innate skills and competences, or how much charisma you have, or whether you have a vision or a strategy for achieving that vision, but whether you have a capacity to learn from your followers. And that learning approach is inevitably embedded in a relational model of leadership. We also want to suggest that the asymmetrical issue is critical to successful leadership. That is to say, where the relationship between leaders and followers is asymmetrical in either direction: weak/irresponsible leaders or weak/irresponsible followers, then success for the organization is likely to be short-lived because feedback and learning is minimized.

This dyadic exchange model between leader and follower is hardly novel (Graen and Scandura, 1987; Yukl, 1998: 149–74) but the relationship is usually construed as focusing upon the change required of the follower. For instance, Driver (2002: 107) suggests that 'In these dyadic exchanges, leader and follower negotiate which behaviours constitute behaviours that are routinely expected of the *subordinate* versus behaviours that are outside of the usually prescribed tasks' [our emphasis]. And much of this 'negotiation' relates to the role modelling undertaken by leaders, rather than role change that results from the interaction. To that effect, Driver (2002: 116) concludes that 'the two learning roles [single loop and double loop] negotiated in leader-member dyads are associated with different individual learning outcomes on the part of the *follower*' [our emphasis]. In other

words, the changes are required of the follower not the leader. Here we want to suggest the opposite – that is, it is the leader who has to learn how to lead as much as the follower who has to learn how to follow. In effect, learning is not so much an individual and cognitive event but a collective and cultural process (Weiss, 1990). This bears echoes of the Community of Practice arguments of Wenger (2000) that we shall pursue later in this chapter.

In what follows next we illustrate some examples of this inverse learning model, or lack of it, by reference to historical examples of successful and failed leadership. Obviously, we should remain wary of assuming that these necessarily prove the case and we use them only as illustrations for constructing an alternative understanding of how leaders might learn to lead.

## Teaching children to lead

The assumptions that learning is a collective and cultural process, and that leadership can be honed through such a format, is hardly novel. The Spartans, for instance, placed all their male children from 7 to 18 into the *Agoge* (*agôgê*) (literally ‘raising’, as pertaining to animals), an institution that combined education, socialization and training to turn boys into warriors. The primary aim of education for boys was the creation of a loyal, dedicated army and at the age of 13 they were commanded by one of the *irens* – 20-year-old junior leaders whose experience in command was designed to instil Spartan leadership qualities amongst a large number of warriors. The younger boys were also required to go through the *Krypteia*, or ‘period of hiding’ when they lived alone or in small self-led groups living off the countryside and killing helots (Spartan slaves) who were regarded as particularly strong or likely to harbour leadership ambitions themselves. At the age of 18 a select group was appointed to the elite Royal Guard and thence to formal military leadership positions (Cartledge, 2002: 49–51).

The clearest connection to a more recent Spartan approach to teaching leadership was probably the organizations making up the Hitler youth movement (see Knopp, 2002). In the Adolf Hitler Schools in particular, German boys were groomed for leadership on the battlefield and in the

homeland. While one third of Germans born between 1921 and 1925 died in the war, only 50 per cent of those attending the Adolf Hitler Schools survived. By 1935, 50 per cent of all Germans aged between 10 and 18 were in the Hitler youth and 90 per cent of all those born in 1936 were recruited. In fact, membership remained voluntary until 1939 but few resisted. It was organized on military lines with groups of 150 comprising a company (*Fähnlein*) down to the ten-boy *Kameradschaft* (*Jungmädelschaft* for girls). ‘Leadership of the young by the young’ was Hitler’s slogan and nothing was left to chance: 12,727 Hitler youth (*Hitlerjunge*) (14–18) leaders and 24,660 *Jungvolk* (10–14 years) (*Jungmadel* for girls) leaders were put through 287 leadership training courses in 1934 alone. Once through the course of physical training, ideological conditioning and military training, these young leaders were provided with manuals for their own followers, complete with introductions, songs and texts for each lesson. For example, a favourite song went:

The world belongs to those who lead;  
Those who follow the sun.  
And we are the marchers;  
None can halt us.

(Quoted in Knopp, 2002: 12)

No discussion or dissension was permitted but the most important experience seems to have been the weekend and summer camps where the community building developed in earnest, usually by ensuring that everyone from the age of 12 took turns to lead his *Kameradschaft* or her *Jungmädelschaft*. ‘That way’, wrote a member of staff at a boy’s school, ‘he learns to give orders and gains the subconscious strength of self-confidence which is necessary in order to command obedience’ (quoted in Knopp, 2002: 139).

After successful completion through the *Jungvolk* and *Hitlerjunge* the chosen few went onto one of the *Ordensburg* (SS Colleges) where Sparta remained an ideal. ‘What we trainers of young leaders want to see’, said one trainer in 1937, ‘is a modern form of government modelled on the ancient Greek city-state. The best 5 to 10 per cent of the population are selected to rule, and the rest have to work and obey’ (quoted in Knopp, 2002: 119). These ‘leaders-in-waiting’ then spent one year in the SS College at Vogelsang learning ‘racial philosophy’, a further year at



Crössinsee ‘character-building’, and a final year in Sonthofen on administrative and military duties. It was at the 1935 passing out parade that Robert Ley, the Nazi Party head of organization, commented:

We want to know whether these men carry in themselves the will to lead, to be masters, in a word: to rule. The NSDAP [Nazi Party] and its leaders must want to rule ... we take delight in ruling, not in order to be a despot or to revel in a sadistic tyranny, but because it is our unshakeable belief that in all situations only one person can lead and only one person can take responsibility. Power rests with this one person.

(Quoted in Knopp, 2002: 128)

## Teaching adults to lead

For the Nazis the ultimate ‘one person’, of course, was Hitler and, despite all the feedback requirements instilled into the Nazi youth leadership schemas, as the war progressed Hitler increasingly distanced himself (often violently) from subordinate feedback and this played an important role in his nemesis. For instance, it is clear that from 1939 to 1941, the invasion of Poland, Europe and the USSR, Hitler engaged in conversations with his generals and listened to them, even if he did not always take their advice. And only on one occasion did Hitler personally intervene in the invasion of Poland – to be overruled by Von Rundstedt. But once the invasion of the Soviet Union faltered in the winter of 1941 Hitler both began ‘managing’ the armed forces at the micro-level and simultaneously stopped listening to his generals. Thus, as the war progressed Hitler’s conversations became increasingly one-sided and the information he received stopped coming from Constructive Dissenters and instead came from Destructive Consenters. That is to say, as the ‘honest’ military experts were removed from his circle of advisers, so the quality of the advice sank to the point where the only advice he received was what he wanted to hear rather than that which might have helped him win the war (Grint, 2001).

In contrast, Churchill, never one to withhold his own advice to others and known to be intolerant of dissent until 1940, began as prime minister by recruiting many of the individuals he knew to be the most independent and free-thinking. Hence, he asked Ernest Bevin, one of the leaders of the General Strike in 1926 that Churchill had previously sought to crush, to join the war cabinet as Minister of Labour and National Service. Indeed, he even worked with Chamberlain and Halifax, two of his bitterest political

enemies. Similarly, in the military sphere, Churchill retained Alan Brooke despite their famous disagreements and furious disputes, because Churchill recognized that only such people had the fortitude and stubborn independence to give him the honest advice that he needed (Haffner, 2003; Roberts, 2003).

Another parallel should suffice to confirm this learning issue: Admiral Nelson and the emperor Napoleon. Nelson was far more successful when operating with his 'Band of Brothers', his favoured group of captains, as at the battles of the Nile (1798) and Trafalgar (1805) for example, than when on his own – in the 1799 Naples fiasco and at Tenerife (1797) and Boulogne (1801), or when he ignored the advice of others, for instance at Copenhagen in 1801 (Grint, 2001; Kennedy, 2001). Napoleon did likewise: in his early major battles at Lodi (1796), Marengo (1800) and Austerlitz (1805), Napoleon listened to his generals and engaged in conversations about strategy, but by the time of his later defeats at Moscow (1812) and Waterloo (1815) he had all but abandoned any thoughts of taking advice from subordinates and insisted that only his personal planning and direction could achieve victory. As Marshal Ségur's diary noted in Russia, 'His pride, his policies and perhaps his health gave him the worst advice of all, which was to take no-one's advice' (Weider and Guegen, 2000: 139). And by the time of Waterloo, Chandler (1966: 161) insists that Napoleon was 'discouraging even his ablest generals from indulging in original thought'. Nor had British officers had much initiative before this. Wellington, for example, refused to allow his generals to design their own operations (Kier, 1997: 149).

In the First World War British military leadership expanded such a philosophy of destructive consent to the point where seasoned commanders in the field failed to question their superordinate commanders, even when the latter was demonstrably wrong. For example, Haig demanded changes in his subordinate Rawlinson's original plan for the Somme offensive and Rawlinson accepted the changes, even though the latter knew they were unwarranted and rash in the extreme (Ferguson, 1998: 305–6).

The German prototype of training leadership through early practice and feedback, followed by the selection of the 'fittest', was in marked contrast to the British predilection for Carlyle's 'Great Man' theory, where (super)naturally talented individual heroes single-handedly turned the wheel of history, an approach still evident in the association of leaders with eras

and events: Bismarck's Germany, Victorian Britain, Thatcherism and so on. But in Britain more generally Carlyle's model emerged as the amateur gentleman leader, who was both born to rule and, of course, primarily responsible for leading the British troops during war. As Gronn (1997: 4) suggests, the British, or rather English, elite sought to create a class of leaders with each new generation through a deft combination of institutions and culture:

Family socialization of status hierarchy and authority norms; reliance on surrogates (e.g., nannies) to reinforce prescribed roles; intense peer socialization in preparatory and secondary boarding houses; a classics curriculum; a highly competitive, tribal games regime to instil muscular Christian virtues and character; and, finally, higher education in liberal-humanism at Oxford or Cambridge universities.

Laski captured the result perfectly when he said that 'a gentleman *is* rather than *does*; he maintains towards life an attitude of indifferent receptivity. He is interested in nothing in a professional way. He is allowed to cultivate hobbies, even eccentricities, but he must never practice a vocation' (quoted in Gronn, 1997: 4). Gronn (1997: 5) further suggests that this system generated a leadership 'prototype' – 'a cluster of characteristics forming a pattern or central tendency' and this prototype then became deeply embedded in the social mores of the British establishment, supported and validated by the education system, reference groups and mass communications.

For Gronn (1997: 5–6), following Barnett (1984) and Wiener (1982), the consequence of the leadership training developed through the nineteenth century was to leave Britain with a group devoted to loyalty, hard work and practicality – but little or no capacity for imagination and little interest in or support for science and technology: thus, its difficulties in the early part of the First World War and the 1930s in particular, and the decline of Britain's technological lead in general. And where business and stalemated war required entrepreneurial and imaginative thought, instead it generated 'guardianship', a code of ethics that favoured responsibility and romantic idealism over innovative structures, procedures and strategies.

On the one hand that romantic idealism 'worked', that is, with few exceptions British soldiers followed their leaders: in the face of appalling danger thousands of formal leaders (officers and NCOs (non-commissioned officers)) and millions of their followers became casualties of a process of leadership that required obedience. And on the other hand, it 'failed', that

is, the very inability of the leadership to rethink or modify strategies in the first half of the war resulted in the same appalling casualties.

But how was the process of military leadership taught? Sheffield's (2000) review of leadership in the British Army in the First World War suggests that what counted as good 'leadership' was closely aligned with the social origins and cultural predilections of a large proportion of the officer corps: the aristocracy. But with that privileged background came the social responsibility – *noblesse oblige* – that had kept the British aristocracy firmly in control of the country long after the French aristocracy had literally lost its collective head in the French Revolution.

The British soldiers these officers led, however, derived from the very lowest social classes so that the social gap between officers and soldiers in the British Army was probably as high as any other. Potential officers who were not 'gentlemen' – and increasingly they were not as the war progressed – had first to assuage any concerns that they would not embarrass themselves or their fellow officers in the mess or in front of the soldiers. But beyond the assumption that leadership was the equivalent of social class, leadership training did occur at GHQ Cadet School. From 1916 – after it became apparent that bravery and social class was an inadequate basis for leadership – officer cadets took it in turn to command their fellow cadets and were evaluated by their instructors and peers. Nonetheless the primary emphasis was on affirming the importance of paternalism. As a standard lecture insisted:

Your first job is to get to know your men, look after them, study their interests and show you are one of them, taking a share in their pleasures and interests as well as their work. If you do this you will find that when the time comes they will follow you to hell.

(Quoted in Sheffield, 2000: 58)

Leadership, then, was not something that subordinates might engage in – as the German Army had long been developing – but was essentially rooted in a process of exchange: paternalism was exchanged for loyalty, dignity for deference. In effect, the leaders were obliged to treat their soldiers as they would to their own children and the soldiers would be obligated to obey their officers as *loco in parentis* in return. As one subaltern from the 1/King's suggested in 1914: 'How like children the men are. They will do nothing without us ... You will see from this some reason for the percentage of casualties among officers' (quoted in Sheffield, 2000: 86). Hence privileges acquired by the officer corps were not necessarily resented by the

soldiers, as long as the privileges did not undermine the social obligations of the officers to look after their men, and that often implied very small things, such as remembering a soldier's birthday, enquiring about his home life and making sure they were all fed as well as possible.

Nevertheless, even after commissioning, a young subaltern had a lot to learn about leadership on the front line from the people who did most of it: the senior NCOs (the Sergeants and Warrant Officers). Indeed, the experience, prestige and value to the army of such NCOs was in marked contrast to that appertaining to a new subaltern, whose life expectancy at three weeks was much less than that of his NCOs. As Sheffield notes, many senior NCOs were responsible for 'nursing' their green lieutenants into the role of formal leaders, and that sometimes meant disobeying them – as did Sergeant Denmark when ordered by his new officer, Lt. Campbell, to stop unloading a wagon under fire and report immediately to him. 'Who's taking charge here, are you Sir, or am I?' responded the sergeant; the Lieutenant had the good sense not to compound his previous mistake (Sheffield, 2000: 124).

Between the wars the British army officer corps changed little; it was still a life of privilege based on inherited wealth and rank and it was irredeemably the cultivated amateur who dominated the mess. Indeed, it had to be because the pay was considered more of an honorarium than a salary; it was an institution that gentlemen attended (on a part-time basis) while they waited to inherit their estates. Thus 'training' was entirely unnecessary because an officer's life was merely an extension of the public school that most officers had already attended. Riding was the only really essential skill for a British army officer, not because it improved the ability of the cavalry but because it symbolized all that a gentleman needed to lead soldiers. The abject irrelevance of all that was not encapsulated by equine matters was most starkly revealed in the January 1939 edition of the *Cavalry Journal*, on the eve of the Second World War. As the editorial stated, 'It is rather difficult to find very much to write about in this editorial' (quoted in Kier, 1997: 135).

And while the British strenuously avoided anything so controversial as politics and religion over dinner, the army officers' mess went one better, prohibiting any discussion about military matters and concentrating on what was important: gentlemanly pursuits, sports, character development and 'good form'. One hospitalized officer recalled hearing his Colonel exclaim

when he spied two military books by the bedside: ‘What the devil are you reading those for?’ He would certainly not have been reading them to enhance his decision-making capabilities because subordinate officers had virtually none to enhance. Hugh Dowding confirmed this, recalling the great contrast between the theory of freedom of thought – which allegedly distinguished the British from the rest of the world – and the practice that inhibited all unconventional ideas. ‘As for expressing an opinion which differed from the general point of view’, one officer remembered, ‘that would be unheard of. ... It would be considered very bad manners not to agree with the senior officer’ (quoted in Kier, 1997: 130). Göring had come to the same conclusions when on an exchange visit with a British regiment before the First World War where officers were banned from ‘talking shop’ in the mess, were mesmerized by parade bashing, bored rigid by field craft training and were certain that war was won by bravery not tactics or management (Blanford, 1999: 113).

## **Constructive dissent and destructive consent: The Calchasian strategy**

Perhaps most of the Allied military leaders engaged in the early part of both world wars might have benefited from rereading their classical forebears. For example, the Roman armies were not only extraordinarily successful in time and space, but they also operated on the battlefield with a process of political control that few contemporary commanders would care to repeat, for their ultimate leaders were professional politicians not military commanders, though they would have had some military training. Thus although, for example, the American president remains in command of the US armed forces, this does not involve physically leading any battles. So how did the political leaders of Roman armies learn to lead? In many ways the answer is that they learned not to take the lead. In the words of one Roman general to Onasander, a military writer, in 53 CE, on how a ‘politician’ could lead the army, he should

either choose a staff to participate in all his councils and share in his decisions, men who will accompany the army especially for this purpose or summon as members of his council a selected group of the most respected commanders, since it is not safe that the opinions of one single man, on his sole judgement should be adopted.... However, the general must neither be so undecided

that he entirely distrusts himself, nor so obstinate as not to think that anyone could have a better idea than his own; for such a man, either because he listens to everyone and never to himself, is sure to meet with frequent misfortune.

(Quoted in Peddie, 1994: 18)

Indeed, so concerned were the Romans to remind their most successful generals of their own limits that even those awarded the honour of a *Triumph*, a major battle honour, were also forced to endure reminders of their mortality. Thus, although they were allowed (for one day only) to enter Rome at the head of their armies, dressed in a gold fringed purple toga, painted red like the god Jupiter, and pulled by a white-horsed chariot, they nevertheless always had a slave standing behind, holding a golden crown over them but whispering continuously in their ear *Respice post te, hominem memento te* [Consider what comes afterward, and remember that you are but a man]. In short, the adulation of the Roman people that attributed god-like qualities to their *Triumphator* was tempered by the lowliest person reminding the general that he too was only mortal and, unlike the gods, neither infallible nor omnipotent. And if this wasn't enough the *Triumphator's* soldiers marched behind him singing lewd songs and making crude jokes about him all with impunity for the day and all intended to deter their leader from seeking immortality.<sup>4</sup>

The assumption that no individual leader can possibly be the repository of all wisdom and that inverse learning was critical for leaders exists well before Onasander's time and at least as far back as Sophocles. For example, in his play *Antigone*, Creon, the king, initially declares that Antigone (his niece) will be executed by stoning for burying the body of her brother, Polyneices, a declared traitor, against Creon's direct order. Antigone, determined to save the soul of her dead brother, refuses to accede to Creon's demand that his body be left unburied and justifies her behaviour on the grounds that she is obeying the laws of the gods, not human law. When Creon's own son, Haimon, appears romantically involved with Antigone, Creon first changes his sentence of death from stoning to entombing and then rescinds it altogether, but it is too late and his indecision and vacillation initiates not just the suicide of Antigone but the death of Haimon and the consequential suicide of Creon's wife, Eurydice. Yet there is more to *Antigone* than simply a story of indecisive leadership, for it also exposes an issue that sits at the heart of leadership like a cancer of self-doubt. For as Haemon says to Creon:

*Haemon ... The Man*

who thinks that he alone is wise, that he  
is best in speech or counsel, such a man  
Brought to the proof is found but emptiness.  
There's no disgrace, even if one is wise,  
In learning more, and knowing when to yield.  
See how the trees that grow beside a torrent  
Preserve their branches, if they bend; the others,  
Those that resist, are torn out, root and branch.  
So too the captain of a ship; let him  
Refuse to shorten sail, despite the storm –  
He'll end his voyage bottom uppermost ...

*Chorus*      My lord, he has not spoken foolishly;  
You can each learn some wisdom from the other

*Creon*        What? Men of our age go to school again  
And take a lesson from a very boy?

(*Antigone*, 1962: 25)

In effect, Haemon suggests that Creon cannot be omnipotent and therefore should take advice from one of his followers. This is a critical lesson for leaders: unless a leader is omnipotent – and none are – he or she will make a mistake at some point that could endanger the organization. So, the issue is not ‘how should an organization find a leader who does not make mistakes’ but what kind of organization generates a process of leadership that prevents leaders from making mistakes or at least mitigates their effects? As Collins and Poras (1996: 42) suggest in their discussion of the US Constitutional Convention in 1787,

the crucial question was not ‘Who should be president? Who should lead us? Who is the wisest amongst us? Who would be the best king?’ No, the founders of the country concentrated on such questions as ‘What *processes* can we create that will give us good presidents long after we’re dead and gone? What type of enduring country do we want to build? On what principles?’

In short, since leaders cannot be omnipotent, the process of leadership through continuous learning is as applicable to leaders as to followers. But this is to challenge the very legitimacy of Creon’s leadership, for to be a leader, in Creon’s eyes, is to be superior to one’s followers and subordinates. Thus, for Creon to admit to an error is to imply that he should



no longer be the leader, and his refusal to accede to Haemon's logic condemns all the major characters to death or misery.

The Spartans institutionalized such a restraint on their royal leaders through the five-annual elected Ephors, overseers, who swore to support the two kings but only if the kings maintained the rule of law. Thus, if one Spartan king insisted on leading the army in battle, as he was permitted to do, two of the five Ephors always accompanied him and reported back on his conduct (Cartledge, 2002: 49–51).

This institutional constraint on leaders was also embodied in the advice given by a courtier to his prince in Castiglione's great sixteenth-century work, *The Courtier*:

Of this it commeth, that greatmen, beeside that they never understande the truth of any things, dronken with the licentious libertye that rule bringeth with it and with abundance of delicacies drowned in pleasures, are so far out of the way and their mind is so corrupted in seeing themselves alwaies obeyed and (as it were) woorshipped with so much reverence, and praise, without not onely anye reproof at all, but also gainsayinge, that through this ignoraunce they wade to an extreeme selfe leeking, so that afterwarde they admitt no counsel nor advise of others. (Castiglione, 1994: 297)

Note that in each of these cases, the Roman army, the Greek king Creon, the Spartan Ephors and Castiglione's prince, the learning occurs not through some unspecified 'experience' but from the process of listening – or in some cases not listening – to followers, through inverse learning. As Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003b) have suggested, far from leadership being located within extraordinary individuals it is rather the 'extra-ordinarization' of the mundane, especially listening, that makes followers follow leaders. These leaders learn from their followers; indeed, they have to learn leadership from their followers before they can attempt to exert leadership over them.

Finally, we might relate this recruitment of 'enemies' to the experience of Agamemnon, King of Mycenae, in the Trojan War. In Greek mythology Calchas, the son of Thestor (a priest of Apollo) is a soothsayer that Agamemnon approaches in an effort to ensure victory over the Trojans. Calchas then visits the Oracle and declares that victory can only be achieved at significant cost to Agamemnon that includes: the sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia, and that the task will take ten years, and that no victory will ensue unless Achilles fights for the Greeks. In fact, Calchas subsequently tells Agamemnon to build a wooden horse if he wants to defeat the Trojans and ultimately foresees his own death. However, two

points are important here: first, Agamemnon has to take on trust the words of a Trojan, a former enemy; second, that the message Calchas relays is distinctly bitter – success has a cost.

The hubris of leadership, of course, has always been regarded as a fatal weakness for many, but the point is to understand what it is about hubris that so undermines leaders. Cohen's (2002) review of the relationships between political and military leaders in wartime confirms that in the cases of Lincoln, Clemenceau, Churchill and Ben-Gurion it is only when political leaders engage in the process of constructive dissent with their military leaders that a successful strategy is likely to prevail. Very often, it would seem, it is the military subordinates who must teach their political superordinates and wherever the relationship becomes too asymmetrical – in either direction – problems develop.

## Leading to learn

We suggested above that perhaps leadership might be best learned from followers because it is through an iterative relationship between leader and followers that the latter teach the former to lead: a process of inverse learning. However, leadership is not something that only affects, or is effected through isolated individuals and their atomized group of followers. On the contrary, leadership is essentially a social activity and leadership may best be learned within a 'Community of Practice' (Wenger, 2000: 4). For Wenger, learning starts with the assumption that 'engagement in social practice is the fundamental process by which we learn and so become who we are'. His approach is rooted in four premises:

- 1 The centrality of our social nature;
- 2 Knowledge is recognized as competence with respect to valued activities;
- 3 Knowing is a matter of engaging actively in the pursuit of such activities; and
- 4 Our experience of, and engagement with, the world generates meaning.

Learning is therefore a social process, not an individual activity – despite the fact that we tend to teach and assess learning on an individual basis divorced from any ‘lived experience of participation’ (Wenger, 2000: 3). Participating implies not just an active learning mode and not just a social event but rather an engagement in a social practice that constitutes a social community and thus an identity. Communities of Practice are thus both informal and omnipresent, as families, work groups, street gangs, and in the case that follows, as a syndicate of sergeants on a leadership course. The implication is that learning occurs most effectively when the participants ‘engage in and contribute to the practices of their communities’ (Wenger, 2000: 7; see also Edwards, 2015, for a longer consideration of the community dynamics of leadership). In other words, learning occurs all the time and not just when we are sitting in a lecture theatre or reading a textbook. The consequence of social learning is a social practice that embodies the folk-wisdom to allow community members to resolve their locally generated problems, though much of this practice is tacit knowledge it is essentially related to practice and does not divide mental from physical activities, ‘theory’ from ‘practice’. In this sense Wenger’s use of the term ‘practice’ is actually closer to the original meaning of ‘praxis’ – translating an idea into action. Hence even the construction of theory is both a social accomplishment and a social practice. And just as the social practice is a consequence of negotiations so too is its meaning, not merely in a linguistic sense but in a sense of a social process, a participatory practice that is more than mere engagement in a practice because it encompasses the lived experience that constitutes identity. As Wenger insists:

Since the beginning of history, human beings have formed communities that accumulate collective learning into social practices – communities of practice. Tribes are an early example. More recent instances include the guilds of the Middle Ages that took on the stewardship of a trade, and scientific communities that collectively define what counts as valid knowledge in a specific area of investigation. Less obvious cases could be a local gardening club, nurses in a ward, a street gang, or a group of software engineers meeting regularly in the cafeteria to share tips.<sup>5</sup>

The other half of a Community of Practice, according to Wenger, is manifest in reification – the materialization of abstractions – in other words, the way we make things represent ideas to the point where the thing appears to embody our own projections onto the world. Flags, for example, are reifications of identity, just as rank badges are, but so are classifications of people or things. These reifications capture and congeal human experience

in material form that may be process or product, but either way they are the reflections of participatory practice. Wenger also insists that participation without reification generates too few anchors to link the practices together, and if there is reification without participation then social meaning cannot be generated and a community cannot be built: participation and reification are a necessary duality, not a 'simple opposition'.

But a Community of Practice does not arise simply from physical proximity; that may be perceived as a community but unless there is 'mutual engagement' of participants that community will not develop a Community of Practice. Nor does an information network or social category mirror or generate a Community of Practice. Indeed, a Community of Practice is not a utopian ideal where mutuality and love prevail but one defined by shared practice and collective repertoires rather than harmonious relationships.

In what follows we use ideas from inverse learning and Communities of Practice to consider how Senior Non-Commissioned Officers (SNCOs) are taught to lead in the Royal Air Force (RAF). We describe Keith's experiences of following two Intermediate Management and Leadership Courses (IMLC), where he observed participants learning how to lead.

As suggested above, although experiential learning is critical here, it does not necessarily mean that the more experience one gets the better we become. It might be thus, and ordinarily we might expect it, but whether we learn from our experience depends upon the form of reflection engaged with. In other words, unreflective learning is hardly likely to improve our performance. If we practice scoring a goal every day for four hours but cannot see where the ball is going, we are unlikely to improve much because we cannot reflect on our performance. In contrast, elite sport is littered with examples of 'naturally' gifted athletes becoming great by supplementing their talent with additional training and honing. The Portuguese football forward Cristiano Ronaldo, for example, aged 35 at the time of writing, usually a typical point at which a player would retire, remains one of the fittest and fastest players on the planet, due in part no doubt to his notoriously obsessive training regime. The 2020 epic ten-episode documentary on basketball legend Michael Jordan, *The Last Dance*, is a fascinating case study in sustained excellence and leadership, presenting its dark sides as well as its ecstatic highs. A crunch point for Jordan's Chicago Bulls team seemed to come at the end of the 1989–90

season, when the team narrowly lost to their great rivals, the Detroit Pistons, in the Eastern Conference Final of the playoffs. Detroit were renowned for their robust defence, playing a confrontational and bruising style of game. Bruised by the defeat, Jordan, rather than take some time off to rest, immediately started to intensify his training, urging his colleagues to do likewise. The goal, the players and coaches explain to the filmmakers was to never allow the team to be out-muscled by the Pistons again and the method was specifically to build physical strength and defensive nous. They would learn how to out-Piston the Pistons. The following year the teams again met in the conference final and the Bulls triumphed, with the Pistons somewhat unsportingly responding by walking off the court with seconds remaining on the game clock and without shaking the hands of their opponents. This victory – or rather the decision of the team, fired on by Jordan's obsessive drive for excellence during the off season – seemed to be a turning point which led to the creation of the most successful basketball team in US history to date. Subsequent research has shown beyond any doubt that practice, while it does not make perfect, makes for a significant improvement (Whitefield, 2002).

However, equally critical is the point that these practices tend to be communal – either everyone in the team tends to practice or no one does. The communality of the Bulls' practice sessions is brought home vividly in the documentary series, with Jordan a merciless and highly confrontational teammate, at least when he was either disappointed in someone or testing their mettle. In contrast, however, head coach Phil Jackson appeared as a far calmer character, talking to players as equals and turning to eastern meditative techniques to help instil focus and perspective. His most rebellious player, Dennis Rodman, arrived at the team with a reputation for misbehaviour off court and yet Jackson's approach was not to double down on discipline but to push him hard in training yet to also give him space to express himself when not at work – 'Let Dennis be Dennis'. Communality learning need not only mean collective discipline but can also be a way in which groups can form their sense of collective identity through practices that protect the diversity of their members.

We also suggested that a crucial element in the learning process was the feedback provided by the followers and it is this feedback that enables the leader to make sense of the action and interaction. This sense-making activity (Weick, 1995) occurs in all of us but is particularly present amongst

formal leaders – the primary sense-makers. This sense-making activity is generally a pragmatic activity designed to deal with an extraordinarily complex world which is, in reality, too complex to grasp. As a consequence, we tend to operate within an ‘enacted world’ – one that makes sense to us at the time and place we find ourselves in. Thus, even if this proves to be inaccurate it is something we can work with and within: the world does not present itself as a series of tidy problems but as a raft of uncertainties and confusions that we have to make sense of and in making sense of it we reduce it to manageable proportions and problems.

Fisher et al. (2002) have suggested that this sense-making capability is best exploited ‘at the point of action’ in which the learner is posed specific forms of questions to help them make sense of the ‘action’ and simultaneously to embed the learning. Of course, that ‘help’ need not be through an appointed coach, instructor or mentor and may more usually occur through interaction with peers. As Archer (2003: 8) suggests, students and peers often learn more from each other than from any teacher or superordinate. And very often that learning is facilitated by the kind of questions that encourage self-reflection, self-questioning and self-understanding. As we shall see, this model of leadership learning – do-review-apply – under the sense-making guidance of an experienced instructor and supported by a heterarchy of supportive peers, lies at the heart of the Intermediate Management and Leadership Course (IMLC).

## **IMLC**

The aim of the Air Command Squadron (ACS) is ‘to provide effective leadership and management training to RAF NCOs, shaping their beliefs, attitudes and skills to meet the future needs of the RAF’; while the IMLC is designed to further the management and leadership experiences and skills of ‘acting sergeants’, that is those individuals who already have the temporary rank of sergeant but whose confirmation of rank depends upon passing the IMLC. Each course lasts for three weeks and comprises a mixture of classroom and outdoor activities, in which the theory and practice of management and leadership – as the RAF currently perceive them – are taught by experienced SNCOs, primarily flight sergeants, with

the occasional help of a warrant officer or commissioned officers of various ranks.

Each IMLC is split into four syndicates with each instructor, a flight sergeant, typically responsible for eight students, that is, acting sergeants. Keith followed two different courses over a period of five weeks; the first was led by 'Wilf' the second by 'Geoff'. Both syndicates had more than the normal eight students because of the backlog of students that developed through commitments to operations (a firefighters' strike, and operations in Afghanistan and Iraq). Each course has a Course Commander (CC) who is one of the flight sergeants who has the coordinating role but does not take a particular syndicate except as a stand-in. The role of CC rotates and in Keith's case Chris was the CC and stand-in for Geoff whenever Geoff was away. Most of the course takes place at the syndicate level where facilitated classroom discussion and outside exercises are combined, but occasionally lectures are provided for either half or all the course simultaneously. Keith's role was essentially limited to observer with very limited and occasional participation. It is of course impossible to assess whether his presence affected the courses, but his impression was that the participants and course instructors were relatively free of any distortion induced by him.

Every morning in the first two weeks started with parade drill, something that many participants had not undertaken on a regular basis for some time. The primary purpose of this was not to ensure their drill remained at a certain level but that each sergeant got a chance to take the parade; a new and often nervous leadership task for most and one that perfectly captured the essence of the Community of Practice and learning philosophy: the parade leader could have theoretically been 'in control' of the parade – but if the leader made an error in the drill orders the followers were unlikely, unwilling or unable to comply with the leader's orders. Thus, the followers taught the leader how to lead through the formers' feedback. Moreover, since this was an active process in which all participated, either as leaders or followers, a Community of Practice was built up over time to embody collective knowledge and support the acquisition and recognition of competence.

Some days were spent entirely in classrooms but often there were periods spent outdoors on physical activities, 'low ropes', orienteering, setting-up direction beacons, pine pole exercises, putting up and taking down tents and so on. The last two days were all outside. A series of tasks were set

throughout the course including public speaking which, for example, developed from an unassessed five-minute speech on a topic of the participants' choice to the syndicate, to a ten-minute speech on a topic chosen by the instructor to the syndicate, and finished with the more pressured environment of a collective presentation to the whole programme including selective officers as well as a selection of newly trained recruits. Similarly, a series of active 'leads' were required by everyone in increasing levels of complexity and time (called First Step, Mid Step and Final Step) and while some of these were indoor exercises, most were outdoors involving some form of physical activity. First Step was not assessed, and from a learning perspective the more mistakes made the better for all to learn. Mid and Final Step were assessed by the flight sergeant in charge of the syndicate and, if necessary, by the Warrant Officer Training Standards. In between these 'leads' there were many 'theory' sessions provided either by lecture or, more usually, by group discussion and video, concerned with issues such as leadership, management, morale, drug abuse, Form 6000s (annual appraisal forms), 'defence writing' techniques and so on. Additionally, a series of video sessions were run in which the syndicate members took it in turn to interview and be interviewed in a series of scenarios, all of which were likely to arise back at their respective RAF stations.

This complex and busy schedule was run along typically robust military lines in terms of timings, self-discipline, forms of dress, attitudes and behaviour but underpinning it was a well-honed learning philosophy that embodied two critical components:

- 1 Leadership is a collective resource not an individual property. By that we mean that no individual was expected or required to know how to handle each and every situation that they were faced with – but they were expected to use their colleagues as resources to supplement their own knowledge and to control and coordinate the team. Thus, when faced with a task the leaders were expected to delegate sub-tasks wherever possible but to remain the coordinator of the followers' efforts rather than their executor. In effect, leadership was learnt by leaders accepting their own limitations and relying on their followers to compensate for these limitations.



- 2 Leadership skill is acquired primarily through the direct experience of leading but not just through the act of leading. Instead, this has to be supplemented by the provision of honest and supportive criticism from instructors and team members and in an atmosphere that encourages self-reflection rather than denial and self-justification. In effect, learning to lead can be achieved through leading to learn. However, both learning and leading are social rather than individual activities and for both to be successful there is a requirement for a significant support network – a ‘community of practice’ (Wenger, 2000).

For instance, on day one of the first course, the instructor (Wilf) was setting up some ground rules for everyone to work with over the next three weeks and the issue of honest feedback was raised by one of the course participants:

*Wilf:* What kind of honesty are we talking about here? It’s no good – just because you want to be liked – you have to be honest with each other and with me – if you just sit there and be a passenger for three weeks, then come the final exercise you might get caught out. I’ll stay behind every single night for as long as it takes to get you through this course, but you need to be honest with me if you need help.

Wilf then runs through the programme and reminds them that most of the assessment occurs outside when they take up their leadership roles, their ‘leads’.

*Wilf:* I know some of you are worried about the public speaking sessions but don’t be. I shall make notes in your folders on your performance but the pat on the back will not be a ‘recce’ for a knife! [Laughter]. Now remember the most important thing for the leadership Mid Step exercise and the Final Step exercise is to help people who are given the lead but don’t try and take over. Don’t leave them if they’re floundering but don’t take over their lead. This is the most stressful time – a few sphincters will be going! [Laughter] A few teddies will be thrown out of the pram – but don’t take things personally.

The role of questions to force, or at least encourage, reflective learning became quickly apparent when the syndicate was attempting to complete a Form 6000 – an RAF appraisal form – for their direct reports. The Form 6000 required them to complete both numerical scores and a narrative on several development areas for each individual report and the time necessary to complete them had led to some making do simply with a numerical grade without any illustrative examples of behaviour.

*Wilf:* So why can’t you provide an example?

*Sergeant N:* Well, I can't think of any.

*Wilf:* Well, if you say this person is the dog's bollocks but you can't think of a single example to support that – he can't be can he?

*Sergeant N:* But most of my time is taken up with 6000s – it's taking me away from my primary task!

*Wilf:* No, your primary task now as a senior manager is to focus on the troops – they should be concentrating on the primary task and you should be concentrating on them.

Sergeant N was clearly bemused by this response at first but over the next few days he did seem to accept that the task of a sergeant was not to undertake the technical jobs that he had done as a corporal or a technician. A similar example occurred in Geoff's syndicate. Sergeant J had provided an example to illustrate the numbers given on the Form 6000, but Geoff wasn't happy with it.

*Geoff:* What have you written?

*Sergeant J:* Well I've written: 'He has an interest in buildings.'

*Geoff:* Yeh well I have an interest in brain surgery but what does that mean in practice? [Laughter].

The result of these sessions on the Form 6000 was a collective understanding of the right way to complete an appraisal and an acceptance that the form was not just a bureaucratic imposition but the primary route through which subordinates could improve their performance and secure promotion. In short, the result was a reified 6000 – a materialized standard that embodied collective practice and provided some participants with some purchase on what had previously been merely an abstraction. But if the distributed knowledge of former generations of the RAF was encapsulated in the 6000, that belonging to the syndicate under observation became manifest in the First Step exercises.

## Leadership, delegation and a duty of care

One of the first 'leads' in First Step was a mental maths problem and provided an early opportunity to consider how important the distribution of knowledge was. Sergeant P was chosen and given a sheaf of papers to quickly look through while the rest of the group waited.

*Sergeant P:* Who's good at maths? [two hands are raised] Do this please. [He hands them a card and the rest of the syndicate coalesce into different problem-solving groups.]

*Sergeant P:* Anyone got any problems? [Silence]

*Wilf:* 1 minute guys ... 10 seconds ... time's up. [Wilf gets them to write the answers on the board and most are right, but a couple are wrong.]

*Wilf:* So, Chris, what was all that about then?

*Sergeant P:* Delegation – I just asked who was good and gave them the card.

*Wilf:* So, you didn't brief anyone about the task first?

*Chris:* No, I didn't think I had time.

*Wilf:* So why do we delegate?

*Group:* Spread work ... Save time ... Spread experience.

*Wilf:* OK but note that Delegation is not Abdication. How many have worked for bosses who didn't delegate? [all hands rise]. So sometimes the boss signs work off as his own but it's really yours? [All nod] How does that make you feel?

*Group:* It pisses me off ... Yeah, yeah.

*Wilf:* So, don't do it yourself then! Delegation gives subordinates status, value, they feel important, they get confidence and they feel trusted. You must utilize others' experience. ... When I was on Fresco [Firefighters' Strike duties]<sup>6</sup> I had 30 RAF and 30 Paras, and this Army lieutenant comes up to me and says – looking at my guys – 'I don't want any shit from this lot!' So I said 'Hold on – you don't need to talk to me like that – just talk to me.' Army leaders take everything on themselves, but they can't do it. I just delegate and they get on with it. This is the most difficult part of the lead exercises – delegation – don't go 'hands-on', stand back and manage the process. So, what shouldn't you delegate?

*Sergeant N:* Shit jobs!

*Wilf:* Yeah, like sweeping out the hangar – 'I'm not doing that', 'I've done all that.' I think if the guys are really busy you should help. I know the bosses don't like to see you doing it but it's good when you do it. Some of the older sergeants have lost the ability to make tea and do photocopying but when I got promoted, I decided to keep doing it.

*Sergeant N:* Yeah, I do it still, not because I want to be liked by the lads but because I'd have liked someone do it for me.

*Wilf:* And what else should you be delegating?

*Sergeant P:* Complete tasks – otherwise there's no job satisfaction.

This exercise and debriefing set the pattern for the rest of the course. 'Leads' were not expected to know everything but to delegate tasks and

retain coordination, control and decision-making. But delegation was clearly distinguished from abdication of responsibility and Wilf's sweeping example, supported by the 'old hand' of the group – Sergeant N – reaffirmed that superior rank did not mean that maintaining a good relationship with one's subordinates was irrelevant. Note also that Wilf's approach combined the questioning techniques that demanded the self-reflection of the group with practical examples and illustrations. Furthermore, the interjection by Sergeant N reaffirmed that this was a community issue and not something restricted to beneficent instructing staff. Indeed, the 'community' was built or undermined by precisely this practice of undertaking jobs traditionally restricted to subordinate ranks.

The clash with the army lieutenant revealed another critical aspect of leadership training: leaders have to protect their followers from others; they have a duty of care towards them. Indeed, this seemed to provide an important foundation stone for the exchange at the heart of the episodes discussed here: paternalistic care is provided in exchange for acquiescence to rank. This is anything but new; as Sheffield (2000) argued convincingly, the relatively good relationships between British soldiers and officers in the trenches on the Western Front in the First World War were primarily rooted in the exchange of paternalism for loyalty.

But it is not just the relationship between RAF leaders and followers that is underpinned by paternalism because the contemporary RAF has a large number of civilian employees that sergeants have unlimited responsibility for but limited control over. The second course Keith followed was run by Geoff and in this exchange he was facilitating a discussion on 'Working with civilians'.

*Geoff:* Civil Servants comprise 18% of the Service so all of you will have to manage them at some time.

*Sergeant W:* Can we bollock them?

*Geoff:* You can't *bollock* them – you have to *counsel* them [laughter]. You can't take formal disciplinary action against them, but you shouldn't need to if you're using your management skills properly ... You can get the best out of your civilians and RAF staff if you are concerned about their welfare. Your attitude is critical. They have a lot of knowledge and you can only get at it by being concerned about them.

## Leadership and discipline

The importance of the duty of care does not translate into a liberal ‘touchy-feely’ approach to managing subordinates: this is, after all, a military establishment and the instructing staff are typical of the ‘robust’ SNCOs that Kipling long ago proclaimed as the ‘backbone of the British Army’.<sup>7</sup> But it does imply that leaders are responsible for what followers do – even if they are not aware of that responsibility. For example, Chris took the syndicate for a facilitated session on discipline.

*Chris:* What do you all think of the state of discipline in the RAF today?

*Group:* Gone downhill ... People are scared of it these days [general murmurings of agreement].

*Chris:* Yeah, but you have to impose yourself. I mean whose fault is it if discipline is lax?

*Sergeant N:* Ours.

*Chris:* Yes exactly.

*Sergeant T:* Yes, but they don’t expect it anymore, so you can’t enforce it can you?

*Chris:* Well, you should go across to the recruit training because believe me, when they leave here after nine weeks they are disciplined. But by the time they get their trade it’s changed – they know what they can get away with. What happens if you say to someone ‘Do that again and I’ll charge you’ – and they do it again and you don’t charge them?

*Sergeant N:* Everyone knows the Sarge is an easy touch.

*Chris:* Yes, so it’s up to you to stop it. So how do we define discipline?

*Sergeant D:* The enforcement of personal and external standards?

*Sergeant W:* The ability to obey orders?

*Chris:* So how can we maintain it if we don’t have the standards ourselves? How many of you have still got pride in the Service? [About half raise their hands].

*Chris:* Well, we may think differently but we’ve got to give our subordinates a chance and you’ve got to get used to confrontation. Your guys are looking to you to sort this stuff. If someone knocks at your door and you say ‘Come in’ – what have you done? You haven’t given yourself time to prepare, have you? So, what happens if you say: ‘just wait’ or ‘stand there’ – what’s happened? ... You’ve told him who’s in charge, haven’t you? And think about your body language – I know when I enter a room whether I’m going to win just by looking at body language. But top tip – know your people, they’re not all the same and therefore you need to treat them differently. It’s our responsibility to set as well as maintain standards.

The ability to maintain discipline without resorting to authoritarianism, or worse, is not only tested in the field exercises but in the video interviews that occur towards the end of the course. One in particular is set up to test

the toughest disciplinarian in the group: in this syndicate Sergeant I. As Geoff indicated before the exercise, the learning involved was in and through the community, rather than just the individual taking the lead: ‘I need to use the appropriate people so the group can get the most learning from each situation. There’s no point in putting a weak student in with Chris for example, he’ll tear them to shreds and that would destroy his confidence and teach the group nothing.’

The scenario involved one aptly named ‘Corporal Ironfist’ whom, the scenario suggests, was perceived to be bullying his ‘flight’. While Sergeant I went to the interview room the rest of the syndicate eagerly awaited, viewing the coming altercation on the Closed-Circuit TV. Unbeknown to Sergeant I, Corporal Ironfist would not be played by another member of the syndicate, as was the norm, but by Chris, the Course Commander, who bore a remarkably physical resemblance to the archetype embodied in the script – well over six foot, muscular, tattooed and with very short, cropped hair. While Sergeant I was left to ruminate on his coming confrontation it became clear that Corporal Ironfist was in the vicinity because his voice boomed through the television monitor:

*Corporal Ironfist [outside the room]:* Get back to fucking work! [He bangs loudly on the interview room door and immediately enters, carrying a large stick. He sits down without being invited and leans across to Sergeant I.]

*Corporal Ironfist:* Hi Sarge. What’s going on?

*Sergeant I: [Clearly taken aback by the entrance of Corporal Ironfist and trying to recover]:* I’ll ask the questions.

*Corporal Ironfist:* Excuse me Sarge [He stands up, goes past the Sergeant’s desk to the window behind him and opens it as someone (Geoff) walks past]. Oi – you lot get back to fucking work!

*Sergeant I: [Standing]* Sit down! Sit down!

*Corporal Ironfist:* But Sarge those lazy fucking bastards – they’re doing my head in! I mean they’re a right shower. If I didn’t chase them all day long I don’t know what would happen!

*Sergeant I:* Have you finished?

*Corporal Ironfist:* Yes Sarge, but Sarge they need a right good bollocking.

*Sergeant I:* I don’t want to hear you giving them a bollocking in public.

*Corporal Ironfist:* But Sarge listen, you’ve only been here for three months and ...

*Sergeant I:* That’s got nothing to do with it.

*Corporal Ironfist:* But the other sergeants never complained.

*Sergeant I:* That's not the point. I'm in charge here now and the way you treat people is a disgrace.

*Corporal Ironfist:* But Sarge in a few years I'm going for my third stripe and I've got a top flight you know.

*Sergeant I:* Your flight only works because they're scared of you. You cannot shout at people all the time. You've got six months to change your ways.

*Corporal Ironfist:* But Sarge if I go all pink and fluffy the boys will take the piss!

*Sergeant I:* I'm not expecting miracles. I'm expecting to see some change though. Now go back to work. After much laughter, both in the viewing room and at the end of the interview between Ironfist and Sergeant I, the latter return to the viewing room for a debrief from Geoff.

*Geoff:* So how do you think that went? [Laughter].

*Sergeant I:* Well when I saw who it was, I thought – fuck me! [Laughter].

*Geoff:* Well, you might have started by taking the stick off him! You need to remain assertive but not aggressive – I mean when you told him he was an 'absolute disgrace' – do you think that helped?!

*Sergeant I:* No, not really.

*Geoff:* Well, you have two routes to go down here. You can either take the bullying, harassment and legal route or you can try and get him to self-identify the problems. Don't take him on and tear him a new arsehole! That's just as bad as his bullying isn't it? [Sergeant I nods.]

What is most intriguing about this is how close it came to traditional archetypes of military discipline, and how well the players could pick up their roles. Yet underlying the humour there are serious points to be made: that bullying is not leadership; that being assertive is critical but it is not the same as being authoritarian; that it's very easy to fall back into the 'old ways' unless people are constantly reminded of the dangers and – if all else fails – that the law will not support rank if it's abused.

Overlaying all this is the engagement in a practice that supports the production and reproduction of the community of sergeants; the 'band of brothers' (and sisters, since both syndicates included women). However, a significant degree of learning undoubtedly occurred between the sergeants and beyond the gaze of their flight sergeant. In the case of Corporal Ironfist, after Geoff had debriefed Sergeant I and reinforced the learning points he wanted to embed, the group of sergeants were asked for comments, but none provided Sergeant I with any criticism, constructive or otherwise. Indeed, they collectively congratulated him on 'standing up' to Corporal

Ironfist. In sum, the learning that Geoff was trying to instil into the group – bullying is not leadership – was blunted by the learning instilled by the sergeants' Community of Practice – bullies should be bullied back.

The limits on 'formal' learning imposed by the 'informal' Community of Practice also became manifest in one element of the Final Step exercise in which one lead required all the syndicates to work together to coordinate the deployment of a system of ground signals that would enable a pilot to drop an item accurately on the target. In this case the target beacon, along with the aerial and the marker panels were all deployed correctly (in line) at a specified angle down a gentle slope over a 500-metre area. However, with just a few minutes to go before the aircraft was theoretically due, an 'officer' arrived on the scene demanding to know who was in charge. The 'officer' was in fact another of the instructing staff dressed as an officer and the issue was whether the lead sergeant responsible for deploying the marker panels and the target beacon would maintain his stand against an intemperate officer.

*Officer:* Sergeant – the central of the three marker panels is out of alignment and will confuse the pilot, get it moved five metres to the left.

*Sergeant:* [Looking askance because the marker panels are perfectly aligned]. But it's right as it is sir.

*Officer:* No it isn't, it's clearly wrong – now get it moved.

*Sergeant:* But sir it looks right to me.

*Officer:* Are you questioning my authority sergeant?

*Sergeant:* No sir but ... well ... it looks fine to me [looks round for support from the group but doesn't get any].

*Officer:* I will ask you to move it just one more time sergeant.

*Sergeant:* OK sir [the sergeant runs down to the marker and moves it left the required five metres so that it is now clearly out of alignment. He then returns to the officer.] OK sir?

*Officer:* Sergeant, you were right the first time; why on earth did you change your mind? Have the courage of your convictions man. [He turns and marches off, leaving the sergeant baffled and bemused].

In this extract we get a sense of learning leadership as a deeply embodied and aesthetic experience, not just something that happens through language (Carroll and Smolović Jones, 2018). In terms of bodies, we can almost feel



the nervous sweat of the sergeant as he tries to work out how to respond, meaning that the sergeant is learning about leadership through the body and understanding its responses as much as through the words of instructors. This is an aesthetic experience too because it concerns the 'look' of a certain space and a contest over how that space is going to be configured. This incident was the most extreme case of challenging the participants to maintain their position in the face of pressure, but it was not an isolated case and each one was designed to reinforce the confidence of the leader and the group in their own acts and not to rely upon, nor wilt before, the onslaught of apparently superordinate authority that they knew to be wrong.

The second example of integrity testing occurred earlier on the same day as the group passed another syndicate marching back towards its original destination; Geoff asked their instructor (Dale) what was going on.

*Dale:* Well Sergeant J's got the lead and she's very decisive but often wrong – she could be a bloody officer! Well, when she made the mistake, I said she could either write the Course Commander a note explaining what she'd done or she could march the entire syndicate back to where they came from to do the task properly – so she's marching them back ... I can't believe it ... morale's absolutely rock bottom now.

It turned out later that when the task was completed the syndicate let her know their collective mind in no uncertain terms, once again reinforcing the notion that this was a community team at practice not a team practising to be a community. However, the gender of the errant leader in the previous example was not a contributory factor to the team's problems, as we shall see in the next example.

## Gender and leadership

The first syndicate Keith followed had two women and eight men (the second had just one woman) and two of the early exercises generated important lessons for the group to consider. Both involved cooperation and competition and the first task was instigated without any context by Wilf.

*Wilf:* OK, here's the task. You have a large tyre inner tube, and you have to get the whole group through the hole. You have ten minutes to tell me how long, exactly, it will take you.

*Sergeant A:* It's not a race so we could get this perfect! [Laughter].

*Sergeant D:* Why don't we just try it and see?

*Sergeant N:* You are talking about this hole Wilf? [Pointing to the inner tube].

*Wilf:* As opposed to what hole? [Laughter]. [The group take it in turns to get through the hole as two people hold it and raise and lower it alternately. It takes 31 seconds the first time and 24 seconds the second time.]

*Sergeant W:* Is it meant to be a race?

*Wilf:* I don't know – is 24 seconds good enough?

*Sergeant D:* No come on we can beat this. [They do it in 22 seconds.]

*Wilf:* Anything you want to know?

*Sergeant N:* Yeh, why are we doing it?

*Wilf:* Because I'm telling you to. Do you want to know about the other syndicate's times?

*Sergeant N:* Yeah

*Wilf:* A syndicate of eight can do it in 8 seconds.

At this point the two women in the syndicate begin to demand more effort from the group, though some of the men became uninterested. Wilf comments to Keith on the lack of leadership amongst the group and the resulting lethargy. One of the women asks Wilf whether they have to do it quickly.

*Wilf:* You don't have to. All I'm telling you is that your time is average. It's entirely up to you.

The women then take formal control and demand great efforts and the time is reduced to 13 seconds. Wilf concludes by asking them to think about the importance of competition to performance and about the role of leadership in securing that performance, in this case by the two women sergeants.

The role of gender in leadership resurfaced the following day when the group engaged in their first attempt on the Low Ropes, an array of ropes slung tautly between various trees just above ground level with various exercises that required balance, teamwork and leadership but did not endanger anyone – though one of the current syndicate broke his collar bone six months previously on this exercise! Wilf explained the requirements and the limitations of the exercise and asked for questions.

*Sergeant N:* Is anyone in charge?

*Wilf:* No

The two women agree that they should be in the middle because they don't have the physical strength to do this kind of thing and the men all accept this. In fact, the two women then seem to remain in control through most of the exercises and frequently lead the group but it's very much a group effort and lots of advice is given. When they finish Wilf debriefs them collectively.

*Wilf:* I was impressed with the low ropes – but there were some points when you got stuck weren't there? [Group nods].

*Wilf:* Now I could have just stood there and done nothing – but what good would that have been?

*Group:* None!

*Wilf:* So, when you get a lad who can't do it what do you do?

*Sergeant P:* Shout at them! [laughter].

*Wilf:* And if they still can't do it?

*Sergeant P:* Shout louder! [laughter]

*Sergeant N:* Yeah, but when you said 'hold hands' we were off. Yeh we could have become demoralized then if we'd kept on failing.

*Wilf:* Yeah, so it's a fine line between giving people the space and time to do it and helping them when they're stuck.

*Wilf:* And what did the girls start out saying first of all?

*Sergeant S:* That they wanted to be in the middle.

*Wilf:* And where did they end up?

*Sergeant S:* Leading us! [laughter].

Gender and equality within leadership processes are an important issue. The focus in leadership studies and practice is usually upon the number of people holding senior leadership positions who are women or from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds and the reasons why many of these people are prevented from attaining seniority in the first place. These are undoubtedly serious issues and research in this area can uncover issues of systemic prejudice that is vital in furthering our knowledge concerning patriarchal, sexist, and classist assumptions relating to leadership. Yet such a focus on positionality can gloss over the important issue of how people are marginalized in everyday leadership practice. That processes persecute as much as individual people is obviously true – apartheid in South Africa, for example, was a series of exclusionary and persecutory processes against Black people.

Yet these processes can operate at a subtler register. Take, for example, the use of 'girl' in the above extract. Taken in isolation one might write this off as an antiquated use of terminology within an otherwise reasonably fair organization but were this infantilizing use of language compounded by

other micro behaviours they could amount to a situation where women were more systemically marginalized through leadership processes. It is a snowballing of such micro processes that can make bigger injustices, such as pay inequality or the gender segregation of some organizations and professions, seem normal and natural – people don't notice them as unacceptable because they are so routinized through everyday practice.

What we saw in this extract, however, was an instance of women asserting their equality through a process of developing leadership. The women in the activity start off self-disciplining themselves as 'physically weaker' but asserting themselves through both their bodies and words as equal, and perhaps even superior, to their male peers as leadership actors. We can read this as an instance of gender, as well as leadership, appearing as a practice (Vachhani and Pullen, 2019; Smolović Jones et al., 2020b and 2020c). This means that what we come to think of as 'woman' is brought to life through a myriad of everyday processes – including leadership processes like the one above. The extract above is an interesting snapshot of an organization in transition, where the instructors draw on the language of 'girls' not only to highlight the achievement of the women in the activity but as a way of (re)asserting the equal achievements of women to the male participants.

## Impact, delegation and distancing

The importance of using delegation as a mechanism for keeping clear of the task execution – so that the 'lead' could always have the space and time to maintain control, coordination and an overview – was constantly reinforced. Heifetz and Linsky (2002: 51) use 'getting off the dance floor and going to the balcony' as a metaphor for this task that enables leaders to keep asking themselves 'what is really going on here?' The confusion of the dance floor and the 'fog of war' are useful images for what occurs under the pressure experienced by leaders and the need to distance themselves, not from their followers, but from the 'doing'. On the first Mid-Step exercise, the first assessed task, Geoff gathered the syndicate for a quick briefing inside and reminded them of the briefing technique they had been taught to use when time was short: SMEAC – Situation, Mission, Execution, Ask questions, Check understanding.

*Geoff:* When you have a task and it goes wrong, nine times out of ten it goes wrong because the brief is wrong. They (followers) don't know what the task is, and they don't know what they have to do. SMEAC is good when time is short.<sup>8</sup>

*SMEAC:* Situation, Mission, Execution, Ask questions, Check understanding.

*Situation:* The overall issue.

*Mission:* The details – say this twice, repeat it to reinforce it.

*Execution:* How can we do this? If you haven't a clue ask for help, split them into groups and ask them to plan the execution. Then start delegating the tasks.

*Ask questions.*

*Check group understanding.*

So, you may not have an idea, but rest assured someone in the team will; take them to one side if you want and ask them. Then get them all back together and say: 'OK, this is what we're going to do and then confirm with them that they understand. Think about your limitations. Once you've been through it ask for questions. If you've got one or two that's OK. If all hands go up, you have a problem. Then ask them about the limitations so you can confirm everyone knows ... As a team commander I don't want to see you doing everything – handling the equipment – because you lose focus, stand back, delegate and keep an eye on the big picture. If you see something going wrong step in, address it and step out again. Don't get sucked in. An important thing is a sense of impact at the start. You set the tone, raising your voice is fine. Don't walk to the group, get them to come to you – then they know who's in charge.

The group then went outside to the wooded exercise area where Geoff ran through the Health and Safety requirements of working with ropes, hammers and so on and he asked for limitations that related to Health and Safety from each individual and they responded with examples. Then he picked Sergeant P for the first lead.

*Geoff:* Stuart, you're first. I'll read the exercise to you, then give you the card and see if you have any questions. OK? [Stuart nods].

OK. There is a radioactive isotope over there [points]. You have to render it safe using this equipment [reads it out] and these are the limitations: you cannot put the isotope down once you have lifted it, you mustn't go within one metre for more than 90 seconds, there is a minefield between you and it. ... You have 30 minutes to complete the task. I'm giving you 5 minutes to think about the task and then you're off. OK? [Stuart nods] Tell me when you're ready [3 minutes]. Any questions Stu?

*Stuart:* How likely is it that all the equipment is used?

*Geoff:* That's entirely up to you. [5 minutes later] Ready?

*Stuart:* Yep

Stuart starts walking towards the group who are about 15 metres away talking under the trees (it's beginning to rain), then he looks at Geoff – presumably remembering Geoff's warning on making an immediate impact – and stops.

*Stuart:* OK team on me! [They run over, and he explains the task slowly and carefully.] At this stage I'll nominate a time-keeper – Jules that's you. Any questions? OK give me a limitation each. He runs through the group and some respond with a limitation. OK let's have a 2-minute planning session in two groups.

*Geoff [aside to Keith]:* Stuart didn't repeat the mission nor get all the limitations out of the group in the session.

*Stuart [to group]:* Can we have a group chat now?

*Geoff [aside to me]:* That's too weak – should have been 'Come over here now!'

The 'group chat' turns into a general discussion.

*Geoff [aside to me]:* It's a bloody committee!

Stuart then imposes order and asks for suggestions. Two are offered and Stuart selects one and they all pick up the equipment to practice the task.

*Geoff [aside to me]:* He hasn't delegated anyone yet.

Lots of people are standing around while two of the syndicate are tying up logs.

*Geoff [aside to me]:* There's only 16 minutes left and look at them! He's not applying any motivational skills.

Eventually, and after several failed attempts, the task is complete, and the 'isotope' made safe. Geoff debriefs them:

*Geoff:* Any injuries? [none] OK Stu how do you think that went?

*Stuart:* Well, we spent too long wondering about how to get it into the box.

*Geoff:* Did you repeat the mission twice?

*Stuart:* I can't remember.

*Geoff:* I don't think you did. Go through the mission twice, go through the resources and the limitations. You appointed a timekeeper – that was good. Then you went through the limitations, but you didn't cover them all again in the questions. Then you planned for two minutes – that wasn't enough was it? You should have had four or five minutes planning. Then they both came back with ideas. Did you get into a pissing contest, a committee?

*Stuart:* Yes it did.

*Geoff:* Make it abundantly clear that you are in charge. 'Tell me – one at a time.' Say 'Shut-up. I need to listen to X.' Otherwise you're in meltdown. Did you delegate the task?

*Stuart:* There didn't seem to be enough to do to delegate.

*Geoff:* So, what could you do? You could have said: 'Right you four go and get a drink or you're on safety.' Don't say 'someone get the logs.' Say: 'you, you and you, go get the logs.' 14 minutes in did you use any motivational skills?

*Stuart:* No I don't think I did.

*Geoff:* So, motivate them – 'good knot Jasper' and so on. So, there wasn't much urgency was there?

*Stuart:* No, we were all standing around ... it's hard to motivate them.

*Geoff:* So, when you had the log over the minefield who should have decided whether it had gone far enough?

*Stuart:* The person with the best view.

*Geoff:* So, who should that have been?

*Stuart:* Me.

*Geoff:* Yes, it's your responsibility unless you delegate that task. And at the end of the task what were you doing?

*Stuart:* I was holding the rope.

*Geoff:* Yes, you should have been monitoring the situation not holding the rope!

Here, then, Geoff used a combination of questions and assertions to probe Stuart's leadership, to evaluate his performance and to suggest practical ways to improve, and all without the stereotypical military 'bollocking' that the sergeants may have either used themselves or have had to endure when they were corporals or below. Again, it's worth emphasizing here that although the approach was clearly prescriptive – there was a better way to lead than relying simply on your own resources – it remained very flexible because the *resources* that could solve the problems were those of the group, not the individual leader, though the individual leader retained the *responsibility* for making the ultimate decision. That is to say, it was not what Hodgson (1999: 129) calls learning to lead by the equivalent of 'painting by numbers' because that would imply a 'correct' solution to the problem, whereas this approach concerned maximizing the possibilities of solving the problem rather than searching for the 'correct' one.

However, the approach was not foolproof. On one occasion on Wilf's course an assessed 'lead' on the Final Step involved setting up a Helicopter Landing Site (HLS). This was relatively easy to undertake but there were

several aspects that were likely to go wrong. The appointed lead in this case had no knowledge of HLSs but, unbeknown to him, one of the team was an expert. The lead appointed a Second in Command (2IC) without this knowledge and as the lead began to specify how the task should be done the ‘expert’ suggested otherwise:

*Sergeant P:* OK, this is how we’ll do this [points to his diagram]

*Sergeant M:* That’s not how you do it!

*Sergeant P:* And what do you know about it?

*Sergeant M:* I do this for a living!

*Sergeant P:* Who’s in fucking charge here? I’m in fucking charge ... so that’s how we’re doing it.

The task is completed but improperly. Afterwards Wilf debriefs the lead

*Wilf:* Why didn’t you make use of the man’s knowledge rather than ignore him, and why bollock him in front of the team? And then you got it all wrong!

*Sergeant P:* I didn’t realize you could have more than one 2<sup>ic</sup> Flight. I won’t do that again.

The problem of learning to lead was exacerbated by those with minimal experience as an acting sergeant before they attended the course. For instance, Sergeant J had only been acting for a few weeks, while the majority had been in post for months and occasionally more than a year. Geoff chose Sergeant J for the second Mid-Step exercise and by this time it was pouring down, so they all donned their waterproofs and carried on. They failed in the task because the team hadn’t understood the limitations properly and Geoff debriefed them in the relative warmth of the tent.

*Geoff:* So, what went wrong then?

*Sergeant J:* Don’t know really ... just ran out of time.

*Geoff:* Well, your brief was too brief and missed out on the limitations. Hence you got penalized. Did you have a Q&A session at the end of the briefing?

*Sergeant J:* No – I asked if they all understood.

*Geoff:* Yes, but you didn’t know whether they really understood, did you? And where was the motivation? It’s pissing down – you should have been saying: ‘I know it’s pissing down but you’re doing well etc.’ Anyway, you forgot to tell them that equipment can only go forward not back – that’s why I penalized you. I’m not bothered whether you complete the task or not – but with that brief they couldn’t have succeeded. Beyond that your delegation was OK, but did you motivate people?’



*Sergeant J:* No.

*Geoff:* Well, that's honest, at least. Remember what I said before – if it's going to screw up it's because of the briefing – this was a classic case. When things went wrong Sergeant J you got quieter, but we need the opposite – not Mad Max, but vociferous – *real* leadership.

*Sergeant J:* But ...

*Geoff [smiling]:* No 'Buts'. When I give you constructive feedback don't fucking argue with me! [laughter].

It should be obvious by now that laughter played a crucial role in this course – as indeed it does in most organizations (Collinson, 2002). Like all military situations the barrack room banter played a functional role in defusing tension and in enabling troops to distance themselves from some of the things they were faced with. Nevertheless, underlying the humour were real lessons in learning and leadership. To argue with the instructors' feedback was to break the agreed ground-rules that honest feedback was vital and the ability to learn from it was an essential component of leadership and learning to lead. However, it was noticeable that the honesty of the feedback was usually restricted to Geoff, the instructor – the other members of the syndicate were manifestly willing to accept and even support the poor leadership of Sergeant J because they all knew that they could be next in the 'firing line' and would have to call on Sergeant J and all the others for support. In effect, the *practice* of the community became rooted in a peer pressure that demanded support of anyone engaged in the *process* of leadership, even if their *practice* was poor.

A similar experience occurred during one of the interview video sessions. The least experienced and most nervous member of the syndicate (Sergeant J) was supposed to play the part of the sergeant who was interviewing a woman (Sergeant D) who had just arrived at camp. In the interview, which lasted around twenty minutes, at least 90 per cent of the time was taken up with the sergeant telling the new arrival about himself and the camp. In theory this should have been evenly split to allow the sergeant to get to know the new arrival. When the interview stopped, but before the interviewer and interviewee had returned to the viewing room, the group spent several minutes laughing at the events and the poor display of leadership by the sergeant:

*Sergeant J:* He's as mad as a box of frogs isn't he? [laughter]

*Sergeant N:* Yep – he's perfect officer material! [laughter]

Sergeant D returns first from the interview and the group demands to know what she thinks of her 'interview', especially her chance to tell him all about herself.

*Sergeant D:* Well, I certainly gave him a bloody good listening to! [laughter]

Again, with the exception of Geoff, no one in the group made any comment to Sergeant J about the problems of his performance on his return – the convention (though not the intention of the course designers and trainers) was not to criticize each other, at least not in public, and any valuable learning from such criticism was lost in the practice of the community. This should not be a surprise: ever since the Hawthorne experiments in the 1930s (Grint, 1998: 119–23) it has been obvious that social norms are extraordinarily powerful in the construction of everyday life and it would be bizarre if a training course was free from such normative patterning. Indeed, that is how communities are created and reproduced – through social norms. In this case learning to lead is both created and inhibited by the community within which it is practised. Or paraphrasing what Edmund Burke is alleged to have said, 'It only requires the good follower to do nothing for leadership to fail.'

## **'I can't breathe': Life, death and dissensus in leadership processes**

Unfortunately, much writing on leadership is overly positive and the same critique can be levelled at the world of practice, where 'leadership' is usually a term reserved only for positive behaviours and outcomes (Collinson, 2012). Negative examples, such as bullying, despotic or simply incompetent leaders and practices, are written off as not 'real' leadership. Even pointing this out as a problem whose impact should trouble people in the 'real world' as much as in academia can earn you sceptical or bemused responses because western cultures have over time largely come to think of leadership as something aspirational rather than as a process that can engender awful, moderate *or* positive outcomes. Failing to acknowledge that leadership can be negative as well as positive prevents us from being able to adequately accept the risks of pursuing certain forms of leadership. For example, if we are uncritical of notions of charismatic and transformational leadership, we become vulnerable to being manipulated by

leaders who cultivate these characteristics for self-aggrandizing or violent ends – such as political despots, cult leaders and corporate villains (Tourish, 2013). Equally deadly would be to collapse the difference between leadership and management, assuming that robots and algorithms are undertaking leadership work.

The phenomenon of over-attributing organizational successes to leadership and blaming failures on other forms of organization (e.g. poor management) is known as the ‘romance’ of leadership (Meindl et al., 1985). While Meindl and colleagues could have opted for alternative descriptors (valorization, for example), we think romance is quite apt. This is because people can become bewitched by the idea and promise of leadership, as it is a rare concept within organizing that hints at being able to reach beyond the mundane, suggestive of groups of people being inspired, creative or knowledgeable enough to solve problems most had written off as impossible (Grint, 2005). In a study we wrote with David Collinson (Collinson et al., 2018), we argue that we can work more with this notion of romance to posit a broader romanticization of leadership.

Our critique went broader than Meindl et al. as we turned to the Romantic movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (e.g. Shelley, Byron, Wordsworth) for inspiration. This movement was a response to the Enlightenment period that preceded it, with its major scientific discoveries and innovations, its turn away from blind ‘irrational’ spiritual beliefs towards science, evidence and rationality as offering the solutions to the world’s problems and pathways to its future prosperity. The Romantics, many of whom were also intrigued by science, felt that something had been lost in the Enlightenment, namely, a sense of aesthetic wonderment and appreciation of the world – with nature, with that which defies explanation and should never be rationalized. Hence much Romantic literature and painting is interested in depicting scenes of nature, in contemplation with which people could find a deeper truth and meaning, without need to check in with external sources of knowledge for affirmation or critique. Such an approach is what is known as an immanent engagement and the idea is that through focusing and gaining an ever-deeper appreciation of a scene in nature, a painting, poem or even a person, one can experience ever greater feelings of intensity and pleasure, leading to insights felt through the body as much as through the rational ‘mind’.

The critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin (1996) viewed this tendency of romanticism towards immanence positively in the sense that it helped engender aesthetic appreciation of the world. We would add here that it also teaches us the value of empathy, care and even love for our fellow humans but also for animals and nature. Romanticism helps us remember to be comfortable in perceiving nature with some awe, that humans are relative newcomers to the planet (and of course the universe) and that perhaps many of the world's problems are generated by our trying to control and colonize what should be left alone (the rich fossil life buried in the earth that we extract for fuel, for example, or the countless acres of forest land stripped for development). Operating within this mindset makes you realize the sheer banality, as well as moral corruption, of systems of thought that would establish hierarchies of superiority and inferiority amongst humans, such as forms of racism.

But romanticism, in its preference for immanent experience can also become an unhealthy valorization, Benjamin stated. We can become overly self-satisfied with our immanent experience and forget that there is, outside this, plenty of evidence and theory that can further enrich or indeed call into question the seeming positivity of an experience. For example, if you are in a work team experiencing a particularly positive meeting, full of intellectual stimulation and friendship, but which also runs on for an hour past its allotted time, you might emerge from that meeting full of enthusiasm and energy. However, what if as a result of the mood of the meeting you felt it was inappropriate to raise some uncomfortable finance issues? What if a cascade of inconvenience for other people was caused by the overrun, a single parent became stressed about being able to collect their child from school on time, a junior colleague missed a bus home and had to pay for a taxi they couldn't afford and so on? Our case is that leadership theory (and practice) in all its guises can become – much like the Romantic movement – far too pleased with itself, routinely missing or ignoring the potential down and dark sides it generates. The version of leadership romanticism we posited therefore included collective forms of leadership and the leadership that emerges amongst resisting groups, as well as that of individual senior leaders. Meindl and his colleagues had previously only focused on the romance of individual leaders.

Processes within groups should be approached critically in the same way as should the practices of individual leaders. Simply substituting groups for

individuals does not qualify as a critical approach to leadership. In fact, most of the human-made disasters through history can be attributed as much to the collective failures of groups as to malign individuals. Murderous dictators or bullying narcissistic corporate leaders should be vilified, of course, but beyond these we need to factor in the reasons why people go along with, often reluctantly and sometimes enthusiastically, the actions of such leaders. More mundanely, groups can adopt a range of oppressive practices that marginalize certain people because of gender, disability, sexuality, race or class. As we previously stated with issues of gender, these do not have to be very obvious practices but can be taken for granted, enacted unconsciously or even amount to a range of micro instances of marginalization that snowball to create a profound sense of alienation of some people from their workplaces and societies. For example, many theories of leadership assume western and white norms while overlooking and marginalizing the alternative modes of organizing they have suppressed throughout history rooted in indigenous and global south traditions (Liu, 2020). We will address this issue in more depth in the next chapter.

These issues are often overlooked by collective accounts of leadership, even the ones with more democratizing ambitions for organizations (Collinson, 2018a; Ford, 2016). Indeed, the danger with ostensibly more egalitarian and democratic theories and practices of leadership is that they may become even more adept at concealing their own (probably unintended) effects of oppression and marginalization. Democratic accounts of leadership, for example, usually extol verbal communication, deliberation and sense-making as of primary importance (e.g. Fryer, 2012; Raelin, 2011 and 2016b). At the most apparent level these approaches to leadership offer a step change for the better in terms of how leadership could be practiced, offering agency and participation to a range of previously excluded people. They offer a glimpse of more empowering workplaces and societies. Usually operating on a normative plane, these studies can offer a conceptually rigorous and hopeful view of what our organizational leadership could become. Yet to date they have also underplayed the darker sides of what people experience in reality in many workplaces – low pay, job insecurity and a stripping back of material benefits, such as workplace pensions. Many people will not feel comfortable truly voicing up and disagreeing with colleagues, particularly those more senior to them in the organizational hierarchy, for fear of losing

status and potentially their jobs. These are real and justified concerns that should not be casually brushed to one side by leadership scholars interested in democratic processes, such as ourselves – people need to pay for food, fuel, the care of children and dependants, shelter and, in some contexts, their healthcare. In many, perhaps most, organizations, following a ‘democratic’ approach, we suspect that the conversations that take place in reality are far from truly open and free, and are far more likely circumscribed by unspoken status and job security differentials.

For Raelin (2020), democratic leadership is ultimately ‘incommensurate’ (p. 622) with hierarchical, top-down practice, as these more traditional organizations will always find a way of restricting, smothering or subverting democratic practices rooted in principles of equality and freedom. Redesigning organizations, and even movements, in democratic ways, will therefore involve a radical rethinking of foundational commitments and a constant vigilance to the ways in which hierarchy and corrupting self-interest can re-assert themselves (Raelin, 2020). The challenge for more democratic theories of leadership therefore seems to be twofold. First, recognizing the dominance of hierarchical models of leadership in our societies, we need to think of ways in which democratic leadership can be generated within and between largely undemocratic spaces – how to discover and grow clusters of possibility where alternative approaches can flourish – between and against forms of Total Management. These could be pockets of resistance within organizations or alternative organizations outside people’s employment relations where they learn more democratic and distributed ways of leading. Second, we need to find ways of ‘scaling up’ notions of democratic practice so that they become more commonly associated in people’s minds with leadership (Raelin, 2021). This task, Raelin says, is one of seeking to influence the symbolism of leadership in mass culture, where the concept is still synonymous with ‘decisive’ and ‘strong’ individuals rather than with more inclusive and pluralist practices.

More generally, approaches to leadership that focus on internal organizational communication as the driver of leadership can unnecessarily limit the scope of how leadership is practiced in reality. They can overlook the point that often it is real material struggle that drives change and innovation. From this perspective, organizations adopt new practices, policies and technologies when they are forced to by pressure from workers

and social movements. This is not a smooth and harmonious process of formal leaders coming to their senses through peaceful dialogue but one wracked with conflict and hard-fought victories from trade unions and other campaigning groups. Workers are the motor of history, not executive leaders, according to this perspective. Hence, for example, the National Health Service in the UK was introduced by the reformist post-war Labour government of 1945 not simply because of the innovative and dogged practices of a leader (although the health secretary of the time, Aneurin Bevan, his vision and determination, certainly helped) but because of concerted pressure from below – from workers and movements – that made the introduction of universal healthcare a legitimate political issue. Likewise, the abolition of slavery and the emancipation of women, although we fully acknowledge that these breakthroughs have been partial. Further, organizations can innovate, particularly technologically, when they feel that their human workers have become too powerful – indeed, much of the innovation in automated work technologies can be explained by the fact that executives and owners need more leverage over increasingly demanding workers. Drawing on these insights we need to acknowledge that leadership as a process needs to account far more for issues of power and materiality, particularly those eruptions of resistance that come from outside the boundaries of organizations and the senior levels of organizations.

It also needs to move beyond language and communication to consider processes of direct-action involving bodies and the actions of bodies, rather than communication through words, as legitimate and vital. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement serves as a good example for us to illustrate the importance of direct action as a ‘dissensual’ leadership process (Barthold et al., 2020) that deserves to be considered alongside communicative approaches to leadership. The dissensual leadership of Barthold and colleagues is a provocative contribution to knowledge about leadership because it disrupts hierarchies of who leadership is attributed to in academic and popular writing. Dissensual leadership tells us that groups that operate beyond language, who use direct action through their bodies and the re-imagining of spaces need to be considered as legitimate and powerful instances of leadership that engender real change – the workers on strike who place their bodies on a picket line can drive change as much, if not more, than the ‘charisma’ of a corporate chief executive, for example. We can consider both the power of dissensual leadership – as well as the

forces it seeks to challenge, namely, corrupted processes of leadership and management from a status quo – through reflecting on the case of BLM.

The genesis of BLM can be located in the police shooting of 17-year-old Black teenager Trayvon Martin in Florida in 2012 and the subsequent acquittal of the officer who killed him. What started as a hashtag campaign on social media and major street protests in the United States erupted and went global in May 2020 after the murder in Minneapolis of another Black man, George Floyd. Many of you will remember how you felt when you watched the video of the killing, which at the time was widely shared through news and social media – we were badly shaken, tearful and angry. George Floyd had been arrested for the minor alleged offence of using a counterfeit bank note and the police response seemed utterly disproportionate and barbaric. Kneeling on Floyd's neck for almost eight minutes, police officer Derek Chauvin ignored his exclamations of pain, 'I can't breathe', pleas for help and mercy, 'please', 'don't kill me', even as he called out in vain in his last moments for his mother – 'Mama, Mama ...' The other officers present failed to intervene. We need to think carefully and critically about why Floyd was allowed to be murdered – not only the psychology of the officer who took his life but also the group norms informing the inaction of his colleagues who watched on and failed to intervene. We remember watching the video back several times, and although we knew how the event ended found ourselves willing one of the officers to knock Chauvin from Floyd's body, or even to shout at him to stop. This futile, but very human, response occurred in part of course because the actions of the police officers seemed so alien to us, so inhuman, and as humans who study leadership we wanted to step in, pause everything, try to talk some of these officers down. Here though – and the same goes for all instances of leadership processes – we need to be mindful of the fact that although these actions seem incredulous to us, they did not to the officers involved nor might they to the millions of Black people who watched the video. For them, these scenes, as horrific as they are, have become far too normalized, and to understand this we need to step outside our safer social positions as white academics and try to see the world from both the 'marginal' (hooks, 2014) position of Black people who routinely experience racism and police officers who seem at ease with taking Black lives.



To better understand this, we need to turn to the very naming of BLM. At stake is 'life', that most basic yet precious of things we all possess but which can be taken from us in an instant. Social theorist Judith Butler can be of considerable help to us here as she places life at the heart of her theorizing about why some people are persecuted and written off as less valuable people than others (Mbembe, 2019) but also as an explanation for what can unite people to stake meaningful claims for change and equality – to practice forms of dissensus in the words of Barthold et al. (2020). Making the claim that a life (a black life) has to matter (but currently does not) cuts to the heart of the issue – which is that at present the life, the pulse, breath, relations, love, of a Black person in many countries does not matter to society as much as a white person. This positioning cuts through the charade of so much of the official fantasy language and symbolism of governments and organizations with their simulated portrayals of harmonious and diverse institutions and groups in glossy brochures, websites, adverts and so on. Beneath the simulation, in real life, groups and organizations can develop processes that entirely normalize racism, usually through a wide and deep range of subtle group processes. Racism is a practice and process as much as an attitude, just as we discussed previously with regard to norms of gender. For example, a racist culture can emerge within policing organizations that Black people are 'naturally' more violent; or officers may convince themselves that they are not being racist but merely acting aggressively towards criminals regardless of skin colour (which 'coincidentally' happens to target more Black people than white); algorithms that guide the allocation of police resources can automate racism by replicating the racist assumptions of their programmers (Greenfield, 2017). Of course, the racist and self-perpetuating ideology that informs toxic processes of leadership and management is rarely interrogated: if police target Black people more than white people then they will discover more Black criminals; if certain forms of crime are regarded by society as worse than others (drug dealing and possession and petty theft treated as more serious than 'white collar' crime, tax evasion, etc.) then poorer communities (which tend in the United States to have higher numbers of Black people because of the country's deep and persisting legacy of racism) will experience more heavy-handed police attention than other, more prosperous communities. A slew of rationalizations can be employed, in other words, to normalize one life being held to matter less than another.

Judith Butler (2016) asks us to think of the value of life in terms of grief – which lives do the dominant powers in a society grieve and which do they discard? If we can answer this question truthfully, we may in turn be able to see many of the deep-seated problems of racism and other prejudices that infect the leadership processes of many organizations. Hence, for example, when you hear politicians adopt the language of insects (‘swarm’) and impersonal threat (‘invasion’) when referring to migrants, you should start to worry that a dehumanizing language is being adopted whose outcome is that lives lost by desperate migrants fleeing war and/or abject poverty are of less value than your (white) neighbour. Grief is a powerful notion for Butler because it points to the fact that all human beings are deeply relational beings – we only exist and make sense as people through our relationships to others – what we *feel*, *discover* and *produce* with other people (Butler, 2006). When someone we care for dies, we notice how much we depended on that person for our own sense of self – the experiences that shaped us were only possible because of that person and others. It is impossible to be a self-sufficient, solitary individual – even the languages we speak every day were invented by others and make no sense unless we assume the presence of another to communicate with. This insight brings to bear the injustice and self-defeating futility of regarding certain lives as unworthy of grief because denying someone the dignity of a grievable life is the equivalent of denying the vitalism of humanity itself. This insight helps us more clearly position the death-dealing necro fetish of the white supremacist as that which seeks domination and death rather than affirmation and celebration of that which makes humans an extraordinary species. We also gain a clearer insight into the colonizing mindset at work. When someone on social media attacks a BLM action by claiming that ‘all lives matter’, this is, of course, not usually a matter of simple misinterpretation, that this person has not recognized that for ‘all’ lives to matter, ‘all’ must include ‘Black’, which it clearly does not at present, but a situation where a colonial ego has been offended by the aesthetics of Black people publicly demonstrating and asserting their agency and equality. These are just some of the processes that are deeply ingrained in and infect many social institutions and processes, including those of leadership.

Yet the notion of a life, as Butler (2018) teaches us, can also be a powerful spur for impactful dissensual leadership. This is because when we think in terms of lives and our dependence on others for our own sense of

enrichment in life, we can build out from this to build diverse and powerful movements for change. Therefore, in response to the killing of George Floyd, millions of people globally took to the streets to demand change from their governments and organizations to overcome systemic forms of racism that resulted in Black lives being considered of less value than white lives. These were collectives of people from a variety of class, cultural and racial backgrounds who found a common bond in the notion of equality for all lives.

Cities across the world pulsed with life during those weeks and months of protest – even sleepy Milton Keynes, where Owain lives. In Bristol in the UK, a city built on money from the slave trade, many markers of this shameful past persist – streets named after colonized territories and monuments named after or depicting prominent slavers, for example. One such monument was the statue of Edward Colston, an infamous slave trader of the seventeenth century, which stood in the centre of the city. While Colston was a member of the Royal African Society (RAC) between 1680 and 1692 (and Deputy Governor between 1689 and 1690), he was partly responsible for the enslavement of 84,000 Black people, including children, of whom around 19,000 died on the journey. For decades, local campaigns had sought to have the statue taken down, with campaigners using official channels of communication and dialogue, resulting in seemingly endless digressions and obfuscations into considerations of plaques that would help educate the public about Colston's actions, but not in the removal of the statue. In short, the dialogue went nowhere – power did not budge. Then in one single moment on 7 June 2020 the Black Lives Matter protestors simply toppled the statue and dumped it in the river, to a euphoric response from onlookers at the scene and many – though not all – those watching online. There was some justice, after all, in a reproduction of a man who had caused many deaths of enslaved people at sea itself being tossed into the water. In Minneapolis, where the wave of protests originated, the city council announced that it would radically overhaul its police, channelling more money to community relations and support, and defunding problematic parts of the organization entirely. For decades prior to this moment the police in the city had sought to tackle its racism through the usual communicative approaches of training and 'awareness raising' but these initiatives had self-evidently failed. Elsewhere in the United States, most visibly in Portland and Seattle, locals took a stand in the streets and

demanded universal healthcare and housing. More mundanely, organizations across the world were prompted to start conversations about systemic racism that were previously not pursued with anywhere near the same determination and focus, including within our own employing organizations. Even Sky Sports in the UK started debating race issues during its live football coverage.

Similar energy to the BLM actions was evident on the streets of Glasgow in 2021, as a crowd of residents and campaigners physically obstructed the seizure and attempted detention of two local men by Home Office Immigration Enforcement officers. As trade unionist Bryan Simpson, who was at the scene, reported, the movement of the immigration van had been tracked by activists and passed between them through mobile phone messages as it moved through the city. Relationships, down to street level, had been built over the years through a mix of face-to-face and digital engagement. So, when the officers eventually hauled Lakhvir Singh and Sumit Sehdev into the van on Kenmure Street, the activists and residents were ready.

In the words of Simpson (2021);

An activist from No Evictions Network managed to jam himself under the axel of the van, preventing it from leaving while more activists arrived. Thanks to a few viral tweets, soon scores of locals began surrounding the van and forming a human roadblock. At this point the police outnumbered the protestors but still couldn't move them. Within an hour, [numbers rose to] over 100 and by lunchtime there were well over 500 people surrounding the van with chants of 'These are our neighbours, let them go' and 'Racist Police, off our streets.' By 2pm a huge Palestine flag was raised above the Home Office van and people spoke through the megaphone about the problem of racism and violence towards refugees across the world. By 4pm, the sheer number of people who had gathered completely overwhelmed the street and a police force which had sent at least 30 riot vans.

Hearing of the unfolding events, politicians in Glasgow began seeking answers, with an infuriated Nicola Sturgeon, the First Minister of Scotland but also the local Member of the Scottish Parliament, openly challenging and opposing the action. The men were released from custody to scenes of jubilation in the crowd, with this euphoria matched in waves of social media and television amplification and reaction.

Evident in the example of the Glasgow action and BLM is the role of technology in shaping and escalating a leadership process. Far from the scene of heavy control described at the beginning of the chapter, this is the use of technology to coordinate democratic but dissensual forms of

leadership and to respond to and disrupt Total Management logics where people are viewed as somehow less than human, as cogs in a machine to be fixed or terminated. Working from the bottom up, these examples show us how imaginative but pragmatic use of digital technology can offer efficient modes of communication but can also shape broader imaginaries by facilitating the sharing of highly visual and emotionally salient imagery for a mass audience. Such leadership is more akin to ‘guerrilla’ action (Bloom et al., 2021) than top-down managerialism, as it adapts and learns depending on the geography of place and local demands (something we consider in [Chapter 5](#)). Algorithms lack the empathy, compassion and emotional conviction of human beings working with technologies and it is these qualities, in alliance with the capability to learn from one another, which may be the hallmark of a technologically mediated leadership process. Such leadership demonstrates the capacity of the direct action of bodies acting in concert with technologies – beyond mere ‘upward’ and ‘downward’ forms of communication – to *lead* change.

The full ramifications of these waves of technologically mediated direct action are yet to play out and are unlikely to run their course in the near future. What we can say with certainty is that they cannot be explained by processes of leadership that rely solely on language – instead, we need to take proper account and pay sufficient respect to processes of leadership that involve conflict and bodies occupying and using spaces in creative and confrontational ways (‘dissensus’, in the words of Barthold and colleagues) that force change. As further support for this proposition we can recall another iconic embodied moment from the BLM movement, the protest of American Football quarterback Colin Kaepernick, who knelt during the pre-match national anthem throughout the 2016 season in protest at the continued systemic racism in his country; other athletes emulated the knee. These were embodied actions, not speeches or verbal dialogue with the authorities. Kaepernick’s protest led to his effective blacklisting and banishment from his sport, as well as his and other protestors’ vilification by the far right. Nevertheless, we need to mark the symbolic power of this embodied leadership gesture of taking a knee as conveying a force of conviction that language alone could not capture. We also saw some modest evidence for this proposition in our RAF vignettes where the women in the group asserted their equality not through conversation but through physically using their bodies to display their equal (even superior) abilities.

Of course, such collective and embodied forms of leadership process always have their dark sides – at the extreme end of the scale, police officers killing Black men with their knees or trigger fingers, actions informed by and normalized through decades of learnt behaviour and deeply ingrained prejudice. Yet a de-romanticized view of leadership recognizes both the capacity for iniquity *and* poetry within everyday processes, enacted through bodies, spaces, technologies and words (often in combination), from people asserting formal power from on high but also through collectives pushing upwards to stake their lives as equal.

## Conclusion

We began by considering the ever-intensifying phenomenon of technologically driven Total Management, noting its onward march through a number of workplaces but settling on the example of Amazon as an exemplar case in point. In such circumstances it is worth asking whether leadership has a place and, if so, how we can make sense of it and distinguish it from the logic of managerialism. We will go further in this task in the concluding chapters by considering the ‘position’ and ‘purpose’ of leadership. But for now it is worth noting the role of learning and of processes of dissensus. In this chapter we noted that although many leadership experts insist that we can learn to lead, or at least learn some aspects of the process of leadership, this does not necessarily mean that leadership can be taught. A parallel was drawn between learning to be a leader and learning to be a parent and we suggested that rather than parents teaching their offspring to become children it is often the other way round: children teach their progenitors to become parents and guardians through inverse learning. Of course, numerous forms of advice exist for new parents: their own parents, parenting books and websites, friends and so on but ultimately it may be that the most important teacher is the allegedly helpless and dependent creature in your arms, and through trial and error over a lifetime parents gradually acquire parenting skills thanks to their teachers: their children. If Gerard Manley Hopkins is right – and he acknowledges it is a counter-intuitive argument and is more concerned with the way the same individual matures from child to adult – then we may

have to rethink how leaders learn too, for it may be that their greatest teachers are their followers.

This hypothesis was then examined through reference to a small number of exemplars from history whose own successes and failures do indeed seem to mirror Gerard Manley Hopkins poetic innovation. Moreover, although parents may suggest that a compliant and obedient child is the ideal to aim for, in reality any asymmetric relationship is likely to be problematic: irresponsible parents or children are a likely result of this leadership process. Similarly, where leaders secure domination over their followers their followers tend to become ‘irresponsible’, to provide destructive consent rather than constructive dissent, that is to reactively allow their leaders to make mistakes rather than to actively inhibit this. Thus, it may be better for leaders to recruit and retain followers that embody the spirit of Calchas, individuals who are not natural allies of leaders but who have their best interests at heart and are willing to articulate honest if unpopular advice.

Can we relate the child–parent relationship to this ‘Calchasian’ strategy? As we suggested above, one of the problems with some parent–child relationships is the asymmetric responsibility – irresponsible parents allowing their irresponsible children to run wild or overprotective parents preventing their children from assuming any responsibility. In the arena of leadership, the replication would be to have over-responsible ‘leaders’ who are actually ‘micro-managing’ their followers or irresponsible followers allowing their leaders to do things that ought not to be done. Hence a Calchasian strategy involves leaders buttressing their process of leading by recruiting advisers and followers whom they know to have the best interests of the organization at heart, even if this means taking on board prickly and independent advisers and followers: not replacing ‘yes-people’ with ‘no-people’ but replacing ‘yes-people’ with ‘why-people’, not from sycophants to recalcitrants but from sycophants to Calchasants.

We have explored the extent to which this may be accurate and complemented the theory by adopting Wenger’s argument for learning as a Community of Practice. In this approach learning is best achieved both as an active and participatory practice and through a social rather than an individual engagement with that practice. That community builds up a repertoire of accepted knowledge and practices – the processes of leadership – which are reproduced in and through the practices themselves

and through their embodiment in reifications – materializations of abstractions. Through the use of specific examples from two RAF leadership courses we suggested that this combination of a Community of Practice, and a philosophy that is framed by an acceptance that the leaders' primary role is to coordinate and control their practicing community of followers, the RAF, at least at SNCO level, has developed an educative system that is both pragmatic and sophisticated. It is sophisticated because it makes overt the covert secret of leadership – that leaders *as isolated individuals* cannot lead successfully. It is pragmatic because this acknowledgement frees SNCOs from the unendurable pressure and erroneous temptation to be omnipotent and omniscient and embeds a system that generates confidence in the followers. The followers will know what to do and how to do it – but this does not mean that leadership is irrelevant, on the contrary, leaders have to use their skills to facilitate this leadership process: to allow the community to practice.

However, in this 'practice' mutual support provides an important safety net that is very much a double-edged technique. On the one hand it encourages the 'leads' to experiment knowing that the team is very likely to be willing to accept mistakes and maintain their support for the lead. In short, the team is teaching the leader to lead through its acquiescence. On the other hand, there is a case for rethinking this issue because it does limit the experiential aspect of learning. In other words, a sergeant trying to persuade his or her unit to do something under conditions of 'reality' [that is not in the training environment] could not necessarily rely upon the good wishes and willing support of followers who are very aware that they may be next, and that the prevailing social norm is for non-critical acquiescence: Destructive Consent. The sergeant *might* have a very constructive relationship with his or her team, but they might not. Hence, although the supportive environment encourages the 'leads' to experiment it does not provide experience of the process of leading under non-supportive environments. In effect, the success of the 'Community of Practice' undermines the practice of the community because it generates Destructive Consent but not necessarily Constructive Dissent. That is to say, followers may put up with and hence encourage poor leadership because all know that their turn will soon come, and they will also rely upon the goodwill of others to survive the rigours of the test. What might be better would be an atmosphere of much greater trust (probably built around the removal of any



assessment early on) when poor leadership is seen to fail, and poor leaders are helped to understand why they fail and how they might succeed by those most affected by leadership failure – the followers.

Perhaps a good analogy for this problem exists in the martial arts. Most karate training, for example, occurs in the dojo under strict control where two fighters wear gloves and possibly gum shields and even head guards, where only certain attacks and blows are permitted and the injury inflicted minimal if any, where the coach or ‘sensei’ referees the bout indicating when the combatants are to begin and cease, where the typical bout will last perhaps for five to eight minutes and where the fights are virtually silent except for the ‘Kiais’ – the explosive shouts designed to coincide with a blow landing so that the muscle tension is directed as effectively as possible. Now compare this process to a street fight. There may be no warning, there are certainly no rules, no form or target of attack is prohibited, there may be several assailants, there will almost certainly be lots of intimidating swearing, it will probably last no more than a few minutes at most and probably just a few seconds, but the end result will very likely be a serious injury to one or more people. This is not to say that karate training is irrelevant to self-defence; clearly it may make some difference and there are many karateka (practitioners of karate) whom it would be most unwise to attack in the street. But the level of skill necessary for karate to make a difference is both significant and takes immense time and practice. Moreover, competition karate is simply not the same as street violence and a black belt in the former does not guarantee immunity in the latter, especially if the attackers have the intent, skill and experience acquired through years of training in street fighting.<sup>9</sup> In effect, training should be as close as possible to the phenomenon that is being trained for; hence marathon running does not make a runner into a good 100-metre sprinter, nor a good swimmer, even if it does improve fitness.

In the context of training for leadership we can liken the practice of leading one’s fellow sergeants in a mutually supportive Community of Practice to a karate lesson: of course, it is useful to learn in the safety of the dojo under professional guidelines and knowing that the safety ropes are available if necessary, but this is not the equivalent of practising self-defence against unknown and unrestrained attackers. Naturally, this does not mean that the only way to practice for self-defence is to be randomly attacked in the street by a knife-wielding maniac – but it does mean that the

closer the aspect of realism the more effective will be the learning. In karate this means altering the practice, for example: abandoning the etiquette of the dojo where swearing is forbidden; adorning the 'attacker' in protective clothing to allow the defender to strike back without compromising safety and providing the attacker with a red marker pen as a 'knife' to understand just how hard it is to avoid being cut by a knife and so on.

In the military leadership case, it might mean working with followers who are strangers, or whose rank is unknown or working with raw recruits or with 'followers' who are not supportive or compliant. Only under these conditions of enhanced reality can leaders go beyond the comfort of leading a mutual support group, 'us', to the discomfort of leading a group that resemble 'them', the others, the disrespectful, the disinterested, the sceptics and the cynics. The danger of not making training for the process of leadership more progressively realistic is either that it leaves the trainee overconfident and willing to take unnecessary risks or that the novelty of the situation completely undermines their confidence that the techniques provide any value: the karateka 'freezes' or the leader reverts to an authoritarian form of leadership because that seems the default category when confidence is lost and defensiveness kicks in. We should not be surprised, then, to find that officer cadets turn into martinets when suddenly faced with leading recruits and NCOs, having had virtually no contact with them prior to being 'let loose' in the field. Nor should we be surprised if sergeants are shocked to find that their new-found techniques are not quite so viable when their followers are not so much a Community of Practice but a practising community.

We built on the insights of destructive and constructive dissent to consider how and why processes of leadership (and management) go awry – in the most heinous of ways, through forms of systemic racism. Adopting the notion of a 'life' we explored how some groups can come to adopt racist attitudes that are normalized through processes of leadership learnt within their communities of practice. This was viscerally brought home through the example of the killing of George Floyd at the hands of the police in Minneapolis, which we took as an invitation to enquire how and why some groups and organizations develop practices that routinize a hierarchy of lives that matter and those that do not. Such processes can manifest despite the simulated world of diversity and awareness raising training and contradict official discourses and symbolism of inclusion and diversity of

many organizations. Yet we also countered this view by inviting a reading of leadership processes that re-interprets ‘life’ positively as a uniting force, one that can invite us to build movements based on what we have in common as humans, namely, a reliance on one another and our mutual equality. We urged a view of leadership processes that looks beyond language to the use of bodies and technologies – assertions of equal life – insisting on their right of recognition and presence in shared spaces (streets, institutions, organizations). We argued that much writing on leadership over-emphasizes the power and significance of executives and under-emphasizes the counter-leadership that emerges from resisting groups, who are becoming increasingly adept at blending and amplifying their leadership through digital technology. Further, we argued that relatively benign forms of leadership enacted through dialogue tend to be romanticized, while more assertive forms of dissensual leadership tend to be overlooked – this despite the fact that we know that significant change in organizations and society occurs because of such embodied and extra-linguistic forms of resistance rather than through harmonious and consensual discussion. We turned to the Black Lives Matter Movement to help us see these dynamic more clearly, arguing that changes in policy, but also in the ripple of less formal conversations about equality within organizations did not magically manifest out of thin air, nor were they instigated by powerful executives, but were forced open by the tech and street actions of protestors asserting equality.

## Notes

- 1 This was first published in the *Stonyhurst Magazine* (vol. 1, no. 9, p. 162) in March 1883. Thanks to Rob Watt at Dundee University for pointing this out to us.
- 2 Meanwhile, Press (2020) reported that top Amazon executives smeared an employee who was organizing a protest against poor safety measures, before firing the worker.
- 3 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sportacademy/borntowin/default.stm>. In October 2003, 53 per cent of the 2,700 who voted online thought that champions were ‘born to win’, whereas 47 per cent thought they were ‘made to win’.
- 4 <https://imperiumromanum.pl/en/roman-constitution/roman-triumph/> (accessed 20 November 2003). The criteria for declaring a *Triumph* (there were about 100 between 220 and 70 bce) were that a Roman general (1) had to possess *imperium* [power to command, authority, command, rule, control; the enforcement of this rule grew lax over time], (2) had to be the decisive victor (at least 5,000 enemy killed) over a foreign enemy [which is why Crassus had no joy from defeating Spartacus], (3) some say that the Roman troops had to hail the general as *imperator* [commander in chief, general, emperor] in the field, (4) the general had to bring at least a token army back to

Rome, and (5) the Senate had to vote to grant the general a *Triumph* (which entailed permitting him to keep his imperium inside the pomerium [religious boundary of the city of Rome] for a day). See also: <http://classics.mit.edu/Plutarch/paulus.html>.

5 Wenger, (2000: 229).

6 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/2465745.stm>.

7 'But the backbone of the Army is the Non-commissioned Man!' from Rudyard Kipling's poem *The 'Eathen*.

8 When more time is available, students are taught to use SMRLAC PACE.

Situation	Planning Phase
Mission (Repeat it twice)	Ask for Any Questions
Resources (available for the task)	Check/Confirm Understanding
Limitations (The 'F' factors)	Execution of the Task

Ask for Questions

Check/Confirm of Groups understanding

As Geoff reminded us later: 'It is only when the leader is happy that everyone fully understands the SMRLAC (confirmed by Q & A) elements should he/she proceed to the **Planning Phase**. The reason is that if any of the *key elements above are missing*, such as a *LIMITATION*, then the chances are that the exercise will fail. The reason being, that the group *will not have all the facts* to start with when they begin to plan or think of a plan' (Private communication, 8 January 2004).

9 Geoff Thompson's (1995) *Animal Day: Pressure Testing the Martial Arts* is a useful examination of this problem.

## Leadership as position: Hydras and elephants in space

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### Introduction

This chapter looks at leadership as position by concentrating on cases that extend our perceptions of space from vertical to horizontal. At play here are two topics. The first concerns notions of how leadership is structured and practiced through position. In other words, although leadership is commonly associated with a position of vertical authority over subordinates, it is also the case that leadership occurs through horizontal positioning such that leaders may have little formal authority over followers but nevertheless secure their allegiance. In some cases, the leadership occurs through virtue of the leaders being ‘in front’ of their followers, such as in the case of fashion leaders or military ‘scouts’, but more often what we see are examples where the leadership is rooted more within a heterarchy than a hierarchy and it is this particular organizational form – Distributed Leadership – that serves the basis for what follows. In relation to this we consider the leadership of the American civil rights movement in the 1960s, so often subsumed under the apparent hierarchy led by Martin Luther King, but in effect led by a whole host of leaders at all levels of the civil rights movement in a heterarchical network of movements, institutions and supporters. We then go to the extreme opposite of civil rights leadership by exploring the murky realm of terrorists. We argue that going dark is necessary because it helps us see some of the taboo and hidden aspects of power that we need to consider when thinking about leadership as a

position. Terrorism groups make visible its hydra-like leadership forms that tend not to rely too much on one or several individual leaders as much as they do on connection, flexibility and ideology. The second topic we explore is the position of leadership within and through the geography of a place. As has been flagged by Brad Jackson (2019), place and space do so much to shape how leadership is practiced – which can look and feel quite different depending on which spaces it is situated within. We take the position of leadership out of the organization and workplace and into the city, a context where leadership spreads horizontally through streets, diverse workplaces, technologies and cultural spaces, as well as upwards and downwards vertically, as structures of power are implemented and resisted. At play here is the right to the city (Harvey, 2019a; Lefebvre, 2010) – who can exercise leadership and in which spaces, and which organizational forms conceived and developed in space can change this status quo? To help us along with the task of sketching out a leadership of space we visit university buildings, rented housing in the UK, the favelas of Brazil and the beaches of California. In doing so we make a case that the city holds a promising focus for envisaging and building a leadership of space that is participative, diverse and radical.

## **Leadership theory: From hierarchy to heterarchy**

Traditionally, leadership has been closely associated with some form of hierarchy. The original meaning of ‘hierarchy’ was Holy Sovereignty: *arkhos* means ‘sovereignty or ruler’ and *hierós* means ‘holy or divine’ in the original Greek. Thus *hierarkhíā* was a steward, *hierárkhe~s* a stewardess, of sacred rites. The implication is not just that leadership was associated with hierarchy but also with the ‘sacred’ – a point clearly evident in both Carlyle’s and Durkheim’s reconstruction of leadership. However, for our purposes the main issue is that all significant organizations over time seem to have been hierarchical to some degree; either through religious, military, political or social requirements some mechanism for command, coordination and control has persisted. For example, the Great Pyramid of Khufu, built around 4,500 years ago was built with a seven-level hierarchy that had indentured labour (there were few, if any, slaves involved) at the

bottom, below crafts‘men’ (level 2), then scribes (level 3), then priests, engineers and doctors (level 4), then high priests and nobles (level 5), then the Grand Vizier (level 6) and finally the Pharaoh (level 7).

Since that time few large-scale organizations have existed without a hierarchy and there are examples where the concentration of power in one individual is such that the removal of that individual undermines the entire hierarchy. For instance, in 1242 when Ogadai Khan, the son of Genghis, died in Mongolia the entire Mongolian army returned from its encampment outside the gates of Vienna to select the next Khan – and never went back. Seven hundred sixty-one years later the US-led coalition forces attempted to ‘behead’ the Iraqi regime under Saddam Hussein on exactly the same premise on 7 April 2003, just prior to the formal invasion: in theory a hierarchy with such a reliance upon one leader can be overthrown simply by removing that leader.<sup>1</sup> In the event the attempt failed on both counts: Saddam was not killed immediately and neither his removal from power nor his later capture and execution have prevented waves of violence and instability from the heterogeneous factions resisting the US occupation and its legacy. Given this spiralling of violence, which subsequently transitioned into Syria and continues as a proxy war between various nations and factions, we may be entitled to consider whether regimes and indeed organizations can ever be ‘beheaded’ in quite this way.

This shift away from assumptions about individuals ‘leading’ organizations towards some form of collective alternative has increased since the end of the twentieth century, though just as the notion of individual leaders and hierarchies have long histories, so too do the alternatives. The idea that leadership should be ‘distributed’, that is spread throughout an organization rather than restricted to the individual at the top of a formal hierarchy, perhaps goes back beyond the beginning of formal large-scale organizations – such as the one that built the pyramids. For example, many hunter-gatherer societies (the forerunner of settled agricultural societies and large-scale organizations), such as the Hadza of Tanzania, operate without a single formal leader, and leadership tasks are distributed so that any individual can ‘lead’ a hunt or suggest a move to new territory and so on (Millett, 2003; Woodburn, 1970).

In the nineteenth century many anarchists (‘Anarchy’ means without government, from *arkhos* meaning ‘sovereignty or ruler’ and *an* meaning ‘without’) wrestled with, rather than resolved, the problems of centralized

authority located within one individual long after the progenitors of the Hadza first developed it. Over a century later contemporary leadership scholars are wrestling with what lessons, if any, we can draw from anarchist groups who consciously practice forms of ‘anti-leadership’, such as rotating formal leader roles and instigating participative democratic forms of decision making (Sutherland et al., 2014). At a practical level the Xmas Truce of 1914 between the British and German troops on the Western Front was the result of distributed leadership – multiple individuals and groups deciding, literally, to give peace a chance (Grint, 2021; Weintraub, 2002). At a theoretical level Kropotkin (1842–1921) (2002) was convinced that a well-informed group would be wiser than any single leader and stressed that ‘the collective spirit of the masses’ would have to be called into action, if society was to be rebuilt. That rebuilding would also generate smaller, self-sufficient, communities that would, in themselves, undermine the need for centralized leadership and especially heroic individuals.

Kropotkin (1902) coined the phrase ‘mutual aid’ as a way of conceptualizing the reciprocal relationships of support such communities would be founded upon, and we can see something of the power of this idea in its continued appeal during the Covid-19 pandemic. Crucial in maintaining life and health during the pandemic was the mutual aid of communities, sometimes organized at street level and sometimes by charities and trade unions across whole cities or towns. For example, the community union Acorn in the UK (more on this organization later), which primarily represents and campaigns for housing tenants, switched its operation to one of mutual aid, with members doing food shopping and walking the dogs of residents rather than helping them resist predatory landlords. Anarchist advocates of mutual aid believe in something called ‘prefiguration’, a notion that meaningful social change happens not through elections or even seizing state power through revolution but through individual micro communities practicing a different, more democratic and inclusive, way of living – eventually (and in theory) these alternative communities of practice grow, as increasing numbers of people view such a way of living and working as more attractive than what is offered by the state and formal economy. That such an approach often has problems sustaining and growing itself beyond the micro and local is evidenced by experiences of the pandemic, where many of these initiatives faltered and dissipated quite quickly, whereas those led by more established



organizations (such as charities well embedded in localities and those led by Acorn) persisted.

This subordination of the individual to the collective, rather than of the followers to the leader, was reflected in Bakunin's (1814–76) (1970) work:

The greatest intelligence would not be equal to a comprehension of the whole ... Therefore there is no fixed and constant authority, but a continual exchange ... In general, we ask nothing better than to see men endowed with great knowledge, great experience, great minds, and, above all, great hearts, exercise over us a natural and legitimate influence, freely accepted, and never imposed in the name of any official authority whatsoever ... In a word, we reject all legislation, all authority, and all privileged, licensed, official, and legal influence, even though arising from universal suffrage ... This is the sense in which we are really Anarchists.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, Bakunin (1871) was not against *all* authority because he was keen to insist that authority freely accepted was legitimate, but even that did not imply that any one individual could be taken as legitimately in control.

There is no universal man, no man capable of grasping in all that wealth of detail, without which the application of science to life is impossible, all the sciences, all the branches of social life. And if such universality could ever be realised in a single man, and if he wished to take advantage thereof to impose his authority upon us, it would be necessary to drive this man out of society, because his authority would inevitably reduce all the others to slavery and imbecility. I do not think that society ought to maltreat men of genius as it has done hitherto: but neither do I think it should indulge them too far, still less accord them any privileges or exclusive rights whatsoever; and that for three reasons: first, because it would often mistake a charlatan for a man of genius; second, because, through such a system of privileges, it might transform into a charlatan even a real man of genius, demoralise him, and degrade him; and, finally, because it would establish a master over itself.<sup>3</sup>

Some of these ideas surfaced within the Syndicalist and Guild Socialist movements during and just after the First World War in Europe, but their success, such as it was, was very brief and generally died with the interwar economic collapse (Grint, 1986) (similarly to the collapse of mutual aid groups during and after the Covid-19 pandemic). However, the ideas of resisting centralized leadership persisted. Paulo Freire (1921–97), for example, adopted a similar philosophical denial of the leader's claim to domination, and though his approach was routed more through educational philosophies than anarchist communes he was nevertheless always concerned with the practical consequences of claims to superordination (Freire, 1970). This issue was also at the heart of A.S. Neill's 'Summerhill' – an English school developed to provide an educational framework where the students could choose whether to attend lessons or not and where all children had a vote in the weekly democratic meeting to decide certain

aspects of the school's governance (not hiring, firing or teachers' salaries), though the head teacher retained many formal leadership responsibilities (Neill, 1995; OFSTED, 1999).

That reduction or denial of the role of individual leaders is also present in the words of Daniel Cohn-Bendit, ironically labelled by journalists as the 'leader' of the 1968 Paris 'revolution': 'Let them write their rubbish. These people will never be able to understand that the student movement doesn't need any chiefs. I am neither a leader nor a professional revolutionary. I am simply a mouthpiece, a megaphone' (quoted in Ward, 1973).

Since those heady days many people, and not just anarchists, have continued to struggle with the leadership dilemma, indeed the leadership paradox: leadership undermines progressive social organization but without leadership, it seems, there is no social organization. Within business there have been many attempts to empower the workforce by decentralizing production and authority to small teams, from McGregor's theory X and Y in the 1960s through to the semi-autonomous workgroups of the Socio-Technical Systems approaches in British coal mines and Scandinavian car production, and on to the Worker-Director experiments in the 1970s in Britain and the current concern for enhancing worker participation through digital participation, various boards, European Works Councils and other representative channels.<sup>4</sup> Even formidably successful capitalists have engaged with the problem – as Ricardo Semler's (1994) 'no-one-in-charge' experiments at SEMCO in Brazil demonstrate, enormous energy can be realized when bosses 'let the followers lead' (2003: 175–206). Perhaps, however, this theoretical quandary is captured best by Fyke and Sayegh (2001):

Let's ignore that Big Pink Elephant in the Room. The question of leadership in anarchist circles brings up a host of contradictions, which anarchists too often avoid by denying that leadership exists. This is complete hogwash. As *Love and Rage*<sup>5</sup> points out: 'Anarchism tends to assume a theoretical posture of total hostility towards leadership. But every anarchist group or project that lasts any length of time has clearly identifiable, if informal, leadership.'

Indeed, even the most 'anti-leadership' of organizations, such as Occupy, which led a global anti-capitalism protest that occupied large public spaces to prefigure and campaign for alternative economic and social systems, can in reality practice or deviate towards a shadow form of leadership, despite its rhetoric to the contrary – and even if such leadership can initially appear less centralized than traditional alternatives (Smucker, 2017). Similar

currents can be evidenced from more mundane examples, such as the tendency of participants in leadership development programmes to ‘default’ to managerial behaviours and instincts of control and routinized systems of organizing rather than follow through on the promise of more participatory forms of leadership (Carroll and Levy, 2008).

Beyond the pragmatic adoption of decentralized organizations there is much philosophical hostility grounded in the assumption that leadership is essentially deleterious, injurious to the public health and something that must be avoided. But the denial of leadership paradoxically generates the political vacuum within which Machiavellianism proliferates. Or as Freeman (1972/3) put it, removing institutional restraints in organizations does not automatically lead to a proliferation of democracy and is more likely to facilitate the rise of the already powerful individuals and groups in the ‘the tyranny of structurelessness’. This is the equivalent problem to that generated by Soviet attempts to bring about the ‘End of Politics’ by removing private property (Polan, 1984). The result was not just the elimination of all institutions that can be used to channel and facilitate the legitimate articulation of disagreement; the logical consequence was that all resistance was, by definition, illegitimate and counter-revolutionary – hence resisters were either mentally insane and needed hospitalizing or counter-revolutionaries and needed executing. We saw some evidence, albeit less extreme, of this thinking when we reflected on the tendency of leadership studies and practice to remain unhelpfully positive, with often highly negative consequences for adaptation and learning (Collinson, 2012).

Yet there have always been individuals, like Ella Baker, for example, who attempted to construct an alternative approach to leadership that went beyond its negative associations. Baker worked with the US civil rights movement, especially the Student Non-violent Co-ordinating Committee to shift the movement away from individual leaders, or ‘leader-centred groups’, towards ‘group-centred leadership’ (Ransby, 2003). We shall return to Baker later. This approach embodies notions of heterarchy (‘other’ or ‘different’ sovereignty) rather than anarchy where leadership is theoretically unnecessary or radically (re)distributed. Equally radical, Frantz Fanon (1963: 136) implored those attempting to change the world to go beyond individual and unorganized resistance:

The success of the struggle presupposes clear objectives, a definite methodology and above all the need for the mass of the people to realize that their unorganized efforts can only be a temporary

dynamic. You can hold out for three days – maybe even for three months – on the strength of the ad-mixture of sheer resentment contained in the mass of the people; but you'll ... never overthrow the terrible enemy machine, and you won't change human beings if you forget to raise the consciousness of the rank-and-file. Neither stubborn courage nor fine slogans are enough.

The recognition that leadership is, at best, a necessary evil, has prompted some to argue that the issue is not so much 'leadership', but what kind of 'leadership' and in particular, what process of leadership might be viable and whether a resolution exists in those aspects of leadership relevant to the development of Distributed Leadership in which leadership resides 'not solely in the individual at the top, but in every person at entry level who in one way or another, acts as a leader' (Goleman, 2002: 14).

Raelin (2003, 2011 and 2016b) contrasts the distributed or leaderful organization with the traditional organization by suggesting that in leaderful organizations leadership is concurrent and collective rather than serial and individual – lots of people are engaged in it rather than just those in formal positions; that leadership is collaborative rather than controlling; and that leadership is compassionate rather than dispassionate; and that this generates a community rather than simply an organization. Again, this may be theoretically attractive but there are precious few empirical examples of it working in practice outside education or small scale and time limited political organizations. Harris (2003) characterizes this as collective leadership – expertise that is developed by working collaboratively and where the 'leader' is decentred:

This is not to suggest that no one is ultimately responsible for the overall performance of the organization or to render those in formal leadership roles redundant. Instead, the job of those in formal leadership positions is primarily to hold the pieces of the organization together in a productive relationship. Their central task is to create a common culture of expectations around the use of individual skills and abilities. In short, distributive leadership equates with maximizing the human capacity within the organization.

Precisely how leadership can be 'distributed' seems to depend upon the specific situation to some degree (Bennett et al., 2003) and definitely on the type of community from which a particular form of leadership emerges (Edwards, 2015). For example, Harris and Chapman (2002) suggest that in some (English) schools the head teachers used delegation and the rotation of leadership responsibilities with some success as part of a deliberate policy of distribution. They remain clear, though, that distributed leadership cannot be reduced to 'delegated headship', where unwanted tasks are handed down to others (Collinson et al., 2018). In effect, the approach is

‘less concerned with individual capabilities, skills and talents and more preoccupied with creating collective responsibility for leadership action and activity. The focus is less upon the characteristics of “the leader” and more upon creating shared contexts for learning and developing leadership capacity’. Indeed, it would seem that distributed leadership is something that cannot be imposed from above but must be grown from below (Wasley, 1991).

Although distributed leadership takes many forms it is instructive to note what Weber might have called an ‘ideal case’. This is not ‘ideal’ in a normative sense of ‘perfection’ or even ‘typicality’ – and there are precious few empirical examples of such leadership in the published literature by any of its proponents. And this is the point Weber is trying to make with his methodological approach, we would expect to see some aspect or degree of these two core features would be expected in any empirical example:

- *Collective responsibility*: Organizations are replete with leaders; they are leaderful, full of ‘ordinary’ people carrying out modest leadership tasks, not dependent on the heroic individuals doing daring deeds beloved of Carlyle. Where Carlyle sought heroes to push the wheel of history along, distributed leadership requires large numbers of ‘ordinary people’ – ‘hewers of wood and drawers of water’ (*Joshua*, 9.21) to make the wheel move. This is not to demean ‘ordinary’ people but to recognize that there are no ‘ordinary’ people; there are instead lots of individuals who have unique skills to add to the collective movement of the wheel of history in the building of a social community, not the development of a private empire.
- *Collective flexibility*: Traditional organizations maintain unyielding hierarchies of power, resources and rewards. Such structures, however, impose limits on the flexibility of the incumbents of office. Distributed Leadership implies a shift towards heterarchy – a flexible structure that retains the necessary degree of coherence and coordination but does not require the roles or incumbents to operate within strictly defined limits. Normally organizational leaders have roles that are fixed in space and time – they lead a specific organization or department for a particular period of time, measured in months or years. But Distributed Leadership implies that many people undertake leadership roles that need not have these boundaries.

In other words, distributed leaders take up their roles and responsibilities as and where necessary: when the task requiring their leadership is completed, they revert to a non-leader position.

These core ideas may seem attractive to people inhibited by idiosyncratic individual leaders or suffocated by stultifying bureaucracies, but Distributed Leadership is ostensibly an alternative method of leadership, not a utopian alternative to it. And therein lies an array of paradoxes:

- Traditional individual leadership brings with it not just the potential for corruption but also a mechanism for effective decision-making. Thus, simply wishing away ‘leadership’ – the big pink elephant – may merely result in grossly inefficient and ineffective organizations and the potential for ‘decisive leaders’ (authoritarians) to step in and offer a ‘solution’ to the apparent indecision.
- Distributed Leadership offers an alternative to this problem, but it also generates the means by which liberal democratic societies can be destabilized by small and unrepresentative groups or even individuals. For example, part of the success of al-Qaeda and latterly ISIS relates to the difficulty of democratic states penetrating and dealing with terrorist groups that have little in the way of a formal hierarchy.

The apparent consequences of distributed leadership, according to Gronn (2003: 27–50), depend on what kind of distributed leadership occurs. Concertive Action is the result of a number of individuals choosing to divide leadership responsibilities between them. Alternatively, Numerical Action is simply the sum of all involved – another description of participative management. For Gronn, the results of Concertive Action are threefold: first, leadership synergy, in which the whole of distributed leadership is greater than the sum of its parts; second, the boundaries of leadership become more porous encouraging many more members of the community to participate in leading their organizations; third, it encourages a reconsideration of what counts as expertise within organizations and expands the degree of knowledge available to the community. In sum, leadership becomes not a property of the formal individual leader but an emergent property of the group, network or community.

We can summarize the position so far by suggesting that although social and political activists have remained sceptical of leadership for many years it has remained an enduring element of practical change in contrast to utopian theory. This in itself may go some way to explaining why, for example, Green political parties, with some exceptions, have managed to make only marginal inroads into conventional politics and may prove an ideological paradox that remains insurmountable (Christensen and Grint, 2004). However, developments in the reconstruction of leadership theory – towards distributed leadership – that shift the definition away from individual office holders to the social processes of organizations, imply that the problem lies not in leadership itself but in the kind and process of leadership that is being considered. Equally significant, the theoretical affirmation of distributed leadership by scholars does not make its presence any more visible because most organizations, especially economic organizations, are simply not premised upon any kind of democratic principles.

However, we should also note that distributed leadership is both a method and a philosophy. The latter implies for its supporters that distributed leadership is necessarily preferable to traditional leadership because it embodies decentralization, social responsibility and collective learning; it encourages subordinates to learn to lead and facilitates the growth of social capital. All of these appear either progressive or liberal or generally beneficent. But it is a method and a process as well as a philosophy, and that means that it is also possible to consider it under other philosophies. In particular, the distribution of responsibility and leadership are also the means by which profoundly undemocratic and illiberal organizations can distribute risk and confound those seeking their elimination. In the first section below we consider how distributed leadership contributed to the achievement of civil rights in the United States. We then expand our analysis to more explicitly bring to the surface notions of place and space in leadership through exploring what leadership would look like if it was filtered through the perspective of a right to the city.

## **From leader to leadership: The struggle for civil rights in the United States**

The American Civil Rights Act of 1964 barred the unequal application of voter registration requirements (though it did not abolish literacy tests); it outlawed 'discrimination in hotels, motels, restaurants, theatres, and all other public accommodations engaged in interstate commerce' (though it excluded 'private' clubs); it 'encouraged' the desegregation of public schools (but it did not authorize bussing as a means to overcome segregation based on residence); it authorized, but did not require, withdrawal of federal funds from programmes which practised discrimination; and it outlawed discrimination in employment in any business exceeding 25.<sup>6</sup> Its broad background is well known (see Grint, 2000) and is well covered in great detail elsewhere (see Martin-Riches, 1997; Verney, 2000). Here we are concerned not to redescribe events but to analyse the contesting accounts of leadership in the movement.

In the most popular version, the leading role is taken up by Martin Luther King, whose charismatic leadership transformed a cancer that had besmirched the United States ever since the victorious North ended its occupation of the rebellious confederacy. After all, there are not that many people in the world who have a national holiday named after them (3rd Monday in January). After his ordination in 1948 King became assistant pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta; and then pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama; from September 1954 to November 1959. 'Here' according to the *Seattle Times*, 'he made his first mark on the civil-rights movement, by mobilizing the black community during a 382-day boycott of the city's bus lines'.<sup>7</sup> He left to organize, and become president of, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference which he held until his assassination in 1968. Through his public leadership (he was arrested 30 times), his speeches and his vision, King went on to secure the civil rights that had been denied Black Americans. He was *Time* magazine's 'Man of the Year' in 1963 and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. He then shifted his attention towards the economic conditions of the poor in the north, starting in Chicago, where he launched programmes to provide housing. But the move from civil rights to economic demands dissipated some of his support as King moved politically left and began to mobilize support against the war in Vietnam. At that point, while on a visit to support the strikers at a Memphis sanitation plant, he was assassinated. Without King, it seems, there either would have been no Civil Rights Act in 1964 or it would have been achieved much later, it may have proved less



effective and perhaps it would only have occurred after significantly more violence.

In fact, although King himself never claimed to have single-handedly secured civil rights for Black Americans it is worth pursuing two related avenues of leadership here. First, to what extent was this the achievement a collective effort – a reward for leadership not for any particular leader, and second, to what extent did that achievement herald the formation of the distributive model of leadership discussed above?

On the first count we might take the apparent trigger of the Montgomery bus boycott as a valuable case. On the one hand the bus boycott that King ‘led’ was initiated by the individual act of Rosa Parks, who refused to give up her seat to a white man on a bus in Montgomery on 1 December 1955. Rosa Parks, then (rather than Martin Luther King), was the person ‘who changed history’ according to Albin (1996).

Parks was arrested and charged and that sparked a 381-day bus boycott in Montgomery and, eventually, the Supreme Court’s ruling in November 1956 that segregation on transportation was unconstitutional. However, Parks was no ‘ordinary’ woman whose unwitting protest spurred a spontaneous movement of protest. On the contrary, she was secretary of the local chapter of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and later Adviser to the NAACP Youth Council, and that organization had long prepared for such an event. Indeed, it was not even the first time that a Black American woman had been arrested for refusing to give up her seat – but the previous case involved Claudette Colvin, a pregnant 15-year-old, nine months before Parks, and the local leadership of the NAACP had not thought her case strong enough to mobilize community support. Nor was it the first bus boycott, for one had occurred in Baton Rouge in 1953 (Grint, 2000: 386).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Ella Baker spent much of her life resisting segregation laws. For example, in December 1942 she was verbally abused after she and another Black woman refused to get up to let white passengers take their seats as was required by the law. Six months later she was refused service in the dining car of a train despite being in the ‘black section’ because four white sailors had sat in the black section – although there was plenty of space in the white section. Eventually Baker persuaded the sailors to move to their own side and she was served (Baker wasn’t the first known train ‘resister’: Ida B. Wells had been removed from the ‘woman’s carriage’ on a train in 1884 in Tennessee) (Ransby, 2003:

127–30). However, after Rosa Parks's arrest, Lula Farmer, the wife of James Farmer the founder of CORE (Congress of Racial Equality), immediately told him that 'this was precisely the spark that you've been working and hoping for, for years'. Within 24 hours the local activists had distributed 40,000 leaflets protesting against the arrest and within four days the boycott was almost 100 per cent effective. That kind of local organization implies two things: first Parks's arrest may have been the trigger for the action, but it could not have developed without widespread local leadership; second, it developed before King was elected leader of the Montgomery Improvement Association, which aimed to expand the boycott and make the most political capital from it.

However, if many historians do date the beginning of the civil rights movement to the acts of leadership that began with Rosa Parks's individual resistance, Klarmann (2004) insists that the real kick-start was actually Thurgood Marshall's (1908–93) advocacy to the Supreme Court that succeeded in outlawing segregation in public schools in the 1955 case, *Brown vs the Board of Education*. That case did not stir the Black population into activism but rather needled the conservative whites into fighting a rearguard action that set the scene for the civil rights battles of the 1960s. Marshall, who went on to become the first Black Supreme Court Justice, had been legal director of the NAACP. Now the point here is not how we might evaluate the relative contributions of Marshall, Parks and Baker, to say nothing of King, but to note how it does not make sense to even attempt this. If we did, we might end up with some complex regression equation that informs us that Parks generated 23.7 per cent of the momentum, Marshall was responsible for 24.1 per cent, King provided 43.6 per cent and the rest is unclear. This does not make sense because all the actors are dependent upon each other – without any of them the historical record would very probably have been different, but we cannot provide counter-factual data to allow us to measure their individual or collective leadership contributions.

Nevertheless, what we can conclude is that the civil rights movement was always bigger than any individual leader and would have been impossible without a leadership that was deeply rooted in the local networks of supporters. Thus, Ella Baker was herself far more interested in, and active within, the grassroots campaigns than Martin Luther King, whose contributions were more significant in inspiring and motivating through

national media on television or radio. As Ransby suggests (2003: 189–92), Baker regarded King as a member of Atlanta’s Black male elite whose ‘silver tongue’ and charismatic performances acted to enervate rather than energize the population of activists because they could never reproduce his style or success. However, she also insisted that her concern was never personal: she disliked the heroic leadership *style* that he seemed to embody more than anything about his character as such. Moreover, Baker felt that having a charismatic leader worked against all that was required to secure long-term civil rights – local populations had to take responsibility for their own lives and not rely upon some heroic figure from afar to solve their problems for them. In short, while Baker sought to encourage a heterarchy of local leaders to galvanize and organize people, she feared that King’s effect as formal leader was to embed the perception of inadequacy in ordinary people and as a consequence to reproduce the very leadership hierarchies that perpetuated racism and many other forms of gross inequality.

For Baker, the political was personal and the transformation of self and the local community was the prerequisite of permanent and radical change – not the consequence of a charismatic hero. If change did not come from below it would not come at all because leadership had to be local and it could only be achieved by serving an apprenticeship at the grassroots level: leadership was, then, only authentic if it was distributed. To think otherwise was, for Baker, to fall into the trap that some black leaders were already sliding into: namely the trap of bourgeois respectability that blunted their appetite for radical change. That philosophy of Distributed Leadership manifested itself most clearly between 1961 and 1964 in the strategy and tactics of the SNCC (Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee), which involved sending young activists out to the countryside and to small towns in the South to facilitate the self-leadership of local campaigns to demand desegregation or voter rights projects. So, while King might sweep into town to hold a press conference and then disappear again, Baker, in Howard Zinn’s words,

Moved silently through the protest movements in the South, doing the things the famous men did not have time to do. Now, hour after hour, she sat there as people lined up before her, patiently taking down names, addresses, occupations, immediate money needs. (Quoted in Ransby, 2003: 283)

Ella Baker saw herself, as Ransby puts it, as ‘the outsider within’ – never an authentic member of the inner circle but close enough to prevent that inner circle from taking itself to be the master rather than the servant of the followers they purported to lead. Such leaders conflated leadership with centralization and though she was axiomatically against that conflation she did recognize that leadership, albeit of a distributed variety, was critical to advancing social justice. In the next section we consider examples of leaders and movements that are either critical of centralized leadership or personify a distributed approach to organizational authority – but whose slant on this is anything but related to the advance of social justice that Baker would have recognized.

## **From left to right: From elephant to hydra**

The *conflation* of leadership with centralized authoritarianism – as opposed to its contingent *co-existence* – has befuddled attempts to understand leadership. Indeed, the conflation is most clearly and ironically visible in the adoption of ‘Leaderless Resistance’ – a term coined by Col. Ulius Louis Amoss in 1962. It was then used by the white supremacist Louis Beam,<sup>9</sup> and adopted by American militia groups opposed to the federal government (or indeed any kind of government) whose actions are often linked to individuals like Timothy McVeigh, executed in 2001 after being convicted of carrying out the Oklahoma bombing. In these cases, and the assault upon the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 might be another good illustration, the absence of an authoritarian and centralized leadership provides a structure that the authorities find difficult to penetrate because of the lack of central coordination. In the British petrol crisis of September 2000, for example, a small number of self-appointed militants, intent on disrupting the transportation of petrol to force down the tax on petrol, virtually held the country to ransom for several days. And while the government struggled to respond, its main problem was that the protesters appeared to have no recognizable leadership that could at best negotiate a settlement or at worst provide a recognizable target to impose some form of legal constraint (Burke et al., 2000; Doherty et al., 2003).<sup>10</sup> In short, Distributed Leadership had not just transcended the pink elephant problem of the political left, but

also reconstructed it into a regenerative hydra of the extreme or populist right.

The hydra in Greek mythology represented the most difficult of creatures to overcome; not just a creature with multiple heads, and therefore no apparent single leader, no one to hold responsible or to focus upon, but also a creature whose structure appeared to make it immortal because each severed head grew two more. This problem was eventually transcended when Hercules changed his strategy both for dealing with the mortal heads and for despatching the immortal head.

A similar problem now faces those targeted by terrorists that resemble just such a creature. Since the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon in the US on 11 September 2001 (colloquially known as 9/11), much blood and many resources have been expended in trying to find, understand and eliminate Islamist terrorists, and more recently right wing terrorists. Much has also been written on the development of the network both as a form of organization and as a metaphor for future global business: the traditional organizational hierarchy is dead; long live the non-hierarchical network!

Capitalism in its more recent neoliberal and digital manifestations is increasingly being conceptualized (idealized and critiqued) as flexible, networked and distributed. Neoliberalism is a term for an economic system where every part of everyday life is viewed as an opportunity for privatization, market systems and profit extraction (Harvey, 2007). Under this logic, it is people's capacity for expression, communication and collaboration that now seem to be primarily valued – and captured by capitalism for monetisation (Virno, 2008). It is within this framework that we can understand the growth in 'transformational' forms of leadership theory (see Delaney and Spoelstra, 2019 for an overview). Here what is valued is a leader in a senior position inspiring others and engendering loyalty through their magnetic personalities, ability to influence and willingness to share their authentic values. Such forms of leadership are a shift away from the 'transactional', where the obedience of followers is effectively bought off with material rewards in money, terms and conditions. In one sense this sounds like an empowering approach to leadership and we are sure that most of us would like to work in inspirational workplaces, but we should also not be naïve about where this form of leadership emerges from. Capitalism is running out of traditional

space within which to expand and must therefore seek other territories from which to extract profit – selling services through appeals to people’s sense of identity and lifestyles. Within this frame, communicative forms of leadership appear key, as the trick is to understand a whole person (both customers and colleagues) rather than simply their financial motivations. Professional skills are still important for developing a career but should be interpreted within the envelope of the worker under contemporary capitalism needing to remain alert to the communicative demands of work that has become more ‘horizontal’, more about talking with and convincing colleagues and customers. We need to be careful, however, not to get too carried away by the excitable language of transformational leadership advocates. Too often they can overlook the simple need of people to earn a decent wage so that they can live a safe, healthy and fulfilling life, and grand language about inspiration, authenticity and communication can mask deeply fractious and oppressive working conditions. There is a particular kind of violence that can accompany transformational leadership, in other words (Tourish, 2013; Vince and Mazon, 2014), masked by idealistic language. In a nutshell, contemporary capitalism and continuous drive for communicative transformation can make us ill and to better understand this we can turn to the work of the philosopher Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi.

Berardi (2015) makes a more general case that the speed and depersonalization of contemporary capitalism creates a strange, socialized psychosis, brought about by the continuous need to communicate, consume and respond, at speeds that obviate reflection and appreciation, while also fostering disembodied social relations, whereby we lose memory of what it means to physically explore and dwell with one another, so caught up are we in the networks of communication. We communicate exponentially more but are unable to gain any of the qualitative benefits from these connections because they are so superficial and fleeting. The phrase Berardi develops for this terrain of economic, political and social relations is semio-capital, or a capitalism of signs and symbols – these signs lack a referent, a reality rooted in embodied, corporeal and sensual experience. Here, Berardi is using ‘capital’ in ‘semio-capital’ to indicate the fact that profit is now made by trading symbols and signs (e.g. numbers in a cloud, representations of value for things that have no physical presence, such as an estimate of the value of a ‘brand’ on a balance sheet) but also as a way of describing a broader economic state of affairs (we are living in a time when

‘semio-capital’ is dominant). Ultimately, this is a ‘simulated’ reality because the signs we trade in semio-capital do not refer back to tangible, physical products that we can see, touch and smell (Baudrillard, 1994 and 2010).

The aesthetic effect for Berardi is one of hyper-unreality, where we experience what is unreal, a sea of digitized signs and trails of fleeting communication within networks, yet also one that generates very real adverse effects on the body and psyche – the unreality of life turns back ferociously on the real of the body. For sure we are transformed by leadership in this context but in ways far removed from the claimed benefits of transformational leadership theory. We start to become overwhelmed and disconnected, developing anxiety, depression, eating disorders and other illnesses, increasingly turning to medication as a coping mechanism.

At its extremes, Berardi argues, contemporary capitalism produces a particular kind of killer – the digitized networked terrorist and the mass, usually suicidal shooter, both of whom misdirect their illness, anger, anxiety and sense of unbelonging back at fleshed bodies and symbolic manifestations of what they, at some level, believe to embody certain social ills. At one obvious level, these acts of terrorism and mass murder can be read as interruptions of a ‘real’ within the simulation of semio-capital, a cruel reminder that people are flesh and bone after all, more than just their words and symbols.

At another level, however, these killings are related to transformational leadership, with those who shoot or bomb seeking emotional responses and connection from a wider public. For these ‘transformational’ killers, who manipulate symbols and aesthetics, it is the image and spectacle of death that garners almost more importance than the killing itself. For ISIS, for example, it is the sharing on social media of its intimately grotesque executions and the fear generated by these that matters more than the acts themselves. Indeed, it is widely known that ISIS, in a way that mimics corporate capitalism, invests in and takes very seriously its digital communications. We should not lightly brush over the serious and potentially violent consequences of contemporary economic relations and the leadership approaches they generate (Tourish, 2013).

Recently there has been quite a lot of attention given to the psychopathy of senior executives, namely research that seems to show that business leaders are more likely to demonstrate psychopathic behaviour than the

regular population (Sarkis, 2019). In fact, it should trouble us all that organizations have persistently valued and rewarded sociopathic and even psychopathic tendencies – inflated ego, superficial charm, lack of empathy and remorse, manipulative behaviour and so on (Fotaki, 2014; Gabriel, 2014).

The historical myth of the hydra might provide us with a metaphor, therefore, to facilitate an analysis of contemporary positional leadership. In particular, we are concerned with the strengths and weaknesses of what has come to be regarded as a contemporary hydra and archetypal networked organizations: al-Qaeda and the closely related group, ISIS.<sup>11</sup>

This section takes the myth of the hydra as a starting point from which to explore the issues and traces the double strategy that Hercules is forced to adopt in his original fight with the beast. While Hercules is able to decapitate the multiple heads, these heads are not critical to the health of the creature and their regenerative powers force him to cauterize the stumps to prevent their regrowth. However, the central – and immortal – head requires a different strategy because severing and cauterizing it is not enough to prevent regrowth; instead, it has to be properly buried. But first let us explore what kind of things the hydra represents.

## **The five hydras**

The ‘Hydra’ has (at least) five embodiments: star formation, myth, metaphor, polyp and organizational design. First, the largest (and for our purposes the least significant) version of the hydra is the extremely long star formation in a very distant constellation, primarily in the southern hemisphere.<sup>12</sup> Second, it is a mythical monster: a multi-headed regenerative creature that formed the second of Hercules’s ‘labours’. Third, it is a biological creature, a polyp: a freshwater hydroid with tentacles around its mouth and the beloved aquatic animal of biology students that can regenerate the parts of its body that have been cut off. Fourth, the hydra has been adopted as a metaphor for the underworld, the mob, or the devil incarnate. Lastly, the hydra represents the design blueprint for a new form of organization – a network of loosely aligned groups with little formal structure or central leadership. With the exception of the star formation, all the other embodiments have some resonance with the analysis of al-Qaeda



and ISIS that follows below: they are steeped in myth, are regenerative monsters, and represent a novel form of distributed or network organization.

## The mythical hydra

In Greek mythology, Hercules was the son of Zeus and the mortal woman Alcmene. Zeus's immortal wife, Hera, tried to kill her husband's earthly offspring by putting two snakes into Hercules's crib – but he strangled one with each hand. Not to be outdone, she appointed Eurystheus, not Hercules, as king of Mycenae and then drove Hercules mad, inciting him to kill his own children. To atone for the crime Eurystheus promptly ordered Hercules to perform a series of twelve 'impossible' labours, the second of which was killing the Lernaean Hydra. If he completed the labours successfully Hercules would atone for his guilt and achieve immortality.

The Hydra was a multi-headed water serpent born from a union between Echidne and Typhon. While Echidne, related to the mermaids, was half-woman and half-serpent, Typhon was a terrible giant. The Hydra inhabited a cave, or alternatively the roots of a giant plane tree, in Lake Lerna in Argolis, near the city of Argos. Lerna's waters were bottomless and provided access to the underworld for all who could get past the gatekeeper, the Hydra, whose elder brother was Kerberos, a three-or sometimes five-headed creature. The precise number of heads on the Hydra is also debated: most versions suggest nine, some five, and some increase the number to several hundred.<sup>13</sup> Whatever the number, one of the heads was immortal and the Hydra spent most of its time destroying the livestock and crops of the surrounding farmers, often killing people simply by breathing on them, so poisonous was its breath, as indeed was its blood.

Guided by Athene, Iolaus, the son of Iphicles (the twin brother of Hercules), drove Hercules to the creature's lair in a chariot. There the Hydra was forced out of its cave by flaming arrows. But Hercules soon found that cutting off any of its existing heads simply compounded his problems because each stump grew two more heads. In effect, the more he attacked the creature the stronger it became. Eventually, Hercules called upon his nephew to help and Iolaus started a fire (having cut down an entire forest) and duly cauterized each of the Hydra's headless stumps as they fell to Hercules's sword. However, the last head was immortal so when Hercules

cut it off, he buried it under a large rock on the road between Lerna and Elaius (Kerényi, 1974: 143–5).<sup>14</sup>

## The biological hydra

The regenerative heads of the mythical hydra were precisely where the biological hydra derived its name, and it has been known for some considerable time that certain species have the ability to regrow parts of their bodies. Indeed, flatworms seem to have perfected the art to the point where a theoretical immortality appears to exist.<sup>15</sup> But, it is not coincidental that the metaphorical hydras of anarchy only entered the language in the eighteenth century, for the polyp (a hollow cylindrical body with a ring of tentacles around the mouth that occurs in freshwater ponds and lakes) was only discovered by the Dutch inventor of the microscope, Anton von Leeuwenhoek, in 1702. In 1740, Abraham Trembley, a Swiss naturalist, discovered the green species but he was uncertain whether it was a plant because it was green, or an animal because it moved. Although the regenerative powers of lizards (tails) and crayfish (claws) were also well known at this time, Trembley thought that only a plant could regenerate more than half its body, but cutting a polyp in half horizontally led the old head to grow a new bottom and the old bottom to grow a new head. Indeed, whichever way he cut it the polyp regrew itself until one polyp had seven heads. In 1758, Linneaus named the polyp a hydra.

Hydras live in most streams, lakes and ponds, they are from 3 to 50 millimetres in length and they use their four to eight tentacles to feed on crustaceans, insect larvae, worms and similar small animals.<sup>16</sup> There is more to Hercules's strategy than just brute force: according to Shimizu's experiments (2001) the regeneration of a Hydra's head after decapitation depends upon the state of the injured tissue: in effect, the greater the injury the less chance of regeneration – Hercules was right: chopping the head off is insufficient but cauterizing the stump (inflicting greater tissue damage) may well prevent regeneration. It may have worked for Hercules, and it may work in the laboratory, but does this help us understand, or deal with, either the historical or contemporary political threats to the establishment, the state or society of apparently leaderless groups?

# The metaphorical hydra

Labelling leaderless groups that threaten the establishment as hydras is hardly new. Indeed, the juxtaposition of Hercules and the Hydra has provided a richly woven mythical tapestry for many writers, monarchs and militants. Hercules was frequently represented as the hero in whose image laboured the builders of the Old and New Worlds. The British king George I (1660–1727), George III's (1738–1820) brother and King William III (1765–1837) all modelled themselves on Hercules. While in America, in 1776, John Adams called for 'The Judgement of Hercules' to be the seal of the future United States of America. Francis Bacon even suggested that Hercules was the inspiration of modern science and capitalism.

In contrast, the many-headed Hydra was deemed to embody the opposite: the collective Lord of Misrule. As J. J. Mauricius, the ex-governor of Suriname, lamented on his return to the Netherlands in 1751 – having failed to destroy a group of rebellious runaway slaves encamped in the swamp:

Even if an army of ten thousand men were gathered, with  
The courage and strategy of Caesar and Eugene,  
They'd find their work cut out for them, destroying a Hydra's growth  
Which even Alcides [Hercules] would try to avoid.

(Quoted in Linebaugh and Rediker, 2000: 2–4)

Similarly, Andrew Ure contended that he (and for that matter every other manufacturer of the early nineteenth century) was the contemporary Hercules – not just in constructing machines with powers that matched Hercules, but also in using such inventions to tame or 'strangle', the 'Hydra of misrule', that is the contagion of rebellious workers.

Quite how the Herculean authorities were going to cope with the Hydra of misrule was manifest in the draconian laws passed at the turn of the nineteenth century: the 1799 and 1800 (British) Combination Acts outlawed trade unions, and mass executions followed the Luddite rebellions around this period (Grint, 1998; Grint and Woolgar, 1997), though these were nothing compared to those killed in the French Revolutionary 'Terror' slightly earlier. In short, the labelling of rebels and insurgents as 'The Hydra' has been with us for some considerable time. But, one might argue, isn't one person's hydra just another person's Hercules?

The definitional quagmire that surrounds ‘terrorist’, also known as ‘freedom-fighter’, ‘separatist’, ‘rebel’, ‘guerrilla’ and, increasingly with regard to media descriptions of armed supporters of al-Qaeda and ISIS – ‘fighter’, was raised by Sir Jeremy Greenstock, Chair of the UN Security Council’s Committee on Terrorism on 28 October 2001. He suggested that terrorism should include: ‘The indiscriminate use of violence, particularly against civilians, to further a political aim.’ In fact, the original use seems to have been recorded by the Académie Française in 1789, as ‘a system or rule of terror’ – an interesting definition since it includes the use of terror by a state against its own citizens. Indeed, for much of the post-1945 era the UN has failed to agree on a definition of terrorism precisely because such a definition may implicate some member states, and because some definitions imply a justification of terror. Since 1963 twelve international conventions on terrorism have been drawn up against specific acts of terrorism: hijacking and hostage-taking and so on but no definition has ever been agreed (Roberts, 2002: 18–19), though resolution 1373 (2001) on terrorism was adopted by the Security Council at its 4385th meeting, on 28 September 2001.<sup>17</sup> The nearest thing to a consensus on the definition of terrorism talks of ‘criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes ... [these are] in any circumstances unjustifiable whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or other nature that may be used to justify them’ (quoted in Roberts, 2002: 19). Honderich (2002: 95–105), however, is unhappy with such an indiscriminate account of what can be a discriminate act. For example, he suggests that ‘political violence’ should be differentiated from ‘terrorism’ because the former can be directed at political leaders rather than at entire populations. Thus, an assassination of Hitler would be both an example of ‘political violence’ and justifiable, while the attack on the twin towers in 2001 was both ‘terrorism’ and unjustifiable.

Fisk (2001) insists that linguistic gyrations around the word ‘terrorism’ are common and contemptible on the part of all involved in such conflicts. In other words, the problem is not using the word ‘terrorist’ to say what we mean, but that competing groups try to delineate their ‘legitimate’ acts in contrast to the ‘terrorism’ imposed by the other side. In most cases both sides seem to be involved in acts of terrorism. For example,

the AP [Associated Press] used ‘terrorists’ about Arabs but rarely about the IRA in Northern Ireland ... The BBC, which increasingly referred to Arab ‘terrorists’, *always* referred to the IRA as ‘terrorists’ but scarcely ever called ANC bombers in South Africa ‘terrorists’ ... The only terrorists whom Israel acknowledges are those opposed to Israel. The only terrorists the United States acknowledges are those who oppose the United States or their allies. The only terrorists Palestinians acknowledge – for they too use the word – are those opposed to the Palestinians. (Fisk, 438–41)<sup>18</sup>

Under any of these definitions the September 11 attacks were acts of terrorism, acts of violence perpetrated against non-combatants for political and religious ends. But clearly the members of al-Qaeda and ISIS may not regard themselves as terrorists, so irrespective of the lexicon of terror, can organizations that are conventionally structured and led defeat unconventionally structured and leaderless organizations that have some degree of popular support?

## The organizational hydra: Hierarchies, heterarchies and networks

Military overlords have long struggled with such unconventional opponents grounded in what is now called ‘Asymmetric Warfare’. In fact, the contemporary threat from al-Qaeda and ISIS has some resonance with the Order of Assassins, the *batiniyya*, from the twelfth-century Middle East, notable Persia and Syria. ‘Assassin’ was a derogatory label applied, allegedly, by the Crusaders from the Arabic word *hashshashin*, meaning ‘taker of hashish’ [cannabis], but it seems doubtful that the perpetrators of terror were drug-induced. Instead, they comprised fanatical Shi’ites led by a Persian, Hasan-i-Sabbah, whose primary targets were the Turkish Seljuq sultans, and Sunni Muslims, though Crusaders were also their victims. It is more likely, then, that ‘assassin’ is derived from the Arabic *assass* (foundation), via *assassiyun* (fundamentalists); they were simply believers in a purer and more basic form of Islam. And like the contemporary suicide bombers, the assassins accepted their own deaths as a duty and perhaps in the expectation of entry to paradise (Blow, 2001), though Harrison suggests that a better contemporary explanation relates to the exchange of life for a permanent identity as a martyr to the cause.

One thousand years later the difficulties posed to conventional authority by unconventional organizations increased – but it was by no means clear

that conventional force would succumb to the unconventional. For instance, the US government fought a long campaign against terror allegedly linked to an anarchist network, in the first three decades of the twentieth century. This ultimately fizzled out, marked, though not caused, by the (in)famous execution of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti in 1927 for a murder that occurred in 1920 in Boston.<sup>19</sup>

Forty years later a rather more organized attempt to overthrow the local political establishment was successfully defeated by the British after a twelve-year-long communist insurgency in Malaya – but only by putting 105,000 full-time and 250,000 part-time soldiers and police into action to kill over 10,000 insurgents (losing 1,865 men themselves in the process). Yet alongside the overt strategy of force was a more subtle one: the British promised independence to Malaya, and their strategy worked because the Chinese-led insurgents failed to ensure significant Malay support (Grey, 2002). Where the response was more military than anything else, the British were less successful: in 1967, for example, British forces withdrew from Aden after three years of insurgency had stimulated the then Conservative government to declare that although Southern Arabia would be granted independence by 1968 – Britain would maintain a military base there – it did not.

Indeed, one reason that most of Europe has remained so peaceful since the Second World War may well be that what came to be known as the Marshall Plan provided such a different inheritance to that laid down by the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. As Marshall said in 1947, ‘Our policy is directed not against any country or doctrine, but against hunger, poverty, desperation and chaos. Its purpose should be the revival of a working economy in the world so as to permit the emergence of political and social conditions in which free institutions can exist’ (quoted in Carruth and Eugene, 1988). In effect, the assault upon fascism in general and Nazi Germany in particular comprised two elements: destroying the enemy’s capacity for war and undermining the context that had helped it to grow in the first place. This double strategy both reflects Hercules’s differentiated approach to the Hydra and is echoed in Amartya Sen’s (2002: 25) call for a global alliance to combat not just terrorism but also ‘for more positive goals, such as combating illiteracy and reducing preventable illnesses that so disrupt economic and social lives in poorer countries’. In other words, the immortal head, the cause, has to be buried along with the mortal heads,

the means. So, if neither networks nor hierarchies are invincible, what kind of organizations are al-Qaeda and ISIS?

## **Hierarchies and networks: al-Qaeda and ISIS**

Few people predicted the rise of a qualitatively different kind of terrorist group, one that was religiously inspired, globally located and intent on maximizing rather than avoiding the mass deaths of innocent civilians. Certainly Paul Wilkinson (2001: 59–60), a noted British expert, seemed to dismiss the probability of Islamic terrorist primarily targeting anywhere other than the existing Middle East states because the existing groups at the time of writing had a fundamentally political agenda. So why did al-Qaeda and then ISIS take a different turn?

The source of al-Qaeda seems to lie in two critical events of 1979: the fall of the shah of Iran to an Islamic Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Both events encouraged the flowering of many radical groups intent on creating other fundamentalist Islamic societies, amongst whom was Al Qaida al-Sulbah (The Solid Base) formed by Abdullah Azzam, a mentor to Osama bin Laden. The group, comprising a self-styled 'pious vanguard' (in some ways similar both to the early Bolshevik party and the New Model Army of the English civil war) operating under the name of MAK (Afghan Service Bureau), recruited, financed, trained and placed perhaps as many as 100,000 for the jihad (holy war) against the Soviet Union and then into several flash points, including Kashmir, Chechnya, the Philippines, Indonesia, Georgia, Somalia, Uzbekistan, Yemen, Algeria and Egypt. Around 3,000 were then selected for further operations and al-Qaeda fighters were involved in the bombing of US embassies in Tanzania and Kenya and against the USS *Cole*. This diaspora is critical in determining what the aims of al-Qaeda were: they were not focused on particular territorial ambitions as manifest in a specific state but rather on the regional construction of a fundamentalist pan-Islamic state, a regenerated Caliphate, to replace what they regard as corrupt Islamic states and displace all those that inhibit this, most notably the United States (Gunaratna, 2002: 1–15).

ISIS began life as early as 1999 with a similar ideology and political commitments to al-Qaeda, a focus on the 'near enemy' of what it viewed as Muslim states that had been corrupted by foreign, mainly US, influence and

money. Its founder, a Jordanian called Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, was imprisoned by his native country's government in the early 1990s. Described by Fishman (2017) as a 'streetfighter', it was in prison that al-Zarqawi grew his network, earning a reputation as an enforcer and organizer, but it was also where he met and struck up a collaboration with Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, a preacher and scholar of radical Islam who has become hugely influential for Salafi jihadi groups. This 'jihadi odd couple' (Fishman, 2017: Loc 227) was in many ways dysfunctional but al-Maqdisi's theology contributed a coherent intellectual framework for al-Zarqawi, a 'brave fighter who revelled in violence' (Fishman, 2017) and who had previously 'learned [his] lessons in the street' (Fishman, 2017: Loc 232). This 'street' and 'book' teaching meant that al-Zarqawi was well equipped to lead future insurgencies, and, following his release from prison in 1999, was able to do just that. It was the invasion of Iraq which proved al-Zarqawi's moment, as it allowed him to absorb a mix of jihadi incomers from abroad, local disaffected Sunni Iraqis and, importantly, former Iraqi state military officers and soldiers who had been made income-less following the US decision to disband Saddam Hussein's military apparatus.

The two organizations – al-Qaeda and ISIS – always sat in a somewhat uneasy relationship. al-Zarqawi was keen to maintain an independent status for his organization but pragmatically chose to subsume ISIS within al-Qaeda in the immediate aftermath of the Iraqi invasion, with the organization for some time being colloquially known as 'al-Qaeda in Iraq'. However, the goals of the two organizations did differ and ultimately led to the separate identity of ISIS.

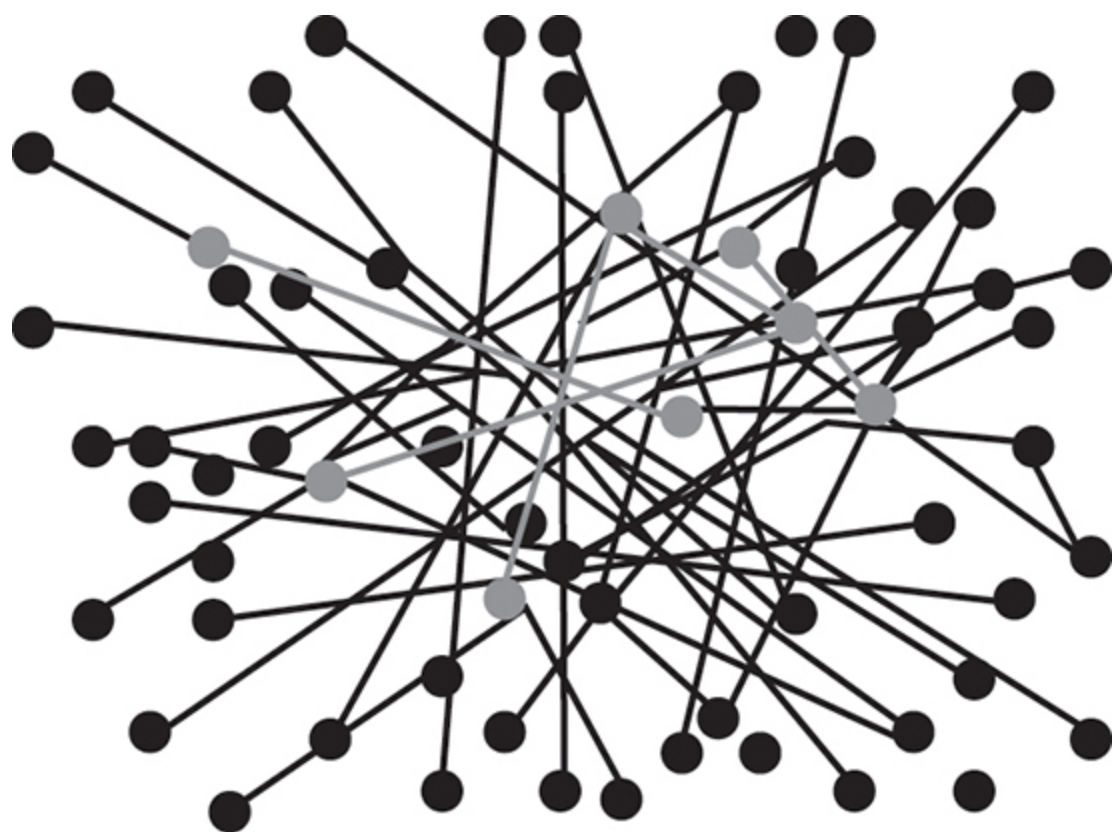
As Bergen (2001: 242–3) suggests, bin Laden's propaganda did not attack the West for what he might have seen as its cultural depravity, but for its support of what he regarded as corrupt Muslim states. Indeed, the idea of a Caliphate – a political-religious structure for all Islamic people that was originally constructed after the death of the Prophet Muhammad – is theoretically boundaryless and certainly unrelated to the idea of territorial nation states (see Hill, 2001: 98–100). Yet al-Qaeda's goals were increasingly tied to attacking the 'far enemy', primarily the United States, as was encapsulated by the 9/11 attacks. In contrast, ISIS began with a focus more squarely on the 'near enemy' of Muslim states, what it viewed as heretical Muslim groups and individuals (most obviously Shia Muslims) and in establishing a new 'Islamic State', to be situated across much of Iraq

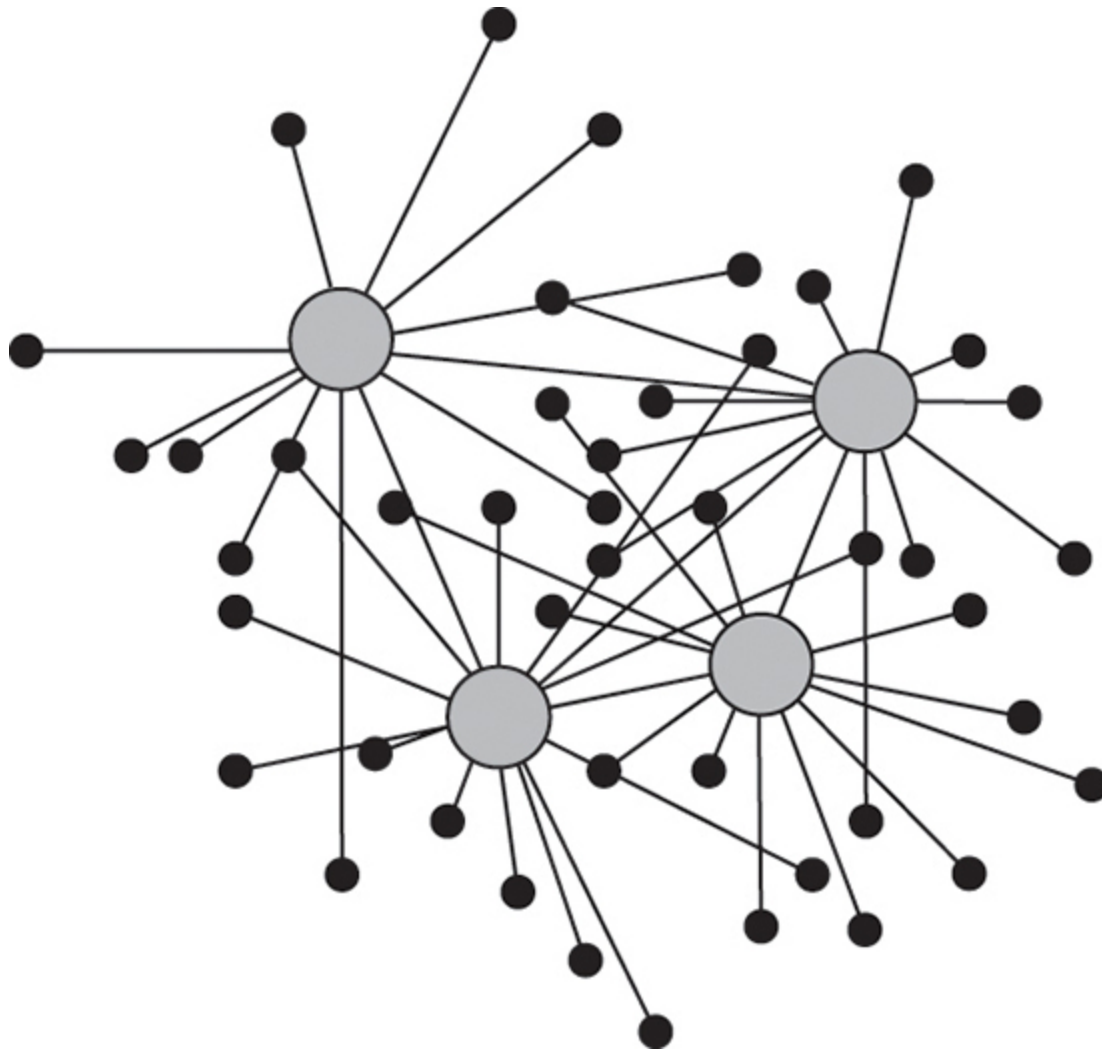


and Syria. While al-Qaeda also viewed Shias as apostates, it tried to avoid sectarian violence as peripheral and counterproductive to what it viewed as targeting its real enemy, US influence and power (Byman, 2015). However, the contrast between the two with regard to identifying and attacking an enemy, as Fishman (2017) points out, has been overstated, as the invasion of Iraq meant that ISIS was able to target both near and far enemies there and then.

The horror of September 11 was considerably compounded by the difficulty of discerning those responsible for planning it and the likelihood of such attacks stopping, were bin Laden to be apprehended. It has often been suggested that al-Qaeda is a leaderless group and thus removing Osama bin Laden from the scene would do little to undermine its effectiveness, but al-Qaeda does not seem to be a leaderless group, even though certain elements do embody some aspects of Distributed Leadership. The structure of al-Qaeda is not an egalitarian network of the kind articulated in the ideal type models of Distributed Leadership or in so-called random networks where power and leadership are very widely dispersed. Network theory does not suggest that power (and leadership) is always randomly distributed or evenly spread throughout an organization – as in a random network – but that power (and leadership) is often disproportionately distributed amongst just a few people who have enormous numbers of contacts in their networks in what are called scale-free networks.

In [Figure 5.1](#), the top represents a random network where the eight nodes with the most links (in grey) are connected to a minority of all nodes (black). In the scale-free network on the bottom, however, the four most connected nodes (grey) are connected to a majority of all nodes (black).





**Figure 5.1** (a) Random networks (b) Scale-free networks.

For one of the founders of this approach, Barabási (2003), within scale-free networks the ratio of very-connected nodes to ordinary nodes remains constant irrespective of the size of the network. And the implication of this is that while random attacks upon nodes in random networks leads to the gradual deterioration and slow disintegration of the network, random attacks upon ordinary nodes in scale-free networks are almost irrelevant. In sum, there is little point in just removing a few ‘ordinary’ nodes in organizations like al-Qaeda and ISIS because they have virtually no impact upon the overall coherence of the network. However, because scale-free networks rely upon a small number of well-connected individuals, focused attacks upon well-connected nodes can result in catastrophic failure of the network. This is not the equivalent of the ‘beheading’ strategy discussed at

the beginning because we are not dealing with a conventional hierarchy. On the other hand, unlike the ideal type organization with (widely) distributed leadership, al-Qaeda and ISIS are actually closer to scale-free networks.

However, scale-free networks are not 'led' in any hierarchical fashion because the well-connected nodes have no formal authority over each other. In fact, al-Qaeda seemed to be a hybrid: Osama bin Laden provided the central command structure, the strategic direction and the financial and ideological resources for the entire network but he sat within a horizontally derived network of semi-independent terrorist cells of between two and fifteen people who were called upon as and when necessary for tactical deployments and action.

ISIS's surge and capture of large swathes of Iraq in 2014 prompted much interest in its internal structures. Perhaps the most striking thing about ISIS is the fact that it is structured far more like what we would know as a civic organization (Weiss and Hassan, 2016). In fact, as early as 2006, it set out to 'build a scalable bureaucratic framework that would eventually define [it]' (Fishman, 2017: Loc 1799). This framework included a cabinet, 'public works projects', health and safety regulations, a communications campaign to recruit foreign workers, accounting procedures, recruitment of members 'with a range of administrative and scientific backgrounds' and, most strikingly, 'rigorous pay scales', housing allowances and systems of care and life insurance for 'the family of deceased fighters' (2017) and a system of taxation. Following early defeats, Fishman (2017: Loc 2642) states that the organization adapted, developing an 'organizational structure [that] was highly federated and cellular – district-level units were built to be self-sustaining – which made destroying the group extremely difficult'. Further, so advanced are the communications, marketing and even media production value of ISIS that it has been referred to as the 'digital caliphate' (Atwan, 2015). Ultimately, it is this mix of cellular, flexible structure with standardized bureaucratic procedures that seemed to sustain the organization.

Yet perhaps ultimately the relatively loose coalitions that bind ISIS and al-Qaeda remain coherent in and through their ideological glue, not through formal hierarchies or structures, and this philosophical similarity, a religious identity, transcends whatever diversity exists; as long as al-Qaeda and ISIS remain internally coherent, individuals will remain committed to them. As Gunaratna (2003a: 21) suggests, 'it is not poverty or lack of literacy that

drives people to join terrorist groups, but ideology; the poor and ill-educated simply being more susceptible.’ McGinn (2019) claims that people are attracted to ISIS from Western contexts by a range of ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors. Push factors are those experiences of everyday marginalization within home countries – racism, abusive families and so on. Pull factors are ideological and theological attractors, as well as ISIS offering a means for recruits to vent resentments, an opportunity to wreak revenge on perceived oppressors. Interestingly, the author notes that for women, the promise of building a ‘utopia’ Islamic state seems significant – in other words the lure of building rather than wrecking.

Rather like the Waffen SS units in the Second World War, the disciplinary system for these organizations is internally accepted rather than externally enforced: individual units do not need to be told what to do because their common philosophy acts as an ideological compass. However, unlike the Waffen SS, the global cells of al-Qaeda, and latterly ISIS, have a very limited hierarchy amongst or between themselves and tend to be organized along ethnic lines, with each ethnic ‘family’ responsible for a different function: training, weapons procurement, finance and so on (Gunaratna, 2002: 95–166). In this sense al-Qaeda and ISIS are closer to a heterarchy than a hierarchy or a scale-free network, that is, a flexible hierarchy where control is temporarily taken by ostensibly subordinate elements, but the structure of the group remains coherent if flexible. Moreover, the absence of a conventional hierarchy makes detection and pursuits very difficult, for the cells are unlikely to know of other cells and, like the Hydra’s mortal heads, are neither subordinate nor superordinate to them. In short, you cannot destroy a heterarchy or a network with a cruise missile.

However, like a scale-free network you may be able to destabilize it by removing pivotal nodes. For example, the German Abwehr (Military Counter-Intelligence) managed to infiltrate the Dutch resistance from 1941 to such an extent that fifty-two agents (all but one from the Special Operations Executive and all but six subsequently executed) were captured, as well as 350 local resistance fighters. In addition, thanks to the deception, London provided the Germans with 570 containers of arms and ammunition, thinking they were being dropped to the Dutch Resistance (Miller, 1998: 49–51).

That pivotal node in the al-Qaeda heterarchy remained the core group around Osama bin Laden, the shura majlis or consultative council comprising around twelve to fourteen individuals (all men of course), which oversaw four subgroups: military, finance, religion and publicity. The military committee appointed agent-handlers to oversee and coordinate groups outside the centre. Consequently, while the centre did not necessarily determine what the cells did, it could impose its will. For example, in April 1996 a cell intended to attack Western targets in Singapore but on the 18th of April, after members of the Israeli Defence Force killed 109 Lebanese civilians, bin Laden apparently cancelled the operation to prevent it from undermining the global condemnation of Israel (Gunaratna, 2002: 100). Similarly, in November 2003 the two suicide bombings that killed sixty-two people in or near the HSBC Bank and the British Consulate in Istanbul were, apparently, personally approved by bin Laden according to Fevzi Yitiz, a suspect arrested and interrogated by the Turkish Intelligence Services. Bin Laden had originally suggested attacking US airbases or ships, but security had proved too difficult (*Guardian*, 18 December 2003). Similarly, the Madrid Bombings of 11 March 2004 that killed over 200 people were linked to al-Qaeda.<sup>20</sup>

When the trail from Ground Zero in New York purportedly led to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network in the middle of Afghanistan, many argued that a conventional assault would be both costly and ultimately fruitless: you could not destroy a hydra-like organization such as al-Qaeda, by lopping off its head, first because it would be inordinately difficult to find, and second because eliminating any element of it would not destroy it, but, on the contrary, only serve to stimulate further growth and resistance. In effect, force was counterproductive – surely the most frightening of all possibilities for those intent on a military solution – thus only reconciliation would work. Either way, it seemed the Americans were doomed: if the Taliban fought to the end there would be unsupportable casualties going home to Washington, and if the Taliban disappeared then the assault would be irrelevant and just the beginning of another protracted guerrilla war. The result could only be that Afghanistan would be America's second Vietnam; and as Vladimir Putin found to his cost in the Moscow theatre siege in October 2002, 'winning' the war against Chechen terrorists in Chechnya was only the first move, not the last. Thus, at the extreme end of the reconciliation approach could Alice Walker, in *The Village Voice*, October

9, wonder, ‘what would happen to him [bin Laden] if he could be brought to understand the preciousness of the lives he has destroyed? I believe the only punishment that works is love.’

Two weeks into November 2001 the bombing campaign had little to show, other than film footage of bombs exploding in the distant hills. Even overt hawks were not always convinced that the war had been won, as Colonel David H. Hackworth (a veteran critic of the current US armed forces) suggested,

We are in round one – which is not even over – of a 30-round fight. I think my grandkids, who are five and eight, will be in college before we’re in round 30.... It’s a mistake to believe you can stop a terrorist movement by taking out its leader. You can cut off the head, but the body will still live on.

(quoted in Scriven, 2002: 7)

Despite moments of self-proclaimed victory from the United States, such as the killing of bin Laden in 2011, we now know that al-Qaeda and the Taliban forces shielding them did not dissipate but dispersed, regrouped and waged a dogged and debilitating insurgency campaign, marked by waves of advancement, retreat and advancement. After over twenty years of conflict and at the time of writing the United States has eventually, it seems, come around to the notion that dialogue with the Taliban may be necessary for a more stable Afghanistan (BBC, 2020).

Proliferating hydra heads has, of course, been no more visible than in post-invasion Iraq and, more recently, Syria. The connection between al-Qaeda and Iraq was always tenuous, bordering on the farcical but, as we have already stated, proved performative, in the sense that the act of invasion itself established Iraq as the primary arena for terrorism and insurgency, attracting in fighters from abroad and domestically (Weiss and Hassan, 2016). As noted by Fishman (2017), ironically it was the Americans who largely, if accidentally, facilitated the expansion of ISIS through its prison system in Iraq. Within these prisons, fighters were able to network, converse and plan in ways that would have been extremely risky outside the prison’s walls. It was within one of these prisons, Camp Bucca, in 2004 that the eventual Caliph of ISIS, who led the organization’s dramatic territorial gains a decade later, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, earned the respect of his peers. Interestingly he seems to have done so less through the ‘street’ toughness of al-Zarqawi than with his ability to convince others through theological knowledge (he held a PhD in this area) and his ability

to mediate between individuals and factions – in other words, drawing heads together into a hydra. The surge of ISIS territorial gains in Iraq in 2014 made the prospect of a Caliphate more tangible for followers and facilitated easier supply routes and crossings into Syria, which in turn compounded the strength and presence of the organization there, which in turn also proved to be the spark of yet another ‘catastrophe’ (Glass, 2016) of a civil war and war by proxy that has yet to fully subside (Cockburn, 2017). We should note that although al-Baghdadi is now dead after committing suicide when cornered by US troops – another head removed from the hydra – and ISIS forces have been defeated (for now) in both Syria and Iraq, ISIS fighters in Iraq still receive salaries and persist, albeit they are dispersed and rebuilding rather than on the offensive (Chulov and Rasool, 2020). Further, it has been noted that the removal of another leader with charismatic appeal amongst his followers could simply mean that ISIS becomes even more flexible and network-like, with a series of global cells operating even more autonomously (Clarke, 2019).

## **Reassessing the myth**

The current downturn in the fortunes of both al-Qaeda and ISIS at the time of writing (September 2020) might imply that their hold over populations and the territories was never deep-rooted, and, indeed, was itself a myth. Just as the Berlin Wall fell when the East German population stopped being cowed by it, so the role of the Hydra myth in this situation could demonstrate that myths are powerful, but not as powerful as sustained, decades-long military force. But the Hydra myth provides us with several other ways of understanding the problem of terrorism.

A first and literal application of the myth might perceive an American Hercules coming to wreak revenge on the ISIS and al-Qaeda, guided and supported by local allies. At first, the task appears impossible, the Hydra cannot even be located, and its lair is so deep that it cannot be reached. But when the flaming arrows of the US Air Force enter the complex the creature is driven into the open – although in the case of ISIS, it is more accurate to state that the arrows summoned the very beast itself. Although difficult, the overwhelming power of the American Hercules eventually grapples the Hydra to the ground, and begins to sever the heads of the monster, only to



find that for each problem solved (e.g. getting the agreement of the Pakistani government to use its air space) two more emerge (e.g. the target has moved and the Taliban supporters in Pakistan are threatening to destabilize Pakistan itself; or, through imprisoning fighters in Iraq, the enemy develops stronger bonds of organization). Eventually the American Hercules realizes that it alone cannot defeat the Hydra and after each head is removed, local allies such as the Northern Alliance and the Iraqi Kurds (Iolaus) cauterize each headless stump in turn until victory is achieved; force worked.

A second, and contrary interpretation is that the problem remains because the immortal head, the hatred of the United States and its allies that motivates such groups, cannot be so easily disposed of, and Hercules has simply buried the problem temporarily. If the immortal head was Osama bin Laden, or al-Zarqawi or al-Baghdadi, then their elimination would have removed the problem – or at least undermined the focus of the groups in the same way that Hitler's death contributed to the elimination of the myth of Nazi invincibility. But if the immortal head is the hatred of the United States, existing Islamic regimes and Muslim belief systems that deviate from Salafism, then the tactical focus of the military assault by the west can only ever be a prelude to a strategic resolution of what many Muslims appear to consider an intolerable situation. And that situation undoubtedly involves not just the problems and plight of the Palestinians but the form of governments that currently control some Muslim societies. As Meek (2001: 3) suggested, a year after September 11 there were 'signs that the Bush administration [was] beginning to accept the absurdity of characterising bin Laden as "the CEO of Terrorism Incorporated"'. Yet when Khalid Sheikh Mohammed ('al-Qaeda's number three') was arrested in Rawalpindi on 2 March 2003, precisely the same assumptions pervaded Gunaratna's (2003b: 3) response: 'His arrest will gravely diminish al-Qaeda's ability to plan, prepare and execute large-scale operations of the scope of September 11.' Rinse and repeat – similar responses have followed in the wake of the capture or killing of numerous other al-Qaeda and ISIS leaders. However, the Herculean task facing those who would see the end of Islamist terrorism lies in combating the continuation of a global network motivated by a particular ideology. In effect, only by ceasing support for autocratic oil-rich gulf regimes and by guaranteeing a Palestinian state will the United States ever undermine support for al-Qaeda-like groups. In this approach, the

double strategy of Hercules is necessary because the target groups and their motivations are different. To put it another way, the Herculean strategy must combine both political and military strategies: the former deals with the causes, the latter with the effects.

A third, and more worrying analysis might be that the Hydra has no head, no central cause, and therefore no method for permanent destruction, least of all a conventional military ‘defeat’, for each assault upon it stimulates its regenerative capacity to the point where, as in some stages and forms of disease, attacking it ensures its proliferation.<sup>21</sup> Here the Hydra myth is more appropriate in terms of its biological manifestation. That is to say that the multiple heads of the Hydra actually represent the malleable nature of the threat in which terrorism, for example, is just one of the heads. This threat is not rooted in one place, nor does it restrict its forms of attack to a particular format, and its support system encompasses significant financial assets, a considerable number of fighters, and supporters right across the world.

al-Qaeda’s and ISIS’s religious fanaticism means that they remain uninterested in compromise, undeterred by death, unconcerned by the unlikelihood of success in the short-term, yet willing to change the focus of their target to the point where it is politically impossible to satisfy. Within this analysis the parallel with Hercules is the apparent willingness of the Hydra to sacrifice its mortal heads in the certain knowledge that two more will grow in its place. The only response, therefore, is permanent vigilance and preparedness because the ‘beast’ appears to be literally immortal.<sup>22</sup> This might actually be worth contextualizing rather more deeply, for there are precious few years in which war has not been a feature of the world, and more people have died as a result of war in the last 110 years than in any other period that we know of. In short, as Machiavelli implied, the threat of violence is an endemic feature of human society and not something linked to the recent rise of religious fundamentalism.

Finally, it is worth considering a reverse perspective of the myth such that bin Laden and other leaders would presumably perceive themselves to be Hercules fighting the American Hydra. Here we need to consider how the United States and allies form their own hydra networks and how these are maintained. In this regard, a study we wrote with Sanela Smolović Jones (Smolović Jones et al., 2020a) can help expand our understanding. In this study we analysed the speeches and press conferences of the then UK

prime minister Tony Blair, examining how he drew upon and used the word 'leadership' to make a case for war in Iraq. Our findings showed that this was a process of using the word 'leadership' as a means of categorizing people and groups as 'for' or 'against' what was positioned as a morally desirable case for invasion. Those who supported the war were categorized in highly positive terms and opponents positioned as problems to be overcome rather than people who simply disagreed. Ultimately, though, the elaborate series of language tactics adopted by Blair articulated leadership as the property of the leader (hierarchical position) bolstered with 'decisive' and 'strong' action that bypassed normal democratic forms of scrutiny and accountability. This position was presented as ethically superior, a moral crusade of spreading 'freedom' and 'democracy' to other global spaces – the classic neoconservative and neoliberal case.

Neoliberalism and neoconservatism form the basis of contemporary capitalism and can be interpreted as the ideological glue that held together the alliance of countries who invaded Iraq. Neoliberalism here provides a drive towards ever greater monetization and marketization of all geographical territories and aspects of life, whereas neoconservatism supplies the moral dogma of national and racial superiority. Under this interpretation, proffered by David Harvey (2019b), the invasion of Iraq in particular was largely a matter of expanding the spaces for US business interests to profit, capturing the industries of the country (primarily oil) but also 'reforming' its infrastructure and public services, in essence privatizing them for the gain of the US finance industry. For capitalism to survive, so the Marxist argument goes, it needs to continually circulate and expand over new territories through force because eventually resources and scope for growth within the originating territories dries up (Harvey, 2019b). Sometimes such incursions occur through sponsored coups and proxy regimes (e.g. Chile under Pinochet, Iran under the shah), other times through more sustained and direct military invasion (Iraq). This is a distributed and networked view of global leadership under capitalism because it stretches over space, incorporates a number of diverse business, government and military actors but also seems to continue almost regardless of who the person 'in charge' of the government might be (an approach followed by Republican and Democrat presidents in the United States, Conservative and Labour prime ministers in the United Kingdom). A more accurate view of the hydra, therefore, might be one of competing,

duelling hydras in the plural. And under this interpretation it is the multiple military, economic, political and cultural arms of the US 'empire' (Hardt and Negri, 2000) that strike terror into the hearts of its neighbours, manifest most visibly in the photographs of prisoner-abuse that emerged from American-controlled Iraqi prisons in May 2004. 'The fact is', suggested Krauthammer in the *New York Times*, 'no country has been as dominant culturally, economically, technologically and military in the history of the world since the Roman Empire' (quoted in Freedland, 2002: 2). And although the United States does not have the colonies normally associated with empires, it does have a military unit of some kind in 132 of 190 member states of the United Nations, and it is the predominant technological and economic power, to say nothing of the cultural domination of icons like Facebook, Amazon, Coke and McDonalds (not to mention the US oil and defence giants). We also face a global threat to the environment that can only be resolved at a global level, preferably through something like the Kyoto agreement. Indeed, global warming is clearly a greater threat to the world than global terrorism (King, 2004), and since the United States with 4 per cent of the world's population generates 15 per cent of the total carbon emissions (Union of Concerned Scientists, 2020), it is critical that any global response includes the United States. Yet the United States under Trump in particular had consistently chosen to ignore the majority of the world community on this. One of the first acts of President Biden, however, was to rejoin the Paris climate accords that Trump exited from.

For Castells (1997), such exclusionary practices in turn generate attempts by the excluded to 'exclude the excluders', or rather to eliminate the excluders, and moreover, to route that elimination along the network channels that the excluders have long sought to use for their own purposes. Here we would expect increasing links between the various mafias and organized crime syndicates and terrorism. But it may be that no such links are necessary for the glue that holds al-Qaeda and ISIS together is rooted in ideology, not self-interested networks. Baudrillard (2002: 6–7), for example, has suggested that since all such 'definitive orders' like the United States, induce the will to destroy them, in some bizarre way, although 'they did it ... we wished for it' as he calls it. In short, and in very Hegelian terms, 'every machinery of domination [has] secreted its own counter-apparatus, the agent of its own disappearance' (Baudrillard (2002: 10). In

these terms, in making the argument for military action against terrorism, political leaders often deliberately describe the enemy to be defeated in vague and menacing terms. To do so makes the target and goals of military action less tangible, which in turn holds open the prospect of a prolonged, total war that can be waged on multiple fronts, abroad in the deserts of Iraq and domestically through mass surveillance and incarceration. In fact, Baudrillard claims that due to such reasoning we are now entering the Fourth World War (the third being the Cold War that eliminated Communism), and as with each preceding world war the end result is the greater integration of the world order (Cf. Bobbit, 2002), though the contemporary upsurge in nationalism suggests this is only a possible future. Yet, in distinctly un-Hegelian terms there is no victory of Good at the end of this story because Good and Evil are permanent members of the world community and whichever side of the fence we may find ourselves, we are fated to the permanent recurrence of the myth of Hercules and the Hydra. Indeed, that might prove a fitting metaphor for Distributed Leadership because it offers a solution to the endemic problem of authoritarian leadership and simultaneously a means for leaderless authoritarians to distribute terror.

Now that we have addressed the positioning of people within structures of leadership, we move on to consider the positioning of leadership in space and place. If leadership is practiced within certain geographical spaces – cities, countryside, office buildings, slums, on laptops in bedrooms – then it makes sense that we explore how these spaces shape the leadership that is practiced.

## **Spaced out leadership**

To better understand leadership as a concept that is positioned, we need to take this proposition somewhat more literally than we have so far and explore the role of particular places and spaces in shaping leadership practice. This intuitively seems like a good idea: after all, leadership, we all know, will look and feel very different in the city streets than it will in the corporate spaces of global tech firms in Silicon Valley. Leadership is as much shaped by its position within particular spaces and places as it is by the particularities of communication or by where it is coming from in an

organizational hierarchy. In exploring the spaces of leadership, we will focus mostly on the city and the urbanization of everyday life that is the reality for the majority of us today. Journeying through space here will mean being taken to the dank and damp bedrooms of young people in the UK struggling for healthy and affordable housing. You will also fly to Venice Beach in Los Angeles during the 1960s as local activists campaign to maintain what Davis and Wiener (2020) refer to as the ‘last poor beach’ in the city, an outpost of freedom of expression, leisure and organizing, and a desegregated space where Black people can mix with white people. Finally, experiencing the favelas in Rio de Janeiro, you will learn about the struggle of their diverse local populations to (re)gain autonomy and democracy. You will sometimes hear that digital technology has collapsed and turned in on geography, meaning that technology can make distance irrelevant – as people globally communicate with one another through their phones – and companies produce, assemble and transport goods over vast distances. While we do not wish to lose the capacity of technology to disrupt notions of space and distance, we will be making the case that technology in fact interacts with space, enabling a re-imagining, but not a defeat, of geography. But before all of that we will describe our approach to leadership space by asking some important questions about the spaces of leadership within universities, focusing on important employees within these organizations, their cleaners.

Many of you reading this book will be studying for degrees in universities, the majority of you using their facilities on a daily basis – the library (we wish), the bars (we know, we remember those days too), the cafes (because what’s the harm in one more coffee before hitting the books?) and (if we’re lucky) the lecture theatres and seminar rooms. Universities, however, are much changed places to those that we studied in and this in no great measure is due not just to the impact of Covid-19 but also to the role of money or, more specifically, commercialization.

In many places in the world now, universities are increasingly hubs of enterprise and serious capital investment. In the UK, tuition fees for students trebled in 2010, provoking much unhappiness, to put it mildly, at the prospect of amassing tens of thousands of pounds of debt, an experience already commonplace for students in the United States. An obvious consequence of the fees rise and resultant loans that most students have assumed has been the accumulation of significant debt at a young age.

People learn about debt first-hand at an earlier stage in life than our generations did. For us, mortgage debt was the typical introduction to such a life and lifestyle, but debt is of course now ubiquitous (Graeber, 2014a), folded into everyday lives – cars, phones, even Nike trainers – can all be financed through accumulating personal debt. In fact, mortgage debt is one of the few forms of debt many young people have little chance of obtaining, due to the spiralling cost of home ownership in large parts of the world. Returning to students and universities, one of the effects of assuming debt has been a refocus of what it means to be a student, a shift of identity from learner to customer-learner. It is commonplace amongst academics to bemoan this state of affairs, to complain about students increasingly treating university as a series of customer transactions, with young people preoccupied about value for money and customer service rather than enjoying being challenged by a learning experience. Of course, most of us know, though, that this ‘enterprise’ mindset is not one invented by students out of thin air but an identity that has been forced upon them through various norms and practices – filling in satisfaction surveys, rating teachers, being told to worry constantly about ‘employability’, being forced prematurely into the labour market of part-time jobs to be able to afford to feed themselves and enjoy a minimum of a social life. These economic and identity issues are all important to think about when considering a leadership space analysis of universities.

Any leadership space analysis, however, needs to consider the geography of a place as responsible for ‘leading’ as much if not more than the acts of the people who move and reside within such spaces (Jackson, 2019). Or, more precisely, we need to package together the acts of people, politics, economics and geography to arrive at a more nuanced reading of leadership. To understand leadership within universities we need to grapple with the economic issues at play but also how the spatial environment of the university interacts with these. This is called, in Marxist and sociological language, a dialectical materialist reading because we interpret one of these dimensions (e.g. economics) in and against the others (geography, politics, technology, etc.) and through a process of continuous engagement backwards, forwards and between them we generate a richer picture of leadership (Collinson, 2005). In this approach, we can start in one place – a university building – but end by producing an explanatory framework of campus leadership and resistance.

So, let's start with university buildings. One result of the consumerization of universities has been a marked uptick in capital investment in buildings and facilities, and in 2016 the *Financial Times* reported that spending on construction work at UK universities had increased by 43 per cent on the previous year (Plimmer and Viña, 2016). In order to finance these ambitious building projects, universities behave more like corporate businesses, for example investing in capital investment bonds. Such space needs to be productively filled for it to generate revenue and value, however, or it remains mere 'dead labour' (Marx, 1990). As Karl Marx stated in a Gothic flourish: 'Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks' (Marx, 1990: 405). Marx's invitation here is to view forms of capital, such as buildings, as lifeless in and of themselves, only animated by sucking the life force (the productivity) of those who work within them. The idea of the student and junior member of staff as victim of an undead predator is quite far removed from the empowering images universities and other workplaces usually convey. According to the formal leadership of universities, however, such rapaciously thirsty capital is needed precisely to impress fee-paying students, who, we assume, in turn have a certain set of consumerist expectations of their spaces of learning. Beyond students, university spaces are now also frequently rented to corporate companies for their events. Certainly, business schools increasingly resemble multinational corporate headquarters – lots of glass, hot desking workstations, 'inspirational' marketing posters and playful post-modern cafes.

Spatial design of universities is tightly bound to other corporate behaviours too, such as an exponential increase in executive pay (Adams, 2019), with the former vice chancellor of the Open University in the UK, for example, even justifying his salary to MPs at the parliamentary education selection committee in language that would not be out of place in a large financial investment firm. His salary was justly large because he was overseeing 'the largest restructuring redundancy programme ever in UK university history' (Turner, 2018). While executive pay mushrooms, however, universities increasingly move to increase the number of staff on temporary, even hourly contracts, outsourcing other labour entirely to external companies. In this instance the Open University is an exception, instead moving in the opposite direction. It is quite possible if you are a university student, therefore, that the lecturer teaching you in a brand-new



building with state-of-the-art facilities, perhaps sponsored by multinational corporations, is on a precarious employment contract, even managed through an app, while the staff who serve us in the café and clean up after us when we go home are on barely minimum wage terms through an outsourced company. All of this to say that by employing a dialectical approach to leadership space in this example we are interested in analysing how the political-economic environment interacts with and shapes the physical, built architecture of a university, which in turn suggests a certain tendency towards more transactional, commercial and insecure relationships between people in the workplace.

To understand university leadership space and to flesh out what we mean by a spatial interpretation we will now turn to an example of university cleaners who took strike action against their employers. We deliberately invert the regular logic of leadership position within large organizations, where the assumption is usually that leadership is performed in the corporate boardroom rather than by people on minimal pay working in the grimy nooks and corners of buildings. Cleaning work in UK universities is almost entirely outsourced to external companies, with cleaners employed on terms and conditions far worse than those of centrally contracted, particularly permanent staff. Cleaners are also disproportionately Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic migrant women. They are therefore more likely to experience oppression at multiple points – because they are women, non-white and poor – and we can therefore assume that their spatial experiences of universities will be quite different to those of, say, senior white male executives. In summary, working as a cleaner within a university, or anywhere for that matter, can be a very difficult job – but sometimes cleaners fight back and through such resistance we can glimpse the rich potential of a leadership space analysis.

One such case is that of outsourced cleaners at the London School of Economics (LSE), who took strike action against poor pay, work intensification, and what they said was the outsourced cleaning company's 'inveterate practice of racist bullying' (Hughes and Campanile, 2018: 3). Reading an enquiry produced by some of the campaigners (Hughes and Campanile, 2018), we were struck by how important space was for the cleaners in both revealing the kind of leadership they were subjected to but also the kind of leadership they offered in return. Where the university saw its learning spaces as filled with ever larger numbers of students and

corporate companies, cleaners saw something quite different – more dirt but worsening terms and conditions of employment. Where the university marketed its several café spaces as welcoming, cleaners were not permitted to use them, only to clean them. As the *Guardian* journalist Owen Jones noted during the strike, having pulled out of a speaking engagement at the university because he wanted to support the strikers by not crossing the picket line: ‘Speakers with good salaries (myself included) will turn up at this prestigious institution to debate the great injustices of modern Britain. Then in come the cleaners – all from migrant or minority backgrounds – to clear up, victims of some of the very injustices that have just been debated’ (Jones, 2017).

Cleaners were therefore ‘invisible’ (Jones, 2017: 9) to centrally contracted staff, navigating university space like ‘ghosts’. Echoing the way in which capitalism segments us all as individual consumers or sellers, cleaners at LSE worked in isolation, cut off from one another in the various campus buildings, which the authors tell us made them more vulnerable to predatory managers, yet also offered a degree of autonomy and privacy from which to organize one another via WhatsApp and other forms of digital communication. Subverting their ‘invisibility’, a key theme of their campaign was to make themselves ‘visible’, to be recognized and seen as equals within a shared workspace. Hence, a range of visibility tactics were deployed by cleaners during strike action and protests, such as samba bands and dancing, drawing attention to the presence, and therefore also the collective rights of cleaners to be regarded as equals, within the spaces of a university. Space therefore interacts dialectically with people’s subjective experiences of economic inequality to shape a distinctive form of resistance leadership. This is definitely not to say that a spatial view of leadership means that the spaces we occupy entirely determine what is and is not possible – clever executive leaders, try as they might to design spaces to intensify work and minimize resistance, are not seers who can foresee our every intention and movement. After all, the LSE cleaners subverted the spaces they worked within and ultimately won their demands, which shows that even in highly managed spaces, alternative forms of leadership can flourish. To better understand these spatial dynamics of leadership, however, we need to consider not only the individual dynamics of workplaces but to zoom out to consider the places they are usually situated within – cities.

# Leadership and the right to the city

For most of you reading this, life is probably quite urban. Many of you will live in shared rented housing, work remotely at home, in office or university spaces in a city, enjoy occasional trips to local coffee shop and bars, connect with friends on your smartphones, use public transport to get to work and some of you will have cars. In many ways this is a very different lifestyle to the workers that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote about in the second half of the nineteenth century. The people they observed and knew worked in factories and heavy industry. Child labour was the norm; death through overwork and illness was commonplace; families could easily indebt themselves to landlords, even the local baker (whose products were laboured over by people working 18-hour shifts on a pittance and laced with sawdust, to dispel any romantic association with local artisanal craft labour) (Engels, 2009; Marx, 1990). The class struggle revolved around the length of the working day – workplaces tried to operate as close to 24 hours a day as possible and the way in which employers extracted surplus value from workers was by extending the day as much as possible, cutting down on rest and sustenance breaks and playing tricks with the shift system to navigate the law, the ‘small thefts of capital from the workers’ mealtimes and recreation times’ (Marx, 1990: 350). Consider here some of the testimony Marx (1990: 353) took from the factory inspectors of the time regarding child labour, these from pottery workers:

William Wood, 9 years old, ‘was 7 years 10 months old when he began to work’. He ‘ran moulds’ (carried ready-moulded articles into the drying-room, afterwards bringing back the empty mould) from the very beginning. He came to work every day in the week at 6 a.m., and left off at about 9 p.m. ‘I work till 9 o’clock at night six days in the week. I have done so for the last seven or eight weeks.’ Fifteen hours of labour for a child of 7! J. Murray, 12 years of age, says: ‘I turn jigger and run moulds. I come at 6. Sometimes I come at 4. I worked all night last night, till 6 o’clock this morning. I have not been in bed since the night before last. There were eight or nine other boys working last night All but one have come this morning. I get 3 shillings and sixpence. I do not get any more for working at night. I worked two nights last week.’ Fernyhough, a boy of 10: ‘I have not always an hour (for dinner). I have only half an hour sometimes: on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday.’

Child labour was not eradicated in Marx’s time either – even as late as the 1930s Owain’s grandfather Will was forced to leave school aged 14 to work in the local anthracite coal mine in west Wales. The bigger game from employers was paying you enough so that you survived a couple of weeks

or months but beyond that the life of a worker did not really justify the return on investment. In the earlier days of the industrial revolution, without a developed trade union movement or political party to represent workers, they relied on the good will of liberals and ‘enlightened’ bourgeois Tories. Nevertheless, we need to bear in mind that the positional leadership of the time was located in different spaces to that of contemporary life – it was held by wealthy industrialists and their political servants but also by workers who organized in factories, mines, steelworks, mills and potteries.

In some senses the spatial configuration of power and leadership is not so different today. There are lots of striking statistics about global wealth inequality, such as the fact that ‘the world’s 2,153 billionaires have more wealth than the 4.6bn people who make up 60% of the planet’s population’ (Oxfam, 2020). UNICEF (2020) tells us that nearly one in ten children in the world is subjected to child labour. Slave labour and labour that amounts to the same thing in all but name persist in vast areas of the globe. Home ownership in the UK and elsewhere has become a far harder, if not impossible, goal to achieve, with recent reports showing that ownership even for working adults in middle age has plummeted (Partington, 2020). The retirement age everywhere seems to be rising, with workplace pensions continuously under attack from employers. The climate crisis of course brings its own precarious conditions – in Marx’s day workers needed to contend with noxious fumes and polluted water, and today such issues have returned with a vengeance, meaning that we have to accept the fact that we are now approaching, or are already within, a time when environmental damage is permanent.

Yet in another sense the spatial experience of workers today (and most of us are workers rather than owners of prosperous businesses, no matter the impressive sounding job titles we may have) is distinct. Obviously large parts of the world still manufacture things (China, Germany, etc.), but for the rest it is the finance and service economies that dominate – with the raw materials of production as likely to encompass bytes being passed through people and automated systems as the component elements of commodities. For most people the reality of work in these sectors is being office bound, usually in, or in the peripheries of, a city. Most people outside the public sector will not be members of a trade union, although there are signs to be detected of a modest resurgence in trade unionism. The hard power exercised over workers in office spaces is still considerable, increasingly

what we referred to in the previous chapter as Total Management – algorithmic control, temporary contracts, bogus ‘self-employment’ contracts, performance appraisals, surveillance systems in open-plan spaces – but the dominant discourse we experience from our employers is drenched in soft power. We are urged to collaborate, communicate and innovate together in teams where creativity is assigned paramount importance (Virno, 2004). Within such systems there is still plenty of scope for extracting surplus value from us, however. Surplus value is a phrase that denotes the ‘extra’ that organizations gain from workers (profit or other forms of value) over and above the costs they outlay on wages, etc. The surplus value we offer is ‘absolute’ in Marx’s (1990) terminology, meaning that it can be increased simply by extending the amount of time we work for; or it can be ‘relative’, meaning that surplus value can be extracted from us by intensifying work (rather than extending the amount of time we spend working), which is achieved by adopting technologies that speed up our productivity (Wark, 2019) but also by encouraging informal performance pressure between peers (‘Could you do me this favour?’ ‘Sorry to bother you but ...’ – sound familiar?). Work is increasingly an experience dominated by the production of relative surplus value – we intensify our time at work through fast and efficient communication made possible by technology. Yet we also experience something akin to the old forms of ‘absolute’ surplus value extraction because many contemporary workers now never truly finish their shifts. They answer emails in bed at night, check them first thing in the morning, take calls at unsociable times and go on staff social events at weekends or in the evenings (whose aim is to improve teamwork and therefore also productivity and, ultimately, profit) – these are all forms of elongating the working day and therefore of extracting more absolute surplus value. To compound it all, the commute to work across cities can become arduous and is caused by a spatial pushing of workers outside centrally located urban residential zones due to being priced out of the housing market.

Employment itself can feel more liquid, with workers transiting between short-term contracts and planning their lives in terms of one-off projects rather than careers (Bauman et al., 2015) – as is the lot of software programmers, people who work for voluntary sector organizations and even, increasingly, academics. For these people, the workplace is often the home and the spaces of home may yet become even more office-like if

changed work patterns related to the Covid-19 pandemic persist. For an increasing proportion of the population, giant warehouse spaces or even whole cities are the workplace. The ‘platform economy’ is a collective term for companies who do not employ many people directly but instead rely on a large number of peripheral workers who are notionally ‘self-employed’ (Srnicek, 2016). Some people like this mode of work as they argue that it gives them more freedom and flexibility but the reality for most is that they can end up working harder and longer for less. Working under these conditions usually means delivering goods or people across usually urban spaces and where there is no human leader to answer to at all but instead a software app that deploys algorithms to give orders and work schedules to people. As previously stated, people are not fired from such work because they are not employed as such; instead, they have their apps ‘deactivated’ (Cant, 2019). For these workers, customers and colleagues are more transient – they come and go – and the office is the city, where they learn the shortcuts, choke points and spaces of sociality that make work pay a bit more and become more tolerable.

We are also forced to work longer and harder due to the ways in which we have become accustomed to living with debt (Graeber, 2014a): student loans and mortgage payments (if you’re ‘lucky’), as well as exorbitant rents paid to landlords, streaming services, cloud storage firms, mobile phone companies, internet providers, car manufacturers, health insurers in some contexts (again in these contexts, if you’re ‘lucky’) and so on seemingly indefinitely. This situation is part of the neoliberalization of society we mentioned earlier. The most obvious manifestation of such neoliberalization is the outsourcing of work within large organizations, which creates a two-tier group of workers, a core and periphery – hence the cleaners we learnt about earlier were not employed directly by LSE. Outsourcing allows organizations to lessen their human resources, national insurance and pensions responsibilities – to behave more like profit-maximizing corporations, in other words. But the neoliberalization of life, as we have hinted, permeates into all spaces of life – how we view and act within our living spaces and even in the friendships and intimate relationships we experience. We meet romantic partners through apps, and we negotiate short-term rental contracts on homes that we flit between every 6 and 12 months, flexibly keeping a minimum of physically present personal possessions (rather than digital files in a cloud) to move between them.

These changing forms of economic production and work are part and parcel of what geographers refer to as a process of urbanization, of cities becoming sites within which capital circulates mostly within the services and finance industries. These trends are intensified by the speed and availability of digital technology. Such urbanization brings with it a host of consequences – more liquid and precarious forms of employment, as we have discussed – but also significant changes to the built environment. New buildings, transport networks and other forms of infrastructure are needed to maintain the flow and functioning of capital in these urbanized spaces. For the geographer David Harvey (2019a), urbanization is a process fuelled by the need of capitalism to find ways in which it can ‘absorb’ its own surplus values and products:

Capitalism needs urbanization to absorb the surplus products it perpetually produces. In this way an inner connection emerges between the development of capitalism and urbanization. Hardly surprisingly, therefore, the logistical curves of growth of capitalist output over time are broadly paralleled by the logistical curves of urbanization of the world’s population.

(2019a: 20)

Such absorption can have the effect, on the one hand, of making cities more vibrant and prosperous places to live but, on the other hand, usually also widens and deepens inequalities into broader terrains of everyday life, some of which we will soon unpack. For now, and broadly speaking, what happens in urbanized spaces is that some of the value we have kept for ourselves through improvements won in our workplaces (usually through trade unionism) gets re-appropriated in other ways within urban spaces – e.g. through spiralling rents on housing, expensive fares for using privatized public transport systems and so on. This is a shift from extracting surplus in the workplace, in production, to extracting it within broader spheres of life, the realm that sociologists call ‘reproduction’. This is called the sphere of reproduction because it incorporates all of the activities we pursue in order to maintain ourselves as healthy and productive people – the time and resources we expend on eating and sleeping, maintaining our homes, loving, rearing children and so on. Focusing on urbanization means bearing in mind both production and reproduction and this also has the effect of bringing the experiences of women and minority populations, who, sadly in the global north, still bear a greater degree of the reproductive burden than do white men, to the centre of our attention. This trend of urbanization has led to some sociologists and political theorists arguing that we now need to

rethink the terrain and spaces within which work, organizing, struggle and leadership take place – we have moved from the factory to the metropolis (Negri, 2017).

Pioneering this approach was the sociologist Henri Lefebvre, who argued that many of the class antagonisms present in the workplace were now omnipresent and evolving in the city (Lefebvre, 2010). Struggle therefore now meant asserting a collective ‘right to the city’ rather than simply rights at work:

the rights of the citizen as an urban dweller and user of multiple services. [The right to the city] would affirm, on the one hand, the right of users to make known their ideas on the space and time of their activities in the urban area; it would also cover the right to the use of the centre, a privileged place, instead of being dispersed and stuck into ghettos (for workers, immigrants, the ‘marginal’ and even for the ‘privileged’).

(Lefebvre, 2010: 34)

We can immediately notice in this quote two ways in which urbanization expands inequalities beyond the workplace – into housing and cultural experiences; yet conversely, we can also see new opportunities for an alternative leadership of place and space: for safe, healthy and affordable housing and for free access to spaces of leisure, culture and sociality within cities.

## **Leadership, community unions and the right to a home**

Article 25 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone is entitled to health and well being, an important element of which is gained through having safe and secure housing. It is unclear from the Declaration, however, what an adequate form of housing might be, and we know from walking around our cities that the Article cannot be taken too seriously by our respective governments when so many of our fellow humans do not have a roof over their heads. We can therefore move beyond the Declaration and suggest that an important agenda for a leadership of space is making demands for universal and collective rights to safe, secure and healthy homes for all.

Housing almost everywhere has become scarcer and pricier. It is not necessarily a problem of a shortage of buildings that troubles us here



(although this is an issue too) as much as *available* buildings. Capitalism needs to grow and spread in order to survive as a system that structures our societies; if it stops circulating and growing, companies start shedding jobs to protect profits, markets panic and governments increasingly respond by further slashing investment in public services and infrastructure (although this form of austerity economics is a more recent phenomenon, where previously governments largely responded to crises through a Keynesian economic approach of investing in infrastructure and industry to reboot growth). Over time, as opportunities for growth from manufacturing products have diminished (there's only so many commodities one can buy and use), finance capital and services capital have become dominant in many western economies: i.e. making money from financial investments and selling experiences. To illustrate this shift, car makers now increasingly rely on money they make from interest payments made by customers on loans taken out to buy cars over time, rather than on the sale itself.

Financialization of the economy has had a massive impact on housing. Whereas once people speculated in stocks and shares, now they also accumulate housing, for which they can earn rents and handsome returns. They often do so without ever seeing their properties, buying and selling real estate through digital technology. Capital and political leaders working on behalf of financialized and commodified housing have systematically dismantled public forms of housing, selling it off to generate short-term surpluses and to notionally spread the possibility of home ownership. Yet decades later we are left with the after-effects – a swathe of people left at the mercy of private landlords because they cannot afford to buy a home and because there are no public forms of housing left to move into; but also many properties in lucrative urban centres merely remaining vacant because they are not bought as homes to live in but as investments accruing value.

There are three major ways in which housing investors and major developers make money and we need to understand each so that we can see how a leadership of space dialectically interacts with them. First, through indebting people within home ownership. Where poorer people are able to secure a mortgage on a property in the cheaper peripheries of a city, such debts are also speculated upon as an additional means of profit – hence the financial crash and subsequent recession of 2007–9 was caused by a collapse in the sub-prime mortgage market, a system where poorer people's mortgage debts were packaged together and sold on as an investment to be

traded on the money markets: investors made money from the interest payments of poor home ‘owners’, a perfect example of an upward redistribution of wealth (Harvey, 2019a).

The second way in which housing investors make money is of course rent. There is a general lack of affordable housing to buy or rent. In the UK, Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government of the 1980s introduced the Right to Buy scheme, which gave tenants in council-owned homes (who paid less in rent and maintenance because the homes were publicly owned), the right to buy the properties they lived in at reduced rates. While the policy allowed people who previously might have found home ownership impossible a means of owning property, it set in motion a chronic shortage of available council homes and also resulted in these formerly public homes being bought by private landlords and rented out at a profit. Successive Labour and Conservative governments have failed to address the shortage of council homes. A lack of affordable housing to buy or rent from local government has meant a proliferation of private rentals, for which people pay a premium price for accommodation that is often sub-standard and hazardous. Paying sky-high rental prices while dealing with landlords who delay essential repairs, fail to attend to damp and other health hazards, withhold deposits but who can also enforce evictions at short notice for little to no reason has become a daily feature of life, particularly for younger people.

Third, poorer people get pushed to the peripheries or slum pockets of cities through a process commonly known as ‘gentrification’ (Harvey, 2019a and 2019b), which creates ‘a political ecology of highly politicised vulnerability’ (Graham, 2018: 121). Particularly affecting larger cities, individuals and families can be forced to live in less convenient, heavily polluted and economically disadvantaged parts of cities because they cannot afford to buy or rent in more central areas. Increasing numbers of workers are needed to do the poorly paid service work of cities, yet they cannot hope to afford the city’s housing costs. More recently this pushing to the periphery has been a reality for formerly middle-class professionals, as any public service worker in London can attest.

All three forms of marginalization have generated their own spatial leadership responses rooted in cities rather than traditional workplaces. Again, as with our analysis of universities, we need to approach understanding such leadership dialectically but this time in spaces across

whole urban areas rather than restricted to campuses or discrete workplaces. And just as with the examples of dissensual leadership explored in the previous chapter, technology helps people involved in leadership navigate and re-imagine urban spaces. In the UK one of the most exciting forms of leadership that seeks to resist the inequalities of urbanization can be found in the nascent organizational form of the community union. While regular trade unions operate within the spaces of specific workplaces or employment sectors, community unions adopt a geography as their focus. They may, therefore, represent and campaign with their members on any issue that would enhance a community – such as housing, transport, air pollution and so on. Adopting the values of the broader trade union movement, community unions try to engender a spirit of mutual responsibility and solidarity, the idea being that a collective of working-class people is needed to take on and defeat the forces of capital.

The most prominent of these unions in the UK is Acorn, an organization that Owain is researching with colleague Nela Smolović Jones (Smolović Jones et al., 2020d). Establishing the union in the UK city of Bristol, one of the country's main sites of intense gentrification but also a place with a long history of political activism, made sense because it provided a potentially strong base of politically savvy and motivated members. Trained up in the latest innovations in community organizing, the founders of Acorn in the UK started by knocking on the doors of residents in targeted parts of the city, noting people's problems and introducing through discussion the concept of a union to strengthen residents' power. Strongly apparent amongst these issues was housing. When Owain and Nela interviewed Acorn members, hearing horror stories about the precarious and dangerous conditions in which renters in the UK live was commonplace – runaway damp in bedrooms, water gushing from ceilings, heating systems that never worked, and bullying, intransigent landlords who try to intimidate tenants all create significant physical and mental health problems for tenants.

Rocketing house and rental prices in Bristol and further afield had left a cadre of people living at the mercy of their landlords and Acorn felt that the moment was ripe for fighting back. Unlike small-scale community groups or charities, Acorn can be confrontational and can seek out conflict as a means of gaining victories for its members. For example, it has in the past formed picket lines at the commercial businesses of landlords who it believes are exploiting tenants, handing out information leaflets to

customers informing them of the shabby way in which the landlord treats people. Acorn often also holds protests outside the homes of landlords, generating a significant inconvenience and shaming effect (nobody likes to look bad in front of the neighbours!). But the tactic Acorn is best known for is eviction resistance. These actions are organized when Acorn feels that a tenant is being unfairly removed from their home. Organizers carefully plan the resistance event, assigning roles and mapping the terrain of the home and street, placing the bodies of members in tactically suitable spots, which forms a human barrier to the bailiffs entering the property to eject the tenant. These are visually striking moments that seem highly effective at prompting a compromise from landlords but that also gain a lot of attention in the spaces of social media. Leadership here therefore mediates between the in-real-life spaces of the street and the virtual spaces of the internet.

The most powerful effect of eviction resistance, however, is the sense of empowerment it creates, an empowerment developed and cultivated within the spaces of precarious housing. Acorn members can be people lacking in confidence, made to feel that they do not deserve any better than a housing situation that is making them ill. Their sense of self-worth is diminished in the damp, dark spaces of unhealthy housing but these are also turned, through a hydra-like distributed form of resistance leadership into spaces of hope, creativity and solidarity. More orthodox trade unions know this sense of empowerment well and cultivate the feeling of hope that is generated when forms of power within organizations are inverted so that it is the workers who now hold power over the bosses. Key to the community union model is adapting this inverted form of power in a hydra-like fashion over the spaces of a city rather than a workplace. Leadership here is about discovering and channelling common cause between diverse people in a city space – cleaners alongside students alongside doctors alongside retired grandparents. This connection is, of course, facilitated and made easier through digital forms of continuous communication. Through gathering and acting together in urban streets in events organized through apps, and later amplified and spread through social media, solidarity is formed, and it is this solidarity between such a diverse group of people that acts as the fuel for leadership:

That most elusive of concepts, yet one rich with potential, solidarity is a word for describing a heady cocktail of forces and feelings: the feeling of loyalty and emotional attachment we hold towards diverse others even if we come from radically different backgrounds; the knowledge that

people we stand in solidarity with can be trusted to have our backs and not crumble under pressure from power; and, finally and most importantly, an ongoing commitment to building the confidence and agency of every ally. When these elements come together, we enter the sweet spot of collective strength and individual expression and capability: these feed one another and can snowball into a force for transformative change.

(Smolović Jones et al., 2020d)

The community union model that Acorn is pioneering is certainly an exciting example of hydra-like leadership between a diverse network of members developed within urban spaces. Yet, although it has grown exponentially and now has a strong presence across the UK, it has yet to pose such a threat to capital that it has attracted significant violent and legislative backlash from the status quo. We also know from history, as well as from other parts of the world, that the struggle over a right to the city is a long and protracted one, needing perseverance and a willingness to experiment with a number of different organizational forms, which often co-exist, and it is to the favelas of Latin America that we now turn to better understand these.

## **Favela leadership: In and against the city**

In Latin America, mass improvised self-built housing has sprung up in pockets within cities and in their peripheries. Such favelas often do not have the security of official recognition by government, for example frequently not appearing on official maps or city plans, or the infrastructure and access to basic utilities that you would expect in more purposefully permanent forms of housing. Yet favelas are significant to the geography, economy and culture of cities. In Brazil's Rio de Janeiro, a city with extreme wealth inequality, around 20 per cent of the city's 6.7m residents live in a favela (Briso and Phillips, 2020) and more broadly still we can note that one in eight people globally (around a billion) live in slums (UN Habitat, 2016).

Favelas are in-between spaces. Initially and often indefinitely overlooked by government, they are starved of the kind of infrastructure and assistance usually offered to city zones – road maintenance, water, access to utilities, proper public services such as education and so on. This can create a vacuum of governance, which, makes them more vulnerable to a 'parallel' form of governance from organized crime rooted in the drugs trade (McGuirk, 2015). As Harvey (2019a) teaches us, however, when such

spaces either intrude on the fortunes of capital or when capital needs further space to expand within, they can become the site of spatial conflict, territorial battle waged over who has a right to the city. Moreover, it is not possible to make a neat division between the drugs gangs on one side and state actors on the other, as the interests of both often coincide, notably in the form of ‘clientelism’ (Fahlberg, 2018), the phenomenon of local officials, police officers, religious leaders and politicians using their power and leverage to work on behalf of the interests of narcotics and criminal entrepreneurs. In Rio’s favelas, the policy of ‘pacification’ of drug gangs intensified in the build-up to the World Cup football tournament in 2014 and the Olympic Games in 2016, but the drugs’ gangs and their violence unevenly resurfaced after the culmination of these tournaments. Of course, sporadic police and state action against gangs had long been a feature of favela life but as the city and state prepared for an influx of visitors and the gaze of the international community due to the World Cup and Olympics, the place-shaping leadership of the state became more obviously embedded in architecture as well as in demonstrations of force via the police. Government started to take an interest in forms of urban regeneration, which would make, it was claimed, the favelas more peaceful and enjoyable places to live and work, yet which locals feared could also be used as a means of forcing them out of what were often potentially lucrative spaces for real estate profiteering.

Within the improvised, culturally dynamic but frequently violent favela spaces a grassroots leadership emerges. At the community level, Fahlberg (2018) chronicles the activities of groups who operate subtly and carefully within spaces they think are safe from the retribution of the gangs, which she refers to as ‘participative spaces.’ These community leaders will campaign for better service provision from the city, for example, or run smaller-scale education programmes to educate young people about violence and racism but also to equip them with the skills they may need to broaden their future work options away from the drugs industry. This is careful spatial leadership rooted in relational forms of assistance (Fahlberg calls it ‘*Transformative Assistencialismo*’) because community leaders need to operate in ways that will avoid them being drawn into the peripheries of the narcotics trade and this can happen fairly easily or innocuously, for example, by doing a one-off favour for a minor politician or official with ties to the drug traffickers. Fahlberg also finds that most of the community

leaders in the favela were women, who manage to maintain civil but distant relations with local drug dealers: they would greet one another cordially on the street and some of the dealers would refer to a particular local leader as ‘auntie’, but this is as far as relations between them went. Women community leaders ‘offered a visual, embodied distinction from violent politics, which were controlled almost entirely by men’ (p. 497). In some ways we can read this gendered phenomenon as unfortunate, playing into broader stereotypes of care for others as ‘women’s work’ and the realm of money and power as ‘men’s work’, yet we also need to acknowledge the ingenuity and pragmatic spatial innovation inherent in this kind of leadership. In a similar vein, Rio’s favelas have been home to ‘activist-architect’ leadership (McGuirk, 2015), employed in a hydra-like form alongside and with other community groups. Such activist leadership works within moments where the government’s approach to favelas tends towards the inclusive rather than the heavy handed and violent, employing approaches such as participative planning to design and build spaces that reflect the strengths and potentials inherent in a community’s existing way of life. These are all subtle forms of leadership that work in the gaps and spaces untouched by violent power-games to build alliances between people intent on re-building favelas along peaceful and inclusive lines but also, crucially, leadership that needs to be spatially aware – of the changing affiliations, territories and interests of the competing powers of favela neighbourhoods.

There is also a more radical edge to favela leadership, labelled ‘Community Militancy’ by Fahlberg, which again requires a sophisticated sense of spatial awareness. Whereas militant forms of leadership are usually too perilous *within* the relations of a favela, as they could attract a violent response, they are possible *outside*, in relation to government institutions and representatives. Militant leadership here, Fahlberg states, is a matter of employing emancipatory education methodologies to build a base of confident activists, who then employ persistent and direct forms of action in demanding change from the government, ‘emphasiz[ing] the development of the territory ... the physical, social, economic, and cultural interests of a geographically bounded space’ (pp. 499–500). Such leadership is marked by ‘confrontation’, facing up to the mayor, officials and other politicians in their own spaces, bringing the demands of the favela to them, ‘to demand they uphold the law and their obligations to urban development’ (p. 500).

The final form of leadership noted by Fahlberg is termed ‘Cultural Resistance’ and we need to give culture its due as a vital aspect of leadership space. Culture and leisure have always been key terrains of struggle for the working class. Karl Marx positioned his case for communism against what he viewed as the disregard of capital and the bourgeois class for the holistic development of human capabilities – their rights to learn, enjoy the arts, socialize and play. Hence why Marx in *Capital* focuses so much on the length of the working day, arguing that in seeking to continually elongate people’s working hours, capital also ‘usurps the time for growth, development and healthy maintenance of the body. It steals the time required for the consumption of fresh air and sunlight’ (Marx, 1990: 374). For Marx, capitalism was inextricably bound with a loss of cultured life and that any replacement offered through accruing more capital was a synthetic kind of pleasure:

The less you eat, drink, buy books, go to the theatre, go dancing, go drinking, think, love, theorize, sing, paint, fence, etc, the more you save, and the greater will become that treasure which neither moths nor maggots can consume – your capital.

(Marx, 2005a: 360)

We have already discussed how capital needs to keep moving and circulating in order to expand and grow, and that one crucial way in which it does so is by moving into and across a geographical place – a city, a region. When it does so, however, it is not a case of simple domination of one form of economic reasoning – capitalism – over a helpless local culture. Rather, it must adapt its aesthetics to local conditions, histories and tastes (a culture) (Harvey, 2019a). One crude example of this is the financialization of the favelas, which, after the release of the hit film *City of God* in 2002 started to develop an image of cool urban living, the so-called ‘favela chic’ (Graham, 2018: 125). Erecting grand cable cars to take tourists into, above and beyond favelas was a way of capitalizing on this chic by creating a form of ‘verticalised voyeurism’ (Graham, 2018: 128) for visitors, a ‘poverty tourism’ that also included guided walks and the sale of merchandise. These are all ways in which capitalism co-opts local cultures for profit. This co-opting also happens via bricks and mortar, with London and New York being the exemplar cases. When capital entrenches itself in a place, as finance capital did in London with headquarters of major banks, market speculators and so on, the expansion of capital does not stop there. Property redevelopment, investment in infrastructure and the eruption of



new ‘gentrified’ businesses follow on. According to Harvey (2019a: 112) this is not simply a hostile takeover where existing locals are forced to adapt to the ways of bankers but rather capital ‘accumulate[s] [local] marks of distinction’, which is to say that it seeks to build upon and profit from local cultures and traditions. Hence you get the bizarre situation in some cities (London is a good example) where neighbourhoods with a tradition of alternative cultural and political practices are co-opted by capital, with the effect of pushing up the cost of property and living to such an extent that these places can become hollowed out of the people and practices capital extracted value from in the first place until what you are left with is a kind of simulation of authentic cultural life, a ghost of life long past. Treat this like a kind of thought experiment – the next time you watch a movie set in London that features some kind of artist, enterprising journalist, activist or even nurse or teacher, take a close look at their appealing homes and then visit a property website to see how much they would have to pay in rent or have as a mortgage deposit to live there. Of course, you will conclude, a struggling busker-painter-writer can’t afford a nice loft apartment in Notting Hill – in reality they would be lucky to hold down a crammed flat-share in Zone 3 or 4. In such films you are being sold a fantasy of urban living by the Hollywood film industry – yes, the movie makers as well as the bankers and real estate developers are profiting from local cultures.

When a place becomes ‘gentrified’, when it is identified by capital as a zone of expansion and accumulation, housing becomes a target of monopolization but so does culture. Culture serves as a means of making money from the practices and traditions of a local population but is also a route to further growing capital in general: if a city’s culture is a highly prized commodity – a ‘mark of distinction’ – then it also becomes easier to make money from real estate, products manufactured in the city and so on, whose value is enhanced by their association with the culture. But as Harvey (2019a) is at pains to demonstrate, this can be a double-edged sword. In some ways, the more radical and subversive the culture, the cooler and more unique it can appear, and the more opportunities exist for generating profit through co-optation, yet such cultures can ‘to some degree [be] uncontrollable ... [and] can be antagonistic to [capital’s] smooth functioning’ (Harvey, 2019a: 116). Opportunities for resistance leadership and engendering alternatives to capital never vanish, in other words: ‘The spaces for transformational politics are there because capital can never

afford to close them down' (Harvey, 2019a: 117). Capital cannot shut down local cultures entirely because they are too profitable, but this then holds open the possibility of revolt as these cultures persist in some form and may develop in ways that reject further, or any, incursion into local ways of life. The more subversive the culture, the more profitable and yet also the more prone to bite back: in fact, appropriation of space by capital can prompt a reawakening of a counter-culture that seeks radically different modes of life.

To better see this form of spatial leadership rooted in culture we can return to the favela. As the music, dance and art of the favela becomes increasingly the site of appropriation, so the artists push back. Hence Fahlberg (2018) tells us of a local arts activist organization in the City of God favela, called Art Talk, which holds monthly open mic nights used for asserting multicultural and multiracial forms of expression that also protest against marginalization and oppression. The organic nature of a place's culture means that it is widespread and not forced – as Fahlberg notes, the local drug dealers play rap music through their battery powered hi-fi systems, and rap battles are an everyday way of life. Such organicism is prime territory for cultural appropriation and profiteering but also a way of life that can refuse to be controlled and, when channelled towards alternatives to capitalist modes of organizing and control, can open up new possibilities. These cultural practices that can engender unique forms of spatial leadership hold the potential to unify people in a way that does not feel alien or imposed.

We can see something of this tendency by travelling briefly to Los Angeles' Venice Beach, the city's 'last poor beach' (Davis and Wiener, 2020). The city is obviously known widely as the home of the movie industry (itself a factory of powerful fantasies of leadership), of glamour, beaches and rock 'n roll; yet it also holds a position in the public imaginary as a place of gritty urban life – of wealth inequality, poverty, racial segregation, police violence and drugs-related crime. As we have just noted, these contrasts should not be seen as impediments to capital accumulation – far from it; just take as one example the commercialization and profit made from the LA rap band NWA, whose image and lyrical themes have long since been appropriated by Hollywood and the T-shirt merchandisers. You have probably also seen Venice Beach on your screens, portrayed as a beacon for a diverse cultural life – hippies, punks, skaters and even body

builders who work out on the sands, co-mingling in an alluring fantasy image of urban California beach life.

By the 1960s, Davis and Wiener say, the neighbourhood was a lone island of diversity and radical politics in an otherwise racially and income-segregated city, home to ageing white peaceniks but also working-class black people. It was also the continuous target of capitalist expansion, with its spaces seen as opportunities for territorializing and marketing a zone of ultra-cool lifestyles to be pursued alongside a prime stretch of coastline. For one, Venice's homes tended to be small houses rather than the mix of mansions and tower blocks that capital tends to cultivate for profit maximization. These homes took up space, with the knock-on effect that getting there by road took time because there was no room to build a bigger, faster route in and out. The city government had therefore long planned road building alongside the construction of 'high-rises and luxury shopping' (Davis and Wiener, 2020: 545), a 'chilling' (Davis and Wiener, 2020: 544) vision that would have integrated the area more tightly with the city but that would also have had a deleterious effect on its poor and black neighbourhoods, forcing many people to simply move away. As we have already noted, for a culture to be appropriated it cannot be entirely eliminated but of course it must be subdued, and so Davis and Wiener recount the 1960s as a time when Venice was over-policed, with public gatherings violently suppressed. But as authoritarian forms of place-shaping leadership, enacted through a mix of city planning, policing and appropriation is placed into circulation, so a resistance movement forms, and in the case of Venice this occurred around the diverse and politically radical Free Venice Organizing Committee. The Committee organized public parades and authored the 'Declaration of Free Venice', which proposed defeating the city government's plans by seceding from the city entirely. The document accused the city authorities of colluding with big money capital over local people. More violence and mass arrests followed but the movement was successful in slowing down the redevelopment of the area and preventing the new freeway from being built: 'The boardwalk remained basically unchanged through the Seventies – a place of longhairs, buskers, young people of color, and booths selling those candles and sandals. The little houses of Venice would be upgraded but (mostly) not razed. Venice remained' (p. 556).

So, we have a right to the city as a crucial terrain of contemporary spatial leadership. This is leadership that is shaped by the geography of a place and the ways in which capital expands and circulates within it but is countered by people who have a very different idea of who should have a right to the city. Such leadership is subtle and spatially aware but also at times militant and confrontational. It is also a leadership deeply embedded in local cultures that arise from distinctive urban spaces. As workplaces and everyday life become more urban, thinking leadership in terms of space and the city will become ever more vital, and the possibilities of building leadership in ways that connect diverse groups of people with shared spatial experiences is a thrilling prospect.

## Conclusion

The Myth of the Hydra provides us with (at least) three different ways of understanding the theory of Distributed Leadership. We began by considering how the search for an alternative to traditional ideas of leadership has regenerated interest in what were original ideas drawn from anarchist theory, though they probably go much further back in time to the original hunter-gatherer societies. On that basis it was suggested that the shift towards redistributing responsibility within organizations could be used to (re)kindle participative communities and inhibit authoritarian leaders and organizations, as demonstrated in the struggle for civil rights in the United States in the 1960s.

One alternative was simply not to face the problem, to assume that organizations did not need leadership of any kind because it was essentially corrupt and corrupting. Yet the refusal to look at the pink elephant in the corner does not necessarily mean there isn't one there, and that recognition has pushed some groups, from Green Parties to educational institutions, to consider how Distributed Leadership, while not a complete answer to the problem might at least prove to be a better way of leading. Indeed, mainstream contemporary organizations and modes of work now place far more emphasis on adaptability and loose structures, meaning that the reality of work for many is that they do not experience the physical presence of a hierarchical leader in the same way. For many people this can mean that the boss is an algorithm, which takes us to the realm of automated Distributed

Leadership, with some of the potential benefits of freedom but also, for most currently, a lived reality of precarious work and lives – temporary contracts, less job security, hazardous housing, worse pensions or no pensions at all and so on.

Distributed leadership, then, does have a dark side and we need to address this. Societies and economies are shot through with power, violence, exploitation and marginalization, dynamics we conveyed through the extreme examples of serial killers and people who commit mass murder. Although these people are aberrations, we need to bear in mind that contemporary forms of capital and associated modes of leadership generate their own distinctive sicknesses. Contemporary capitalism places more emphasis on networks and communication and many studies of Distributed Leadership seem to celebrate such expressive and devolved forms of leadership in breathless language, assuming that conflict can be talked out, as if people at work are primarily dissatisfied with the way they are communicated with rather than by the material terms and conditions of their employment. We argue that this is a fantasy position, a simulacra that bears little resemblance to real life, where people will be justly angry by being made to work harder for less money and security. Masking power imbalances and marginalization – or normalizing and even celebrating them – can be one unfortunate effect of Distributed Leadership. It is also both a philosophy and a process and that process implies that it could be used by those uninterested in distributing authority and more concerned in keeping the authorities in the dark. ISIS and al-Qaeda are two such organizations, and the second part of the chapter analysed them through the perspective of Distributed Leadership in general and the Hydra myth in particular. Quite how we should deal with such groups depends upon how one thinks they are led – and ‘disab-led’.

First, as Hercules initially believed, military force is adequate for the job because force is the only thing that terrorists understand and decapitating their leadership is the fastest way to stop them. There is, after all, little point in trying to negotiate with hijackers who intend to kill themselves as well as their victims. The problem here is not ensuring the means to despatch the terrorists but generating the political will to go through with the task. Indeed, the argument goes, the longer the West procrastinates over the moral case for intervention, the more likely terrorists are to get hold of and

then use weapons of mass destruction. And, following Hercules, the issue is not if he will attack the Hydra but when.

Second, and alternatively, the ‘decapitation response’ is to misunderstand the nature of the problem: such terrorist groups can only continue not because of their hierarchical leaders but because some people regard their cause as just, therefore that cause needs to be addressed through some form of reconciliation. Here the problem relates to the difficulties Hercules faces when dealing with the Hydra – it is literally ‘headless’, so seeking out leaders to decapitate can mask the real problem because for every ‘terrorist’ killed another two ‘freedom fighters’ will emerge as replacements; this is not a clash of civilizations (Huntington, 1997) but a consequence of perceiving ‘the other’ as the enemy. The attribution of responsibility to remnants of the Baathist Party for the attacks upon coalition forces of all nationalities in Iraq, and upon the Red Cross and the UN, long after the war was declared to be over, implied that the United States still believed a leader of some kind was coordinating the resistance, but it may be that while ISIS and al-Qaeda are best configured as heterarchies, the resistance in Iraq was much closer to a scale-free network – not that there are leaderless groups but that there are lots of malcontented groups, each with conventional leadership but without any overall coordination. In truth, in Iraq, Syria and Libya, we have Hydras – not leaderless organizations but multi-headed ones.

Third, neither of these responses is adequate because, like Hercules, you have to employ a dual strategy against different kinds of opposition: force worked for the mortal heads and leaders of dictatorships – providing they were cut off and the necks cauterized – but force alone was inadequate for the immortal head; that required a different resolution. Thus, force is inadequate to prevent terrorism that has some popular support because its heterarchical and scale-free network manifestations are less susceptible to conventional force. But merely addressing the problems that generate support for terrorism will not remove the problem; there are simply some problems for which violence may be an unfortunate but necessary response. This is the Hydra paradox that Hercules can only resolve by engaging in different strategies for what appears at one level to be the same enemy. Indeed, in deference to the myth, even if this set of political problems is resolved, the American Hercules cannot rest in peace forever, for there are ten other Labours yet to be completed. This permanent engagement is a

consequence of the United States taking upon itself the role of global (American) police force and, as all police officers know, activity deemed to be criminal by the (American) law can never be permanently eliminated, though it can be constrained.

We might conclude that this still leaves Distributed Leadership free for colonization by the political left because the political right is philosophically opposed to such a wide distribution of authority and leadership. The latter may be correct but that does not mean that the political left can claim monopoly control over Distributed Leadership. On the contrary, as we mentioned at the beginning, Distributed Leadership in this egalitarian sense only really exists as a Weberian Ideal Type and its practical embodiments tend to slide much closer to the scale-free network model, rather than the random network. As we have already suggested, Distributed Leadership quite comfortably fits the trends of contemporary capitalism to eradicate where possible more stable employment relationships, pushing increasing numbers of people into temporary and insecure work with no or few formal hierarchical leaders. It is therefore imperative that writers on Distributed Leadership – as well as people who promote it in organizations – reflect carefully about the human impact these often idealistically framed ideas have on the lived experiences of workers. This issue brings us neatly to the position of leadership in space, because as leadership becomes more distributed, we need to think more about the geographies within which it operates and spreads. To do this we made the case that we need to adjust our focus from the traditional workplace as site of leadership to geographical areas. To understand how leadership is distributed we probably now need to think about how communities of workers interacting across (mostly urban) spaces function rather than focus on small-scale and face-to-face interactions within groups, as this increasingly feels like an outdated view of work. In making the case for a leadership of space we argued that the geography of a place can lead, shaping the available options and preferences of people in work. To illustrate this we asked you to think about the contemporary university as a space that is increasingly being shaped by norms of commercialization. This example, also, however, raised important issues of how a counter-form of leadership can develop, suggesting that leadership of space can never be viewed as totalizing and supreme – workers will always find a way to organize and offer an alternative.

Thinking in terms of space forced us to consider the urbanization of societies and to consider leadership within the frame of a right to the city. Here we considered explicitly the changing patterns and modes of work in contemporary society, introducing you to some ideas from Marxism about how capitalism functions and adapts to seek out ever greater opportunities for value extraction. Capital has evolved to extract value from the host of reproductive, as well as productive, forms of life. Whole cities therefore become sites within which a particular kind of leadership is enacted from above – moving to appropriate local cultures and constructing a built environment that seeks to maximize opportunities for profit rather than collective well being. This insight prompted us to consider how an urban, city-based leadership might look and feel. We did so through the examples of university cleaners, housing activists, beach dwellers and community leaders. This is a spatially aware leadership that seeks out creative connections, distributed in the sense of not being bound by strict formal organizations and instead reaching across space to assemble groups that are diverse, adaptable and pragmatically confrontational. Leadership here breaks the boundaries of the traditional employment relationship to demand a right to the city that incorporates rights at work, certainly, but also broadens to make demands for a secure, lively and social way of life.

## Notes

- 1 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Iraq/Story/0,2763,932750,00.html>.
- 2 <https://www.panarchy.org/bakunin/authority.1871.html>.
- 3 <http://www.panarchy.org/bakunin/authority.1871.html>.
- 4 See, for example, <https://www.worker-participation.eu/European-Works-Councils>.
- 5 A revolutionary anarchist federation.
- 6 <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/civil-rights-act>.
- 7 <http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/mlk/king/biography.html>.
- 8 As the *Time* website suggests, 'Montgomery's segregation laws were complex: blacks were required to pay their fare to the driver, then get off and reboard through the back door. Sometimes the bus would drive off before the paid-up customers made it to the back entrance. If the white section was full and another white customer entered, blacks were required to give up their seats and move farther to the back; a black person was not even allowed to sit across the aisle from whites. These humiliations were compounded by the fact that two-thirds of the bus riders in Montgomery were black.'  
[https://people.uwec.edu/rasarla/research/anger\\_management/themes/decisionschange.htm](https://people.uwec.edu/rasarla/research/anger_management/themes/decisionschange.htm).
- 9 <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/louis-beam>.
- 10 [http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/september/15/newsid\\_2518000/2518707.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/september/15/newsid_2518000/2518707.stm).



- 11 The following three web sites provide useful information on al-Qaeda:  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-54102404>, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-is-al-qaeda.html> and <https://www.history.com/topics/21st-century/al-qaeda>.

- 12 Hydra: Abbreviation: Hya; Genitive: Hydrae

Right Ascension: 10.12 hours

Declination: 219.36 degrees

Hydra, the Water Snake, is best seen from the Southern Hemisphere, but is visible during the months of January through May in the Northern Hemisphere; see

<https://earthsky.org/constellations/hydra-the-water-snake-largest-constellation/>.

- 13 <http://www.seasky.org/constellations/constellation-hydra.html>.

- 14 Unfortunately, Eurystheus argued that Hercules could not count this Labour among the number required since he cheated by having Iolaus help him.

- 15 Pearson's (2001) review replicates a menu approach to this issue: 'Take one flatworm, chop into 279 pieces and leave for two weeks. Feed occasionally. The result: 279 perfect new worms. ... Flatworms, or planarians, Salamanders, starfish, tentacle-waving polyps and zebrafish can also regenerate new heads, limbs, internal organs or other body parts if the originals are lost or damaged.'

- 16 <http://biology.ucdavis.edu/research/model-organisms/hydra>.

- 17 Resolution 1373 (2001) on terrorism was adopted by the Security Council at its 4385th meeting, on 28 September 2001. It can be viewed at: <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/1373>.

- 18 Six hundred and twenty-five Israelis have been killed, and 4,500 injured in 14,280 Palestinian attacks between 1999 and 2002; over 1,372 Palestinians have been killed and 19,684 injured in Israeli attacks that are fewer in absolute numbers but have lasted significantly longer than the Palestinian equivalent (Grossman, 2002).

- 19 For a brief review of events, see: <http://www.english.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/sacvan.html>.

- 20 <https://www.globalsecurity.org/security/ops/madrid.htm>.

- 21 Thanks to Yiannis Gabriel for this insight.

- 22 Thanks to Yiannis Gabriel for pointing this parallel out.

## Leadership as purpose

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We start this chapter with a tautology: Without purpose, leadership seems ... purposeless. What is the point of leadership if it does not have a point? Without a purpose, we could be 'led' into all manner of pointless activity – is leading ourselves into the purpose of making a cup of tea sufficient grounds for earning the label 'leadership' or does the purpose underlying leadership need to be more ethically significant to earn the title? Considering the frivolity or otherwise of the everyday activity that is classified as leadership can be amusing, particularly when we take a closer look at some of self-aggrandizing rhetoric employed by executives and leadership writers.

However, chuckle as we might at the grand language of leadership in contrast to the grey and drab realities of much managerial work, it could be that the joke is on us after all. The anthropologist David Graeber (2019) made the case that much of what we do as 'work' *is in fact pointless*, purposeless in the sense of not contributing to the wellbeing of society. Many of us – and we emphasize the collective pronoun here to include ourselves – could be keeping busy doing work that does not make a meaningful difference to anyone – these are 'bullshit jobs', in Graeber's terminology. Do we really need armies of digital marketers? Do we need so many cheap and disposable commodities, most of which end up being thrown into landfill anyway? Do billionaires need a second yacht and private jet made for them? Do we need to mass produce so many cheap items of clothing that barely if ever get worn? Did you need that third takeaway coffee today? Was that hugely expensive war really necessary? Did you need to take a flight when you could have held a meeting online? If

the answer to these questions is ‘no’, then it could also be the case that we have a purpose problem that smells a lot like bullshit. However, we do need to be careful here not to equate ‘bullshit’ straightforwardly with ‘pointless’ because of course there can be a point, even to bullshit. It is just that the purpose is rarely articulated because it does not hold great motivational value. Bullshit work keeps people employed, pays their way in the world – it exists so that we can persist. It also – and here is the critical point – maintains a current economic system and keeps us on a trajectory where economic growth fuelled by continuously growing production, consumption and the proliferation of services is the norm.

Considering bullshit work in relation to purpose soon takes us to bullshit economy, in other words, and when we start to think how scary and difficult it is to change the economic relations and systems of societies, we start to see that the challenges faced by any purposeful leadership that wants to challenge this status quo faces a difficult task. Yet the purpose underlying such a leadership in some ways is relatively straightforward – to tackle the climate crisis and reduce wealth inequality are two of the most pressing issues facing the world today and two purposes that are intimately connected. As simple as this purpose seems to be, however, lurking beneath it is an interesting play of power and ethics, the central pairing that seems to make all the difference as to whether purposeful leadership gains traction or not. As the chapter proceeds, we will address both of these in relation to purpose. But before we do that, we need to clarify why wealth inequality and climate seem so vital to the purpose we choose to address here.

Humanity risks crossing certain key environmental ‘tipping points’, interconnected triggers beyond which environmental devastation seems unstoppable (including melting of ice sheets, deforestation and erosion of coral reefs), far sooner than was initially supposed (Lenton et al., 2019). Indeed, the United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has warned that the planet may only have around a decade to institute changes that will prevent unstoppable climate disaster (drought, flooding, widespread poverty) for a significant proportion of the planet’s population (IPCC, 2018). Many of the impacts of the climate emergency are, of course, already with us – witness the regular wildfires in California and Australia, which light the sky a post-apocalyptic orange, or the ever-worsening flooding, particularly in Bangladesh; consider also that humanity has wiped out on average 60 per cent of animal populations since 1970, according to

the World Wildlife Fund (Carrington, 2018). We also know that the climate emergency, were current trends to continue, would adversely impact the welfare of the most deprived communities and people (Brainard et al., 2009; Fitzpatrick, 2014; Hallegate et al., 2015; Leichenko and Silva, 2014; Paavola, 2017). This is particularly important to those in the Global South, worsening and generating new forms of fuel and energy poverty (Day et al., 2016; Bouzarovski and Herrero, 2017); food shortages and financial poverty; drought and access to water (Feller and Vaseva, 2014; Yoon et al., 2019); erosion of mobility and access to transport, air pollution and related illness (Benmarhnia et al., 2014; Krstic et al., 2017); and unsustainable housing and density, particularly in relation to vulnerability to extreme heat waves. As we will discover later, a bitter irony at play in the climate–inequality pairing is that it is the planet’s richest who are disproportionately responsible for, and who profit from, the climate emergency. As wealth becomes increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few, in other words, not only does this have awful effects on health and quality of life for most people, but it also turbo charges climate change. Therefore, a leadership purpose worthy of its name needs to have as its focus the unapologetically normative goal of redesigning economies and human relations to not only reduce carbon emissions but also, in the process, to reduce wealth inequality. We could dance around the issue more carefully, offering a more balanced view but the scale of the problem seems so acute that it would feel morally problematic to do so and we need a concerted leadership purpose to address this fact.

Purpose, however, is a hotly contested (Kempster et al., 2011) and we need to briefly dwell on what we mean by it. Its origins lie in Plato’s and Aristotle’s teleological suggestions that differentiate between intrinsic purpose – what a thing is designed to do (for example Aristotle suggests an acorn’s *telos* is to grow into an oak tree) – and extrinsic purpose – the aim that is ascribed to a thing (a pen is designed to write). The intrinsic purpose of an economy is to generate wealth but there is an extrinsic purpose that has developed over time, which is growth at all costs, with ever expanding proportions of that wealth being concentrated in the possession of a few. Hegel’s philosophy suggests that the purpose of humanity is to realize a perfect state (an intrinsic purpose) – a model refracted in more extrinsic terms in Marx’s assumptions about the purpose of the proletariat as being

the true leaders of a society that could be rooted in non-alienated relations to one another and to nature.

Purpose must encompass an overarching focus on ethics if we are to consider it as something capable of correcting a status quo gone awry – it must call into question the rightness and justness of a state of affairs. It needs to ask difficult questions of those in power. They, in turn, may agree that some of these questions need to be asked, even if it may disagree with the emphasis, and may outright oppose others. For example, most major business owners and executives, as well as senior political leaders, would agree that climate change is a problem, at least publicly, even if they disagreed with the proposition that they were a central part of the problem; some of these same people might also agree that wealth inequality has gone too far, although it would be harder to find consensus on this issue. These shades of agreement/disagreement flag to us that ethics, much like leadership, is a complex and contested area – after all, if we all agreed on what an ethically correct set of rules were, perhaps the phrase ‘ethics’ would not need to exist at all, because what was right and wrong would be obvious and would not require consideration.

Of course, the world we occupy is more complicated than this. We can experience competing ethical demands but also vested interests that make the ethical decision that much harder to make, and here issues of power become more visible. Our contemporary societies are mostly informed by an ethics of neoliberalism, of faith in markets to arrive at optimal outcomes and a kind of social Darwinism that holds that free markets result in people arriving at the socio-economic positions they deserve (Bloom, 2017). Despite the current dominance of this kind of ethics, alternatives challenge and question – and occasionally win through. For example, concessions were forced on governments globally during the Covid-19 crisis to ban housing evictions, feed children and provide workers with a wage subsidy to protect their jobs. Sometimes a radical purpose presented without compromise is worthwhile and impactful, shaking a status quo and forcing a response from governments, institutions and corporations (Barthold et al., 2020); but at other times, when we think there is room for small but significant breakthroughs, compromise can be more effective. Perhaps modest gains towards an ethically desirable outcome are preferable to being roundly defeated and ceding power to adversaries who are not as ethically conscientious. Such is the basis of a Machiavellian ethics or Sartre’s (1989)

‘dirty hands’, which acknowledges that because there are plenty of people out there who care very little about social and environmental responsibilities, we need to be pragmatic and strategic in our ethical approaches. This is about being comfortable with living in the grey, rather than choosing between black and white.

But what is purpose in relation to *leadership*? For us to consider purpose as relevant to leadership it has to be thought of as something that ‘leads’. In this sense, we can think of purpose as providing as much leadership as a person, process, product or position. A purpose can outlive a person, after all. Leaders come and go but purposes can persist, as has been the case with civil rights and environmental movements, political parties and more ethically purposeful organizations such as many charities. People, processes, products and positions can all be shaped by a purpose – for example if the purpose of an organization or movement is to spread equality and democracy then it is likely that it will strive for diverse leaders, inclusive processes, sustainable products and horizontal positioning.

Yet historically, leadership studies have not engaged enough with purpose and we aim to help correct that here. We do so firstly by considering the ethics of leadership, which broadly comprises of two perspectives, one of which focuses on the ethics of an individual leader and the other on how groups develop ethical processes of leadership. Focusing on ethical leaders can help us better see the kinds of responsibilities and qualities we should seek from people in charge of things, but also perhaps the kinds of people we should strive to be. This is also, however, a limited perspective and, worse, one that is not aware of its own limitations, meaning that focusing solely on the ethics of leaders will surely lead us wandering blindly into purposeless problems. Focusing on ethical *leadership* holds more promise because it can help surface important practices can sustain purpose – and in this chapter we highlight care and democracy as two particularly important practices. Embracing these practices, we posit, can help enhance freedom, and hence also flourishing, opening possibilities for everyone to discover and enact their potential in a sustainable and secure world. Furthermore, we need to account for the fact that purposeful leadership in these contemporary times is more often than not generated, shared and amplified through digital technology.

Yet thinking in terms of ethics is insufficient because any system of ethics inevitably has to win through in an environment of power and

politics, of wealth inequality and injustice. Thus, one of the reasons that Machiavelli is so adamant that leaders need to do whatever is necessary to protect the community, is that he was writing against a background of civil war where the options are not 'lead ethically' or 'lead unethically' because the former might allow the community to be overrun. Ethically rich purpose has to stake its claim in an unfair political world where 'force decides' between competing positions (Marx, 1990: 344). A purposeful leadership, therefore, needs a political theory of leadership informed by a strong sense of ethical purpose but capable of defeating and then redistributing power. We take some tentative steps in this admittedly (overly?) ambitious direction by presenting a theory of what we call 'organic leadership'. This leadership needs to be rooted to localized purposes and practices, tied to shared identifications and experiences within specific local spaces – which can be one or a mix of the geographical, ideological, spiritual or professional (from street level campaigns through to digital campaigns from scientists who share a common purpose); the important thing is that they share a common set of community experiences, whether that community be geographically based or rooted in other forms of shared experience. Indeed, the origins of much of this approach lie in the community leadership models rooted in the work of Marshall Ganz who spent twenty-eight years working with social movements (Ganz, 2010; Holt, 2016). But leadership can get stuck at the community level, incapable of scaling up to make a bigger impact on the world. This is why the challenge of organic leadership is not only to nurture generative engagement at the local scale but to grow outwards, electrified by digital communication and social media, to connect seemingly disparate movements and groups resisting the big problems of our times and pressing for alternative solutions. It is a theory with purpose at its heart – it recognizes that any radical and widespread change needs to assemble diverse groups of people around a common but loose purpose, one which will appeal to many local communities. It is this contradiction of common-loose, and the democratic and caring activity generated around it, which – theoretically – provides the energy and potential for organic leadership.

Building on this basis we try to apply the theory to some real-life examples of movements that have tried to enact ambitious social change. We first focus on the socialist takeover of the UK Labour Party between 2015 and 2020, a dramatic example of purposeful leadership that threatened

at certain points to overturn the country's balance of power, before crashing to defeat. From here we stare squarely into the eyes of the beast – the climate crisis, fuelled by a runaway capitalism high on the fumes of year-on-year compound growth (Harvey, 2014). We do so through studying the Indigenous leadership of Native Americans at Standing Rock, who resisted the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline in the face of concerted violence from the authorities and the Sunrise Movement in the United States; we also consider the global movement Extinction Rebellion, which for a period of time seemed to electrify the imaginations of young people in particular, using imaginative forms of direct action to try to force environmentalism as the pre-eminent purpose of our times.

## **Purposeful leaders**

Let's start our purposeful journey by focusing primarily on ethics. Power will be introduced later but for now we need to acknowledge that for a purpose to be worthy of its name it needs to possess a theory of right and wrong; purpose needs to strive towards something it regards as a good and, presumably, to try to diminish what it regards as bad. If we owned a business and its purpose was to reverse climate change through sustainable and green production and distribution, then this is also an ethical claim that it is good if the ecology of the planet is protected and sustained and bad if it is not – this is a basic system of ethics, one that helps us make judgments of right and wrong. Purposes are informed by a system of ethics, of right and wrong.

The most common way of interpreting leadership ethics is to assume that the ethical begins and probably ends in the person of the leader, often rooted in virtue – the 'good' habits of an individual. In this logic what is right and wrong manifests in the personality and behaviours of individual leaders, presumably with the implication that such people hold the key to guiding the rest of us to an ethically rich and purposeful life. Can ethical leaders save us? No, not entirely, but we are not naïve enough to suppose that formal leaders make no difference at all, so think it worth considering them as one part of the solution (and problem). Ethics from this perspective can be explained by the psychology of leaders and how they are perceived through the sociology of followers – social environments, history, space and



the relational dynamics of groups are secondary or non-considerations. It is commonplace amongst more critical leadership scholars such as us to dismiss these kinds of views of leadership as, at best, overly simplistic, and at worst, dangerous, as they normalize and celebrate a concentration of significance and power within the hands of a status quo. After all, we might reasonably argue, these leaders are precisely the people who have led us into a climate crisis in the first place, so the notion that we should now seek to learn from their ethical example seems counter-intuitive. Yet to lose sight of the role of individual human beings of influence and standing within social processes also seems like an abdication of responsibility. Humans have brought us great technological breakthroughs and towering works of art, but also genocides and impending climate catastrophe. Therefore, understanding a little more about the ethical psychology of human leaders and followers seems sensible, as long as we do not over-attribute the route to ethically rich, purposeful leadership as residing only within human psychology.

A number of more general theories of leadership have sought to include an ethical dimension in their models. Transformational leadership, for example, as originally coined by the political scientist James MacGregor Burns (2012), contained a strong ethical component. Within this original account of transformational leadership, leaders and followers continuously influence one another to attain ever higher moral goals and achievements. From this perspective, someone like the former US president Barack Obama entreats his followers to ‘be the change’ they want to see in the world, which leads someone otherwise destined for a career in oil extraction to instead dedicate themselves to community organizing; in turn, such followers might convey their increased moral expectations to Obama, via, for example, town hall meetings or other forms of engagement, which in turn provoke further moral exhortations and actions – and so on indefinitely. However, it seems as though ethics are considered irrelevant to business because when the theory transitioned into the context of US business studies reference to morality and ethics was removed (Delaney and Spoelstra, 2019)!

Authentic leadership is a notoriously slippery concept to nail down, as it seems to ask leaders to be more than simply honest, open and transparent with followers – rather, its proponents seem to offer a contradiction in terms: namely, they prescribe certain dimensions of universal authenticity,

including what they refer to as an ‘internalised moral perspective’ (Gardner et al., 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008), or a strong sense of right and wrong. It is impossible, according to the strange logic of the theory to be genuinely, authentically immoral. Leaders are judged as authentic or not, then, on whether they meet such universal criteria. But surely the very point of being authentic is being unique, true to one’s own specific characteristics and values – otherwise the theory loses its underlying premise. This leaves us with a significant problem when asking whether Hitler or Stalin, for instance, were ‘true to themselves’ – and therefore ‘authentic’, but still immoral in the eyes of most people.

A further problem arises in the lack of specificity provided by proponents of authentic leadership as to what they mean by moral. They are required to display ‘high’ (Gardner et al., 2009; Walumbwa et al., 2008) or ‘positive’ (Walumbwa et al., 2008) moral behaviour but what constitutes ‘high’ remains generally uncertain and contested. Walumbwa et al. (2010) define ‘high’ morals as something internal within individuals, not influenced by outside sources. Yet it seems unhealthy to shut oneself out from outside moral influence, as this is surely precisely how absolutely everyone learns ethics in the first place – from friends, parents, books, films, real events and so on. Avolio et al. (2004: 805) hedge on the issue of ‘high’ saying that what is high or low depends on their own ‘moral principles’, meaning that no universal or normative set of ethics is offered as a standard – it all just depends on the person. Yet they continue by stating that in order to be ‘moral’, leaders should act with ‘honesty’ and ‘integrity’. These *are* held as universal goods. Around and around we go: despots could conceivably act with honesty and integrity but still be extremely harmful. A further and final hedging is offered: leaders should act ‘in the best interests of others’ (Avolio et al., 2004: 807). But again, what those interests might be is left vague, as is a discussion on the justness of a leader deciding on behalf of others what is in their interests, rather than those people deciding that for themselves. We therefore end in an endless conceptually shaky spiral of over-prescribing what it means to be authentic but under-prescribing what it means to be ethical.

Although authentic and transformational leadership seem of little help to us in making sense of the ethics of purposeful leadership, perhaps approaches that focus more narrowly on the ethics of leaders might. The

most influential account of ethical leadership within this sphere is the work of Brown et al. (2005), who defined ethical leadership as:

the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making.

(Brown et al., 2005: 120)

From this definition it is apparent that central to the authors' conception of ethical leadership is the role modelling of behaviours from designated leaders within organizations. These behaviours must exude fairness, honesty, trustworthiness, kindness and compassion, which are held to be the 'normative' aspects of an ethical person. Brown and Treviño (2006), in a review of ethical leadership studies added that being agreeable and conscientious seemed to be positively related to the appearance of ethical leadership. For there to be ethical leadership in practice, however, not only must a leader exhibit these characteristics but must routinize them within the processes of an organization: distribute rewards fairly, listen to the concerns of employees, make decisions on the basis of principle and designing reward and punishment systems that reflect ethical conduct (Brown and Mitchell, 2010; Brown and Treviño, 2006). Brown and Treviño (2006) found in their review that there were instrumental benefits at play for organizations with leaders perceived to be ethical in increased follower satisfaction, higher motivation and organizational commitment (see also Walumbwa et al., 2012). So far so good, perhaps. After all, we would all like to work for organizations where the leaders were kind, our ethical conduct was rewarded, and the unethical conduct of colleagues was punished. Surely if all, most or even a fair proportion of organizations, operated like this, then we would live in a world where people could live and work in relative peace, comfort and happiness, where organizations paid their employees well and cared for the environment enough to reverse climate change. We do not live in that world, however, and perhaps one reason for that is that organizations have not been following the guidance of Brown and colleagues sufficiently carefully. Or it could be that it is not leaders who are to blame after all but deviant followers, who refuse to follow the ethical examples of those in charge. Or perhaps the structural conditions of the systems are simply impervious to the actions of individuals?

From these perspectives, we could attribute responsibility for the climate crisis not to individual business leaders in the fossil economy, nor even to the political leaders who take their money, but to ‘the system’ that carries on regardless of the actions of any individual. But do they? Aren’t systems composed of the aggregated decisions of individuals? If they are, and we cannot just blame the leaders, maybe it is also you and I, we who stubbornly refuse to act ethically – our insatiable hunger for burning fossil fuels – is to blame rather than the systems created by leaders who restrict our options (e.g. oligopolies in privatized railway systems making it prohibitively expensive to travel this way, necessitating air or car travel). Taking this a step further, it is our fault for endorsing the fossil economy in our purchasing and our voting decisions. We are the ones who are ethically deficient because we keep making the same destructive choices over and over again. By this logic we are the ones to blame for the intensive industrial-scale agriculture that employs workers on slave wages and ravages the environment because we enjoy cheap food prices – tsk tsk, if only you had spent most of your salary in the local organic farmers’ market.

There is something to be said for follower-blame, however. After all, the studies we have explored here so far base their definitions of ethicality on the *perceptions* of followers rather than on any intrinsic personality properties of leaders. Followers observe their leaders at work and then rate them on a scale of characteristics formulated by researchers – they grant them ‘moral legitimacy’ or ‘illegitimacy’ (Sidani and Rowe, 2018) – so if a leader is perceived to be ethical or unethical, then this is a matter for followers rather than leaders. If followers see no problem with the status quo, by this logic, no problem exists. There is some evidence to show that followers do not perceive there to be a problem: Brown and Treviño (2006: 608) state in their review of ethical leadership that despite *in general* being distrustful of business leaders’ ethical fortitude, 80 per cent of US workers believe that *their own* organization’s leaders ‘communicate the importance of ethics and set a good example in terms of ethical behaviour’. This leaves us with four different possibilities: a. there is no problem and people like us who are worried about the climate and inequality need to relax more; b. there really is a problem, but followers seem incapable of spotting unethical practice; c. followers are the unethical ones rather than their leaders. d. followers don’t think that organizations can do anything to change these kinds of problems anyway, even if the problems are real. e. answers b–e are

all correct to varying degrees. We could be in a climate emergency because followers are easily duped by their leaders, do not think that the climate crisis and wealth inequality are particularly important, or do not think that organizations can fix the problems. If any of these hold true, we should not be so quick to blame leaders, who may simply be reflections of the desires and fallibilities of their followers. Perhaps, therefore, if we are to have a strongly ethical purpose to our leadership, we need to pay closer attention to the moral rectitude of followers. van Gils and colleagues (2015) refer to this as ‘follower moral attentiveness’ and their claim is that the more morally attentive followers are, the less likely it will be that the unethical behaviour of leaders will be tolerated. Now of course this is stating the obvious, a little bit like saying that if we are aware that we are thirsty, we will be far more likely to obtain a glass of water.

However, none of this tells us about the systems within which such psychological or sociological states persist – such as the availability or affordability of water in the first place, or, staying more tightly with ethical followership, the systems that allow or disincentivize followers to speak up about unethical practices. We know, for example, from ample studies that we should be wary of believing Hollywood films celebrating whistle-blowers because the fate that usually awaits them is one of concerted psychological torture and persecution (Kenny, 2019; Munro, 2017). Dust and colleagues (2018) seek to spread the credit and blame for (un)ethical leadership more evenly. According to their study, a leader is more likely to ally ethical leadership with organizational success (chiefly running a profitable business, one assumes), if they are ‘psychologically empowered’, meaning that they feel they have the agency to act. However, if followers are ‘emotionally exhausted’ then this ‘dampens’ the effectiveness of leaders. Again, we are told little of the systems that exhaust followers and we have yet to see a study that connects material pay and conditions of workers to levels of exhaustion, to the propensity to speak up against unethical conduct. Maybe toiling away in bullshit work that pays very little could have something to do with the propensity of a worker to demonstrate ethical agency? Of course, studies such as the ones we have examined here so far do not enter that kind of territory, probably because to do so would entail asking bigger questions beyond those of the psychological make-up of leaders and followers, ones that were critical of the very systems that breed ethical and unethical conduct in the first place and doing this would

inevitably mean at least considering the possibility that the current mode of neoliberal economic relations is at least flawed. This is what C. Wright Mills (1959) distinguished when he talked about the difference between ‘personal issues’ and ‘public problems’: very often we experience areas of concern as just a personal issue, but in reality these may well be connected to ‘public problems’, if only we made our personal issues public. For instance, the #MeToo movement began with what appeared to be just a personal issue of sexual assault against a particular woman, Tarana Burke; but when the private concern went public it became apparent that the personal issue was systemic – it was a public problem. Similarly, while governments warn us to cut down our calorie intake to avoid obesity, this personalizes a problem that we know is related to all kinds of wider contextual factors, such as poverty, poor education and poor housing, all of which are government responsibilities rather than just the result of poor choices by individuals. We will return to more systemic views of ethical purpose soon enough but for now we need to consider a final, fatal flaw with many of these studies of person-focused ethical leadership: that they are more concerned with signs and symbols than with reality.

Cloaking themselves in the language of science, person-focused accounts of ethical leadership talk a good game. Their pages are filled with statistics and equations, which indeed do look scientific. And yet dig a little deeper and we find that these are perhaps the most postmodern of all forms of leadership study. Postmodernism is a movement and mode of thought that generally holds to the belief either that there is no true reality awaiting discovery but instead a play of contingent imagery and ideas, which slip and slide playfully into one another, or that we cannot get direct, unmediated access to that reality except through the prism of language. From this perspective, reality is what we are told it is by mass culture and what we make of it through our engagements with culture (Jameson, 1992). Person-centred accounts of ethical leadership, similarly to the critique we levelled at authentic leadership earlier, demonstrate characteristics of postmodernism in the sense that they are usually not based on a solid system of ethics rooted in serious philosophical thought (with some exceptions, e.g. Eisenbeiss, 2012) but in the decontextualized perceptions of leaders and followers. This is a system of *relativist* ethics, usually meaning either that one person’s good is another person’s bad or that the interesting question is why we come to believe in good and bad as categories and what

persuades us that X is better than Y. For some people, for example, allowing migrants to drown at sea, torturing animals for sport or burning down rainforests to make way for intensive agriculture are either ethically fine or unfortunate but necessary or inevitable, but banning racist and misogynist jokes from television is wrong. In other words, as far as these theories of ethical leadership are concerned, the degree to which the person completing a survey in actuality wishes harm on others is irrelevant. What matters is how anyone *perceives* their own or others' ethicality. From this perspective, we might trust a leader, think that they are honest, kind and compassionate to us and therefore be willing to label them as ethical; but this does not also mean that they are in reality any of these things. Both the leader and their followers may be climate change deniers or rampant racists who are honest and kind to likeminded and like-looking followers. The point is that the theories do not provide us with a way of making these kinds of distinctions as to who is and who is not ethical. There is little underlying basis available within the theories to discriminate between various judgments of right and wrong because these are essentially contested categories. Clearly, for anyone with ambitions for a leadership that will deliver equality and climate justice, this is a significant problem. Nevertheless, we ought not to dismiss these theories out of hand – after all, any purposeful leadership should obviously feature leaders who are perceived as ethical. Problems arise when our thinking goes no further.

## **Purposeful leadership**

We can move towards addressing this problem of relativist ethics through moving the focus of our attention from the person possessing purpose to one of an ethical purpose inherent in a process of leadership. From this perspective, questions of ethics are primarily ones of care for one another, how each of us can use our positions and resources to maximize the comfort and capabilities of others. Care from this perspective is closely connected to freedom, in that by providing caring leadership we also free people from worries about survival, which in turn can allow them to pursue projects that bring them joy. This is also a perspective that takes power seriously, in that it acknowledges care to be a marginalized and undervalued practice in societies, one whose value and recognition needs to be fought for.

Deploying a focus on ethical leadership practice also means coming to terms with the pragmatic difficulties of enacting care in environments where power is disdainful of it, meaning that certain compromises in purposeful leadership may be necessary. Adopting this processual view of purpose and ethics enables us to see that they are hotly contested phenomena that can be posited, challenged and adapted over time (Kempster et al., 2011). Viewing ethics – and purpose – in this more political way does not eradicate the need to understand and do away with the ethical leader but rather does allow us to see ethical or unethical actions as continuous and contested processes that come loaded with a history of asymmetrical power relations and struggle. Each of these topics will now be addressed in turn, starting with care ethics, which is a perspective generated from within feminism.

Essential to understanding the possibilities of caring leadership is understanding what is meant by interpreting leadership as a gendered issue. Feminist leadership writers have long helped us see the sex and gender inequalities at work in both the notion of leadership itself (Pullen and Vachhani, 2020) and in the organizational processes that prevent women from attaining senior leadership roles (Smolović Jones et al., 2020c). The very concept of leadership certainly has tended to carry quite masculine associations – of a strong, assertive, determined and individually powerful person who can impose their will freely within organizations and societies. It is one of the great injustices of contemporary and historical societies that alternative qualities to the stereotypically masculine, rooted in duties of care and care-based work, tend to be poorly valued and rewarded by societies and organizations. Embodiment is closely connected with care and is a word that denotes ethical processes that involve feeling and connection to others rather than reliance upon formal organizational policies and guidance. Embodiment describes the way that ethical relations through leadership are felt rather than simply thought. These notions of embodiment and care can be read in political ways because they compete for primacy in and against more masculine conceptions of leadership – it is an ongoing struggle that in our present era tends to result in the marginalization of embodiment and care.

The main problem lies in the dominant ways in which cultures tend to think of ‘leadership’ (Borgerson, 2019; Oseen, 1997). Leadership tends to carry associations of ‘white knights’ (Liu and Baker, 2016), of ‘heroic’



masculine people showing others the way and saving us from potentially catastrophic situations (Ciulla and Fosyth, 2011). Strongly associated with movie and militaristic culture, the image of a leader as synonymous with a certain kind of ‘decisive’ man colours how leadership is then interpreted in subsequent contexts (Ford et al., 2008; Smolović Jones et al., 2020a). Under this gendered archetype of leaders and leadership, women can experience a ‘bind’ (Fletcher, 2004) whereby: on the one hand women are socially punished for demonstrating alternative forms of leadership, because these do not fit dominant perceptions of what leadership should be and therefore tend not to be materially recognized and rewarded; on the other hand, however, women are punished if they *do* play into the masculine stereotype because such behaviours are not interpreted as ‘proper’ according to dominant social norms. Hence more masculine women leaders are more likely to be judged as ‘pushy’, ‘aggressive’, ‘bossy’ and so on, while men behaving in similar ways tend to be perceived as ‘authoritative’, ‘decisive’, ‘strong’. This is clearly a situation that can generate significant anxiety and material harm for women (Ford et al., 2008). There are implications at play for how an organization’s ethical purpose is devised and enacted through leadership because the purpose can be shaped in gendered ways through dominant masculine behaviours – for example, notions that it is ethically acceptable for leadership to work towards a purpose of extraction from nature for profit no matter the environmental damage wrought. It is helpful here to dissociate ‘masculine’ from ‘man’ and ‘feminine’ from ‘woman’ in the sense that the masculine and feminine can be thought of as particular behaviours and characteristics that have become socially attributed to men and women – namely, ‘cooperation, empathy and care’ (Pullen and Vachhani, 2020: 3) for women and rational, ‘strong’ and ‘decisive’ for men. In practice, however, men can be more feminine than women, and vice versa. But we cannot entirely dissociate attributes from sex because men tend to be rewarded more than women for demonstrating all types of leadership behaviours – and this extends into men demonstrating feminine behaviours, when they can be disproportionately credited and rewarded for stepping out of type.

In an important intervention, Pullen and Vachhani (2020) help us see that the very terrain on which processes of ethical leadership are played out may be stacked against women from the outset. Ethics theory, much like leadership, is an area of thought dominated by men and is awash in

language privileging masculine forms of personal mastery, rationality and reason. Yet the authors' position is not to simply tip the other way into making the case for a 'feminine' leadership ethics but to reject such modes of crude classification and insist instead on 'agency [as] a political way of life that emerges through a lived and embodied ethics that places women as actors of their own life, challenging the symbolic and material practices that violate them' (p. 5). From this perspective, women leaders and a feminist leadership both subvert the rules as laid down by their patriarchal predecessors and peers, but also assert forms of leadership that call forth an openness to difference and therefore to compassion, respect, empathy and care. The example they draw upon to illustrate this kind of leadership is the New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern, whose highly competent and empathetic approach to a racist mass shooting and the Covid-19 pandemic in her country invited people to step beyond stereotypical views of women leaders and leadership as only bound to masculine norms (either in commonality to or deviating from these). Ardern can then be viewed as purposeful and ethical in her aims and approach, collapsing distinctions and false divisions between the caring and the reasoning.

We need this kind of thinking and practice because quite apart from the more obvious problems of structural sexism, as Gabriel (2015) notes, processes of leadership that seek to mainline care as their guiding purpose can themselves become beset with problems. In a study that is clearly appreciative of the need for caring leadership, Gabriel nonetheless highlights a significant potential flaw, which is that care can too often manifest in care for someone or something that is close to us, in our proximity. This can mean physically proximate (our neighbours, friends or families), ideologically proximate, experientially proximate (people with whom we share certain experiences of work or everyday life), culturally proximate or, far more problematically, racially proximate. Such proximity can shape who one thinks of as deserving of care and who not. Hence you can find contradictory behaviours, such as people who post violent online comments about refugees dying at sea but who also act generously towards their own children and grandchildren. Care can be, Gabriel warns, a gateway to unfair practices that marginalize and harm those who do not meet our thresholds of the deserving. Witness, for example, the actions of the UK Conservative Government in the UK during the Covid-19 pandemic, which decided, in contrast to decisions made by the devolved

governments of Scotland and Wales, not to pay for poor children to receive free school meals during a half-term holiday. Its MPs took to social media and television to sternly lecture the public about the appropriate role and limitations of the state, and to urge potential parents to think about the need for sexual restraint and family planning – overlooking of course the obvious point that the pandemic had decimated family finances to the extent that even previously fairly well-off people had been reduced to difficult financial pressures due to the pandemic while MPs continued to enjoy government-subsidized meals in Parliament. In effect, to use C Wright Mills's (1959) language again, to try and turn a public problem into a private issue. The same government, however, had provided payouts to airlines and dodged a commitment to apply a tax levy on retailers who had profited from the pandemic through online sales – companies such as Amazon and Tesco. Care was therefore extended to certain corporations but not to struggling parents and children – until a media campaign by Marcus Rashford, the Manchester United footballer, shamed the government into a U-turn. While many people, including us, believe that this is a case of misjudged priorities, what is more striking is the inconsistency in moral position – i.e. not that state care is morally right or wrong but that it is applied so inconsistently. People can care for what they know and respect, in other words, but fail to care for that which they do not respect or notice as significant. Gabriel's (2015) study uses the example of a hospital accident and emergency unit, where an exemplar of caring leadership was described by a junior doctor in this way:

A pregnant woman came in through A&E [Accident and Emergency]. She was having problems with her pregnancy. I asked the registrar [senior clinician] what to do. They decided that the best thing to do was get the woman scanned to find the problem. However, being a night shift there were no porters to be seen and the scanning units were closed. I felt that the anxious woman could not stay in A&E surrounded by drunks and druggies as it was inappropriate. Instead of calling for porters, which would have taken time, I and the registrar moved the pregnant lady to the maternity ward ourselves where we opened up a scanning unit to find out what was wrong with the lady's pregnancy. I was proud of the leadership that I had received from my registrar; not every registrar would have done this, but he solved the problem and delivered good patient care in the process. The problems were resolved within an hour with only skeletal night staff.

(Gabriel, 2015: 326)

Of course, had the pregnant woman referred to in this extract been genuinely seriously ill and the hospital's processes at risk of failure, we should all applaud such an example of caring leadership in practice. However, as Gabriel notes, the doctor is silent about such facts. We must

also therefore examine the language used by the doctor in more depth and note the derogatory positioning of others in the waiting room – ‘drunks and druggies’ – whereas the pregnant woman is offered the deferential designation ‘lady’. Individualized care, in other words, can undermine ethically sound systems, diverting resources away from where they could do the most good, and normalizing discriminatory practice. Yet this critique presents us with a problem because most of us intuitively know that care is a vital component of healthy social relations, so we need, as Pullen and Vachhani (2020) note, to think of and practice care in ways that challenge prejudice rather than re-enforcing it (see also Tomkins, 2021).

Similarly to Gabriel, Pullen and Vachhani, therefore, we are not prepared to discard notions of care when it comes to the purpose of leadership. Rather, care can be elevated to a pre-eminent concern of purposeful leadership, something that acts as a guiding value. For this to happen, caring leadership needs to be thought of and practiced as including, but also more than, a series of proximate relationships; care should also be scaled up to infuse the design and practice of policy, structures and strategy. Contemporary neoliberal societies seem to disincentivize and marginalize care through making individual competition and private profit the driving purpose of their leadership, with matters of care viewed at best as an afterthought and at worst relegated to low-status work conducted by people deemed unqualified to receive care themselves – the precariously employed, immigrant women, unremunerated family members. Yet if the Covid-19 crisis taught us anything it is that care is central to the functioning of societies, which rely on infrastructures of care and a multitude of people willing to administer care. Without such infrastructures and the will to make them work, daily life would simply grind to a halt, something we cannot say about other facets of society – for example, most of us could probably cope for a day without receiving any digital marketing or, for that matter, reading yet another book about leadership.

In a sense then, diminishing the importance of care to human life is an act of denial, a fantasy of unalloyed self-sufficiency, whereas the reality is that we all need care in our lives on a regular basis. Needed, therefore, is a way of asserting care as vital at a number of different scales. This is what the Care Collective (2020) refers to as an approach of ‘promiscuous care’, ‘an ethics that proliferates outwards to redefine caring relations from the most intimate to the most distant. It means caring *more* and in ways that remain

experimental and extensive by current standards' (p. 39). Such a focus on the promiscuity and universality of care necessarily requires us to rethink both our proximate and distanced care relations as salient leadership challenges. Rethinking the proximate means paying closer attention to the caring relationships we rely on, reflecting on how we could offer more care ourselves and revisiting how society, organizations and governments value and reward caring activity. This requires thinking of care along various scales – from the micro-proximity of everyday encounters to the macro legislative and policy contexts. Of course, none of this is meant to overlook the unpleasant aspects of care and the understandably ambivalent feelings of people whose lives are dominated by tasks of caregiving (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017): care work can be physically and emotionally hard work, of course generating pleasure for care giver and receiver, but also resentment and sadness on occasion. This is why thinking of care in promiscuous ways is helpful, as it can force us to focus on the infrastructures and support needed to make the calling of caring more rewarding, tolerable and secure.

We can also connect notions of care to the generation of freedom, enabling increased and enhanced participation in leadership. Freedom from this perspective is about individuals being able to flourish and fulfil their potential but also recognizes that this is only possible when they are freed from worrying about the necessities of life. In other words, if you are burdened with worries about access to food, water, shelter, education and healthcare, you are not free to do much (Harvey, 2020). If these things are freely available, then people are free to follow whatever it is that gives them joy. Care for the necessities of life is therefore essential to enable freedom. If care is something widely distributed and valued in a society, then this can act as the bedrock, the security net that makes us feel secure enough to follow our passions, collaborate with others and pursue innovation. A project of freedom within purposeful leadership can be thought of therefore as firstly ensuring that the 'realm of necessity' (Harvey, 2020: 84), comprising those things we need to be properly cared for, is adequately resourced and valued. Secondly, the project of freedom then becomes one of generating plenty of opportunities for people to express themselves and find whatever it is that brings them joy. For Munro and Thanem (2018: 151), the task of leadership is precisely one of creating and enhancing 'joyful encounters'. Such joy is manifested when people come together to

freely produce and design, a democratic engagement of work, sociality or civic life. Such leadership seeks to diminish the calculative and instrumental (what can I extract from this leader/follower) and instead invites a process of mutual creation.

Yet, of course, we know that real life is not as straightforward as only choosing options and decisions that explicitly enhance care and freedom and we therefore need to persevere with a political interpretation of ethics that offers appropriate weight to issues of power. Unfortunately, we need to recognize the obvious, which is that most of us do not live in societies that value freedom and care as pre-eminent. We must, of course, do what we can in leadership to care for others and in the process enhance their freedom, but we also need to acknowledge that this will not always be possible. Responding to the world as we find it means needing to navigate difficult dilemmas between one course of imperfect action or another, or between one unpleasant course of action and many other unpleasant alternatives. In contemporary neoliberal societies your choice, for example, might be between caring for one person over another, due to your limitations of time, physical energy and resources; yet the implications of making such a choice could well be that the person not chosen receives little to no attention from that society's care infrastructures systems.

This is the phenomenon of 'dirty hands' that we mentioned at the outset of the chapter, which is not a free licence to leave cruel systems as we find them but is a perspective that acknowledges that not all of us at every point in time will be able to affect deep systemic change. Our choices might therefore be restricted to imperfect compromise or walking away entirely. This is the realm of competing responsibilities in leadership flagged by Rhodes and Badham (2018), where people in a leadership process often find themselves caught between 'essentially infinite ethical meaning and demand, and its inevitably finite enactment in social structures and interpersonal contexts' (p. 72). We need to unpack this statement before moving on. By infinite ethical responsibilities they mean the fact that if we looked hard enough, we could spend every waking hour discovering new ethical responsibilities. Only in our immediate surroundings would we have an ethical responsibility to the low-paid people who make our clothes and the nature scarred by their production; the trees felled for you to read this book; and most pressingly to people in the Global South and to future

generations everywhere who will pay for our excessive consumption of fossil fuels.

There are things we can do to address all of these ethical responsibilities: we can make individual consumer choices to divert resources away from organizations that cross our ethical lines; we can politically agitate and organize to change the system that enables ethical wrongs to occur; we can patiently talk to people we know to help them see the wrongness we see. Yet we also have responsibilities to our own families and friends – to nurture and care for them, make them feel good about themselves and to generally spread joy amongst those we know. These pulls may not be mutually exclusive but can be – more time and energy spent on one can reduce capacity for the other or result in a breakdown of ethical responsibility to self – the phenomenon of burn-out. These demands on our finite resources exist even prior to those we experience at work.

Whenever we design a syllabus on business ethics for students, a central question we always ask concerns our ethical responsibilities to students, who may not have the power or agency to affect meaningful change about the issues we draw to their attention. It is all very well us writing about the desecration of the planet by the fossil fuel industry and the related fabrications of ‘greenwashing’ propaganda that can mislead people to think that huge corporate actors care deeply about planetary climate. Yet we know that the vast majority of our students – at least alone – will be able to do little to transform the situation – to force these companies to switch to only renewable energy or to fold operations entirely. As Rhodes and Badham state, relational theories of leadership and leadership ethics too often overlook power and fail to acknowledge that practitioners work in organizations where hierarchy and material insecurity are an everyday reality and where, as a result, people may not feel or be able to speak up to the required extent. So instead, we need to help them find their sense of ethical agency and power to act, which might be that they seek savvy leadership approaches within their work organizations and/or outlets to pursue their purposeful leadership outside work. For Rhodes and Badham, one means by which leadership can live and make a difference within this gap between individual will and power restraints is through ironic practice. Irony refers to an attitude or stance that expresses knowledge of a gap between what we know, believe or intend and what the real situation is – for example, if a company we owned was installing a wind turbine for the

production of renewable energy and while on a smoke break one of the workers accidentally started a grass fire that wiped out nearby wildlife, an ironic remark would point out the difference between the intent of renewable energy investment and the unfortunate outcome in this instance. Ironic ethical leadership will therefore always question and reveal gaps between intent and reality, between assumed knowledge and truth. Irony suggests a subtle approach that does not mean necessarily radical and direct confrontation but one that helps others see ethical purpose as an evolving, continuous process.

Is irony *the* answer to the climate crisis and other serious global emergencies? No of course not – we also undoubtedly need much ‘dissensual’ leadership (Bathold et al., 2020), leadership that seeks imaginative and disruptive ways of dislodging power and halting operations, radically reshaping imaginations towards new paradigms. During the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, the city of Bristol in the UK attracted widespread attention after the statue of a slaver, Edward Colston, was toppled and dumped in the river by protesters. The background to the event was decades of ultimately fruitless campaigning to get the statue legally removed, with tortuous processes and suggested compromises leading nowhere. In the end an act of dissensus and of dissensual leadership – tearing down the statue without permission – enacted change and proceeded to force a dialogue in the national media about Britain’s colonial legacy. Such acts are not given their due by leadership studies but should be. Sometimes within organizations, similarly robust acts can have a meaningful effect – the strike, for example – is a tried and tested means of calling a halt to work, deliberately creating disruption so that an injustice can be rectified. Such acts operate outside everyday organizational systems and can provide a radical challenge to the status quo. Yet the lesson of a more ironic approach is that the dissensual is not always possible and at other times, particularly when embedded within the belly of the beast, alternatives can be sought out. The reality of purposeful leadership seems to suggest an approach that combines the pragmatically ironic and the confrontational. It is to such a pragmatic model that we now turn, one that we term organic leadership, which offers a political way of interpreting and building purposeful leadership.



# Organic leadership

At this point in our enquiry, we will take a journey to an Italian prison cell where from 1926 to 1937 the philosopher, politician and writer Antonio Gramsci was imprisoned by the Fascist government of Mussolini in his homeland. His health deteriorating under inhumane conditions, Gramsci was ever watchful of the prison censors, writing his *Prison Notebooks* (2007) in circular and often coded prose to avoid the gaze of the censors. Yet what he produced in these years arrived as a thunderbolt, producing a reconceptualization of power relations and strategy. The notebooks contain a view of power as dispersed within societies, no longer merely captured within states but forming a hegemony of social relations where states were an (important) node but beyond which lay ‘a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks’ (Gramsci, 2007: 238). These ‘fortresses and earthworks’ represent the realm of civil society, and what is included in the category depends on which section of Gramsci you read – he wrote his notes over a long period of time of ever deteriorating health – but we can take it to mean institutions and organizations that are non-governmental, so media, trade unions, business, charities and so on. Seizing and maintaining power was therefore a matter of a ‘war of position’, where the dominant power should be perceived not as a centralized concentration within the institutions of a state, but a mass stretched across the ‘powerful system of fortresses and earthworks’ that absorbed and expelled allies as circumstances suited. Hence, for example, in the UK the power hegemony has changed over time, adapting over recent centuries from a concentration of power amongst feudal landowners and aristocracy to one where power is more dispersed between capitalists, government, landowners and an army of willing workers who ‘spontaneously’ (Gramsci, 2007: 12) embrace the ideologies of this ruling coalition through cultural and media consumption and identity politics. In China, power has adapted from state communism to authoritarian capitalism by embracing big business with an export focus and situating these enterprises within massive and expansive new urban conurbations, thus also shifting economic power away from agriculture and in the process converting and absorbing agricultural workers into urban industrial workers (Harvey, 2019a). This Gramscian view of power is more

totalizing and adaptive than previous theories but also more vulnerable to multiple points of influence, resistance and challenge.

This hegemonic view simultaneously presents problems and possibilities for a purposeful leadership that seeks to change and influence power. In terms of possibilities, it indicates that one can influence a broader system through outer ‘earthworks’ over time, subtly operating to influence a larger power and perhaps eventually navigating into a position where the hegemony will be consumed and replaced by a counter-hegemony. In terms of problems, a hegemonic view of power should indicate that no simple and clean sweep of power is possible. This is best illustrated through the problems that frequently beset socialist parties that capture state power. In Greece, Bolivia, Brazil and Venezuela, to name but a few, socialist parties have found that winning elections is insufficient, as they face extraordinary and intense resistance from a range of international institutions, which leverage economic threats and measures, even espionage and violence, to derail and destruct the agenda of the new regime. Such ‘fortresses and earthworks’ situated beyond the state can nevertheless leverage power that is overwhelming in its destabilizing force. We will later return to focus on what a Gramscian notion of power and leadership offers an interpretation of environmentalism.

For now, we note that Gramsci’s notion of power as hegemony offers an important contribution as it invites us to see the ways in which (a) leadership, when we zoom out a little from the unit of the individual organization, seems far more distributed across and between societies than we first suspected, and (b) ‘followers’ are incorporated within its nets of power, willingly reproducing, although sometimes resisting, acts of power directed towards and against them. Some of the strengths and tensions of Gramsci’s theory can be seen in the contemporary UK, where political allegiances and the degree of ideological ‘absorption’ (Gramsci, 2007: 59) within hegemonic power seems to be dictated predominantly by age (Milburn, 2019). Much of this tendency can be explained in terms of people’s varying levels of material security, even if it is articulated in extra-material, identity and cultural terms by individuals. The post–Second World War generation benefitted from a general labour shortage, which meant that they were able to command higher wages for work because there was less competition for jobs. The country was rebuilding after the devastation of war and so manufacturing and heavy industry still played a central role in

the economy. Significantly, the preceding generation who had fought the war also fought to expand the role of the state in providing institutions of care (health, housing, education and welfare) and in directing the economy. This backbone of care provided a basis from which people could build more secure futures and have the freedom to pursue leisure interests.

But a significant proportion of the children of the people who fought the Second World War, those now close to or in retirement, who had benefitted from the institutions and provisions fought for by their parents, embraced a counter-ideology of shrinking the state, embracing free markets, privatizing universal, state-owned resources and services. For certain this is an oversimplification because that generation was also at the forefront the first student revolt of 1968 across Europe, and the fact that it was university students rather than young factory workers that led this revolt is significant. But we need to also consider the emotional life of this generation, the last to experience the British Empire, and now increasingly frayed by a diminishing economy which has been forced to compete in a global marketplace. This also needs to be situated amidst the tendency of corporations in this environment to seek a 'spatial fix' (Harvey, 2020) to falling profit and worker resistances by shifting operations to places with lower labour costs (the phenomenon of offshoring). Trade unions in this era also had more members and were more likely to go on strike, which seemed to amplify the feeling of crisis for many people. It is within this environment that the new and revolutionary neoliberal politics of Margaret Thatcher emerged – the solution to the problems of the economy was an expansive project of privatization and allowing free markets to determine outcomes within society. A proportion of this generation of people (for it was never an overwhelming majority) who had accumulated material gains under post-Second World War social democracy, but who were now anxious about the economy, could be absorbed within this market-oriented hegemony via tactics such as offering them purchase of their council homes at a reduced rate. Ordinary people were to be remade as homeowners and shareholders, spreading prosperity and absorbing increasing numbers of people into hegemonic power. Such moves were bolstered though culture and identity – Hollywood films promoting an entrepreneurial carefree spirit and corporate-owned media promoting a certain narrow view of patriotism with one hand while systematically demonizing and crushing resistance to this view with the other.

Power, then, is something distributed in an ever-shifting hegemony and it is one that defines the ‘common sense’ (Gramsci, 2007: 197) of a large part of a generation. Such power is shared and fuelled by state, corporations, media and culture, as well as through the everyday routines, behaviours and decisions of ordinary followers. One of the defining legacies of the post-war generation to younger generations, unable to access a fraction of the resources and options available to their parents and grandparents, has been climate change. Carbon emissions started to rise synonymously with the dawn of the industrial revolution but sharply spiked in the post-Second World War era, when there was a mass expansion of industry and infrastructure globally. In recent years the astonishing growth and urbanization of China have placed it as the world’s biggest emitter of greenhouse gases. A theory of hegemonic power, however, tells us that flattening and then reducing the curve of emissions is not as straightforward as capturing power within a central state but a matter of challenging it and building ‘counter-hegemonies’ over a wider spatial terrain – in communities, trade unions, social movements, businesses and mainstream culture; and in a way that reflects the globalized nature of hegemony by widening the scope of attention to include international institutions and relations. This presents us with an interesting challenge for any leadership with aspirations to generate care and freedom: purposeful leadership needs to operate robustly at a micro scale but also needs to scale outwards into a web, a hegemony.

Gramsci is of use not only in helping us see the expansive nature of power but also for identifying the micro forms of leadership that are necessary as a basis for this scaling up and outwards. Of interest here is his notion of the ‘organic intellectual’, which pushes us to consider the role of localized knowledge and knowledge practices as central to any purposeful leadership. By ‘organic intellectual’, Gramsci did not mean a traditionally well-read sage, such as an academic or scientist, but was more emphasizing that every group and community generates people who provide it with an ongoing intellectual basis that sustains and informs its practices:

Every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields.

(Gramsci, 2007: 5)

For someone to be an organic intellectual, the primary qualification is one of deep immersion in the knowledge and norms of a community. From this basis of 'active participation in practical life' they act as 'constructor, organizer, permanent persuader' (Gramsci, 2007: 10). Thinking in terms of business organizations, organic intellectuals can emerge because they possess some passion for a particular management approach that proves effective in practice and they consolidate their status as an intellectual in the organization through study and learning about successful experiments with this form of management. Political and activist organizations obviously generate organic intellectuals steeped in philosophy, strategy or tactics, who help groups make sense of their system of values and approach. Geographic communities can generate organic intellectuals, people who introduce forms of knowledge that hold the potential to make a difference to people's everyday lives, such as direct experience of surviving in sub-standard housing or fighting against rampant crime. Organic intellectuals, Gramsci acknowledged, often stood in opposition to the more conventional and traditional intellectuals of a society – those given power and authority by a hegemonic status quo to inform us of how we should interpret major events and daily life.

For Gramsci, then, intellectualism is a distinctively distributed and egalitarian notion – 'All [people] are intellectuals ... but not all [people] have in society the function of intellectuals' (Gramsci, 2007: 9). Anyone holds the capacity to be an intellectual in their own right, but not everyone chooses that path or is able to do so due to structural restrictions, such as lack of resources and time. A democratic dimension emerges because for Gramsci, organic intellectuals should not be viewed in isolation but as emerging from, and uniquely accountable to, their communities in a relational situation of co-dependence. Without the community, organic intellectuals would not be able to generate knowledge and without the intellectualism the community would be less able to make sense of their situation, needs and demands. Freely available education is vital therefore for organic intellectuals to emerge, as immersion in education helps people connect everyday experiences, 'muscular-nervous effort, insofar as it is an element of a general practical activity', with 'a new and integral conception of the world' (ibid.: 9). This means that everyday work and experience should serve as a basis for learning that in turn should underwrite the

purpose of leadership activity. In this sense an ‘organic unity between theory and practice’ (ibid.: 190) is created and preserved.

In reflecting on the role of learning in organic leadership we need to pay closer attention to this unity between experience and knowledge and be wary of not regarding it in too superficial a way or interpreting it in a purely instrumental way. To help us in this, we can turn to the critical education philosopher and practitioner Paulo Freire, who developed the innovative and seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). In this work, Freire seeks to achieve two things. First, to help his readers see more clearly the connections between education and oppression – that education can be used as a lever that helps keep people in a subordinate social and economic position. Second, to develop a counter pedagogy, one that empowered the oppressed to not only see their place within a socio-economic hierarchy but to develop the ideas and tools themselves that would help them overturn this status quo. Freire’s values were strongly reflected in his own practice and his ideas were developed through the close experiential engagement of working with peasant and worker communities. The strong emphasis throughout his work is upon the educator as someone who walks with students, that the relationship is generative and co-dependent, in distinction to what he dismissively referred to as the ‘banking’ method of education, where teacher speaks at students, who then ‘bank’ the knowledge and move on. Power is inverted in the relationship. Teachers needed to operate in solidarity with students, which ‘requires that one enters into the situation of those with whom one is in solidarity; it is a radical posture ... true solidarity with the oppressed means fighting at their side to transform the objective reality which has made them “beings of another”’ (Freire, 1970: 31). We need to take Freire at his word here and try to remove his words from the corporate-speak of organizations – by ‘stand with’ he really did mean to be intimately involved in struggles, to have something of one’s own at stake in these. Key in a pedagogy of the oppressed is that the knowledge is produced by the learner rather than the teacher – so there is a great emphasis on writing and other forms of knowledge produced by students. Dialogue is central in this process, one of mutual learning that builds towards a theory of ‘transformation’ (Freire, 1985: 39). At the heart of the approach is that the oppressed already possess the knowledge they need to transition to an organic, purposeful and impactful leadership.

Also relevant for helping us understand the process of learning within an organic community is the theory of situated learning (Lave and Gomes, 2019; Lave and Wenger, 1991), which has been influential in helping organizations consider how learning can be the driving force of everyday activity and leadership. At the heart of the theory is the notion of legitimate peripheral participation, where newcomers in a community learn by being granted a certain licence of peripherality, the freedom to observe and be gradually absorbed into the practices of a group through ever-increasing involvement in hands-on work. Bearing affinity to an apprenticeship model, legitimate peripheral participation differs to the degree that it regards power as central, acknowledging that the process of introducing new people within a community is an opportunity for both sides to learn from one another – but that such learning necessarily involves disruption to dominant orders of hierarchy and of identity, as dominant practices are questioned and thought anew.

The darker side of communities is also acknowledged within the theory, something we need to keep returning to in our consideration of leadership as purpose. Thinking in terms of the learning and leadership of a community in many ways follows the energy of how people naturally seem to organize (Edwards, 2015) and yet communities can become sealed off from outside influence, becoming too self-preoccupied and self-satisfied. At its extremes this can turn into something known as collective narcissism, whereby a community develops similar characteristics to those of individual clinical narcissism, namely, a ‘persistent pattern of grandiosity, fantasies of unlimited power or importance, and the need for admiration or special treatment’ (Kacel et al., 2017). Narcissists, disturbingly, can rise high in organizations, as an inflated sense of self-worth can seduce through giving the impression of authoritative confidence and yet when organizations are dominated by such people they become preoccupied with protecting the fragile feelings of the narcissist rather than focusing on what is best for the community as a whole – in short, organizational life becomes dominated by the ego of the narcissist, who displays the toxic combination of simultaneous exaggeration of personal value with a fragile and envious ego (Gabriel, 1999). Indeed, it would appear that narcissist not only have unshakeable self-confidence – they are never wrong, just robbed of what they deserve – but that we are attracted to such individuals even as children. Dutch research suggests that 96 per cent of children (7–14) picked the most

narcissistic child in their class as a ‘true leader’ but the same ‘true leader’ proved no better than average on helping group achieve a goal (Brummelman et al., 2015, 2021).

Collective narcissism shares some of these characteristics but can be viewed at the scale of a community. It is:

a belief that one’s own group (the in-group) is exceptional but not sufficiently recognized by others. It is the form of ‘in-group love’ robustly associated with ‘out-group hate.’ In contrast to private collective self-esteem (or in-group satisfaction, a belief that the in-group is of high value), it predicts prejudice, retaliatory intergroup aggression, and rejoicing in the suffering of other people. The pervasive association between collective narcissism and intergroup hostility is driven by a biased perception of the in-group as constantly threatened and out-groups as hostile and threatening. Collective narcissism is associated with hypersensitivity to provocation and the belief that only hostile revenge is a desirable and rewarding response. It arises when the traditional group-based hierarchies are challenged and empowers extremists as well as populist politicians. Instead of alleviating the sense of threat to one’s self-importance, it refuels it. The association between collective narcissism and intergroup hostility is weakened by experiences that fortify emotional resilience (e.g., positive identification with a community).

(de Zavala and Lantos, 2020: 273)

Evident here is the close association between collectively narcissistic communities and hostility and violence towards other communities. Interestingly, the authors state that collective narcissism seems less likely to develop when communities develop positive forms of emotional identification, i.e. when they base their identity on their own strengths rather than upon the need to defeat and vanquish others. An example used by de Zavala (2017) is that of the Donald Trump presidential campaign of 2016 (unsuccessfully repeated in 2020), which seemed to be defined more by hostility to others, particularly racial minorities, than by any positive identification from within the community. The thin-skinned, fragile ego of collective narcissism was evident in how Trump himself – but also his followers – responded in aggressive ways to even basic and relatively soft questioning, never mind to being held to account with facts – such as losing the 2020 election by virtue of having fewer votes than the winner. In summary, then, at their extremes, communities can turn inwards and emote violently outwards.

Situated learning seeks to address this issue of the destructive inward focus of communities by employing two related concepts – the boundary object and the broker. Boundary objects are things or ideas that facilitate engagement with ideas and people external to the community. Their usefulness lies precisely in their relative ambiguity and liminality, meaning



that the act of making sense of them serves as a way of connecting forms of previously disparately held knowledge. This is viewed as a particularly useful way in which people can learn about climate change (Hawkins et al., 2017), for example, by learning in their communities how everyday objects such as laptops are assembled in the Global South by exploited workers and transported in energy inefficient ways. Boundary objects can also be those made by communities, for example when groups create artworks together as a means of expressing the leadership practices of their groups (Hawkins and Edwards, 2015), which allows them to surface and reflect on these practices in relation to theory and practice generated outside the community. The broker (Wenger, 2000) is a role explicitly designated within communities of practice for gathering learning and knowledge from outside – for example, attending workshops, conferences, engaging in conversations with stakeholders or pursuing academic study. While it is desirable that all members of a community should be engaged in brokering activity, designating one or many people to adopt such an identity can help ensure that this function is not lost. Technological development, moreover, makes the seeking of innovative knowledge and practice far more straightforward than at the time in which Wenger was writing.

In reality, how often communities are actually nurtured as learning communities is less certain, and this can be identified as a key point of vulnerability for organic forms of leadership. Too often learning is viewed as ‘nice to have’ rather than as central to the functioning of communities and organizations, as everyday pressures and short-term demands result in power and knowledge being ever more concentrated in the hands of a few leaders. We therefore do need to be careful with universally equating organic intellectuals with leaders, as doing so can suggest a pooling of knowledge in the figure of the leader. This is not to argue that we would want community leaders to be idiots or disinterested in knowledge and learning.

Organic intellectuals are not always synonymous with formal leaders but certainly can and perhaps should be – Gramsci himself was a good example of this overlap and this is not a phenomenon restricted to the political left, as we could point to figures such as UK Conservative politician Boris Johnson, who have made their careers through research and writing as well as through politics. In an age of misinformation proliferation and relativism even over the most basic of scientific truths, such as climate warming and

its causes, it seems that we need to pay more critical attention to relational and democratic leadership that produces knowledge and that emerges within communities to offer purpose and direction. This formulation of community-based intellectualism and its potential potency – of ideas and leadership rising from communities in a co-dependent way – helps explain the rise of certain leaders such as Roger Hallam and Greta Thunberg within environmentalism. Both in their different ways speak from a basis of personal experience: Hallam from his decades as an environmental activist and organizer, translated into his arguments for a ‘civil resistance model’ (Hallam, 2019), influential in the establishment and persistence of Extinction Rebellion; Thunberg in her experiences as a child facing a future of planetary extinction, translated and consolidated into a series of authoritative speeches, which others can learn from in a book (Thunberg, 2019b). It is perhaps useful, however, to dissociate the figure of the organic intellectual from that of the leader and instead think about the organic production of knowledge, purpose and leaders – sometimes these will overlap in the body of one or many people but at other times they may be more distinct and require cooperation and coordination, digital or otherwise.

This takes us back to one of our original propositions in this chapter, that a purpose can lead as much as a person, place, product or position. In Gramsci, such purposes are tied with locally produced knowledge within communities, but they are also connected to the ethical. The word ‘leadership’ in Gramsci is a translation from his original Italian *dirigere*, to ‘direct, lead, rule’, his translators state. We might assume then that the original connotation of *dirigere* is more heavy-handed and hierarchical than the distributed and democratic leadership we would advocate for. Yet, his translators continue in their justification for the translation by flagging the textual context in which Gramsci discusses *dirigere*, namely in contrast to *dominare*, to dominate (Gramsci, 2007: 55f). This means we should read Gramscian leadership as that which provides direction but that also offers an alternative to domination by power. Many leadership scholars reading this translators’ dilemma will crack a wry smile, as this kind of terminological dance is precisely what continues to inform and sometimes bedevil the field. Gramsci provides us with some clarity, however, in the sense that he ties leadership closely to morality in addition to power.

Moral leadership, then, is certainly the exercise of direction by a particular power that provides ethical instruction to followers; but this is a

direction that should be in continuous, democratic and porous co-dependency with organic communities. In this sense we return nearly full circle to one of our earliest points that an ethical purpose is continuously contested. We also return to the core of the original intention of transformational leadership theory (Burns, 2012), which precisely argued that the transformational was defined by a relational *and moral* dialectic between leaders and followers, where each helped the other level up their ethical horizons and ambitions. Yet Gramsci's notion of organic and moral leadership places power at its core and offers us a way, further, of integrating a sophisticated hegemonic understanding of power with a commitment to democracy, that which may prevent the creep of domination.

From this basis we can read into Gramsci a general formula and structure for a form of organic and democratic leadership, one where a generative but adaptive purpose is at the core. Within this logic, the 'central' organization is in a process of 'continuous adaptation ... to the real movement, a matching of thrusts from below with orders from above, a continuous insertion of elements thrown up from the depths of the rank and file into the solid framework of the leadership apparatus which ensures continuity and the regular accumulation of experience' (ibid.: 188). Translating this somewhat cryptic formulation of Gramsci (ever watchful of the censors), we take his meaning to be an adaptive central organization that makes decisions but is guided by the 'thrusts' of people below, those who bring with them a closer connection to the organic experiences of community.

Inevitably as people take on more leadership responsibility, and expand their sphere of attention and influence, they will dissociate themselves somewhat, or a great deal, from the daily experiences of a community's work: trade union activists who become party political leaders will no longer be familiar with the micro detail of specific labour disputes and will rely on a 'thrusting' community to maintain that connection. The salience of the formula offered by Gramsci lies in not losing sight of where the power resides – not entirely amongst the formal leadership nor with the organic roots of a movement, but in a dynamic interplay between them. Centralized leaders may know something of the 'tactics' that can win the day in specific disputes or campaigns, but the broader 'strategy' is perhaps best left for the grassroots, who have a richer sense of the feelings of their communities and the conditions under which they toil (Hardt and Negri,

2017). Communication between grassroots and formal leaders in many ways has never been easier, through digital messaging or social media. Yet such technologies may also hamper organic leadership, engendering ‘broadcast’ approaches from leaders who use their platforms not to interact but to dictate.

The potency of this connection to the organic also explains the desire of well-funded corporate campaigns to appear as if they emerge authentically from the grassroots, a phenomenon known as ‘astroturfing’. Corporate funded special interests masquerading as emanating spontaneously from communities is a common feature of contemporary life and can be uncritically regurgitated by the media. The irony at play here is that such campaigns can transition to something more spontaneous and distributed, as was the case with the Brexit movement in the UK, which undoubtedly began life as the project of a small group of conservative nationalists and media tycoons with ties to investment finance but also undoubtedly grew into a grassroots campaign that energized millions of people across social classes.

Having drawn out the main features of organic leadership we will move on to consider some of its dynamics at work with an example from contemporary life, the rise and fall of the radical left-wing politician Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the UK Labour Party, and the movement of ‘Corbynism’ that fuelled this rise – but that ultimately faltered.

## **Oh, Jeremy Corbyn! Oh dear ...**

What follows is based on a study conducted by Owain into the UK Labour Party over three and a half years, as well as on an article he wrote with Paresha Sinha and Brigid Carroll on resistance leadership within the party (Sinha et al., 2019). In the study Owain interviewed forty Labour Party leaders, from local party members through to senior Corbyn strategists; more importantly he immersed himself in party activity, spending time chairing a local Momentum group, the organization established to campaign for socialist policies and politicians within the party, but also acting as the campaign manager for a parliamentary candidate in the ultimately doomed general election campaign of 2019.

In the 2019 article we just mentioned Owain and colleagues make the case that while Corbyn himself was clearly an important factor in the rise of socialist power within the party, his appeal was less about his personal characteristics and more about the way in which his presence seemed to act like a ‘channel’ and ‘vehicle’ for the experiences, values and leadership of others. They say that this was a kind of ‘anti-charisma’, that it was Corbyn’s self-effacing and unassuming character that fuelled commitment from followers, inviting robust forms of democratic engagement and participation. This kind of mass participation was evident in Corbyn’s initial campaign for the party leadership. Following the party’s heavy election defeat in 2015 under the leadership of Ed Miliband, most commentators expected its MPs and members to opt for a more right-wing figure as leader and indeed such a discourse seemed to shape the messaging of the front-runners, including the initial favourite, the then shadow health secretary and later mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham. Yet it seemed that this was a good example of bubble-think, the tendency of communities to look inwards and develop notions of common sense detached from the lived realities of external communities. Corbyn was a name that barely registered with political journalists or with most MPs. Out in the country, however, many people were suffering after five years of austerity economics – heavy cuts to public services, cuts to welfare payments and services, stagnating and falling pay and a proliferation of food banks to feed people who could no longer afford to feed themselves. It seemed that what at least some of these people wanted from a Labour leader was radical change and a reordering of the economic system, rather than politics that tinkered at the edges of a system to make life more bearable. While Corbyn was relatively unknown to journalists and most MPs, amongst anti-austerity and anti-war communities, he did have name recognition and a track record of supporting them. Such was the bubble-think at play within the status quo of the party, however, that many MPs even decided to lend nomination votes to Corbyn in order to allow for a socialist voice in the ensuing debate, mostly in the assumed knowledge that Corbyn would have little chance of victory in the contest proper (Nunns, 2018). After all, how could such an outsider as Corbyn ever have a chance of victory, someone who had spent his career rebelling against his own party in favour of causes regarded by its mainstream as politically unthinkable? The result of this bubble-think was

that Corbyn, after receiving enough votes from MPs, proceeded to qualify for election by party members and supporters.

What followed in the summer of 2015 was a wave of grassroots activity, most of which was outside the direct control of the official Corbyn team – impromptu campaign events and fundraising drives, combined with huge crowds turning out to see Corbyn speak, often in areas with little to no previous attachment to the Labour Party, let alone to socialism, all fuelled by widespread sharing on social media. But where had this wave of support come from? The answer is within the organic intellectualism and informal education systems of a number of different communities across the country. Neighbours were talking to neighbours, colleagues to colleagues, in a wave of organic participation and engagement. Socialism was back on the agenda.

Demoralized communities of public sector workers had become tired of year-on-year pay freezes combined with taking on the additional strain of trying to deliver more value for less money. As one research participant, who later went on to work as a senior organizer for Corbyn, noted in an interview with Owain:

I was teaching. I was a primary school teacher on the outskirts of Birmingham in a very, sort of, socially deprived part of the country and I used to keep snacks in a cupboard because a lot of the kids weren't able to eat properly ... I remember hearing on the news that – or maybe on social media. I remember hearing that Jeremy Corbyn was trying to get on the ballot paper ... and thinking ... what?

This teacher was due to emigrate abroad to teach when the leadership election was announced. To fill time between the end of her employment contract and scheduled departure date, she and her partner began volunteering for the Corbyn campaign, graduating to organizing events, and, following the victory, stayed in the country after all and became professional political organizers for the cause. Meanwhile, on a council estate in the south-east of England, a local mother found her agency and voice.

Despairing at the daily grind of feeding children, two with special educational needs, and suffering from a chronic lack of self-confidence, she decided to be 'brave', to join the party and stand for election as a councillor: 'I feel like [Corbyn]'s there, walking with me on my estate. Whenever I feel like I can't do this, too nervous, too scared ... he's there with me.' Another local councillor and young mother who had been

brought up in council housing decided that the ‘party had come home to me’ and decided that she would try to become an MP. A wave of people who had been forced into precarious work found a political voice and home, and started organizing, noticing a political leader and movement that understood the daily realities of struggling on insecure and low wages – ‘This was it, finally something to fight for’, in the words of a low-waged hospitality worker who had become politically active after Corbyn won, eventually taking a job with a trade union and getting elected as a local councillor.

Disabled activists who had toiled for years against cuts to welfare payments had the possibility of campaigning for and electing someone with an organic connection to their movement, one of the few MPs who had listened and met with them. Moreover, Owain noted, party meetings suddenly started to look and feel a lot younger than he had ever remembered them being. Young people who had been furious with the Iraq War and the trebling of university tuition fees responded to a candidate with a track record as a peace activist who was also promising to abolish fees. Climate activists who had previously viewed Labour as anathema to their cause, too close to the interests of big business to offer a pathway to carbon neutrality, recognized a willingness in Corbyn to think radically about the underlying economic causes of climate change. These younger people introduced cutting-edge modes of digital communication and planning to a party operation that had fallen behind the times. Trade unionists who had already elected more radical leaders within their own organizations now saw the potential of electing a similar outsider as leader of the Labour Party, ‘to support us, bolster us, not see us as a necessary but embarrassing extra’, in the words of one research participant. A stalwart group of socialist members and activists who had stayed within the party to fight for their cause from within and suffered decades of defeats (much like Corbyn himself) could now feed their learning into an expanding community.

These supporters had in their various ways developed a form of collective ‘common sense’ (Gramsci, 2007) that austerity neoliberal economics and consensus were at the root of the problems they experienced in the ‘muscular-nervous effort’ (Gramsci, 2007: 9) of everyday life and survival. They had been quietly developing an alternative intellectualism within their communities – trade union meetings, academic conferences, workplace conversations, WhatsApp conversations and aside encounters on

their housing estates. The ideas and energy now found a channel. The result was a sweeping victory for Corbyn in 2015, followed by another in 2016 after he successfully resisted a challenge to his leadership.

Following these victories, a proliferation of organic communities emerged. These were groups designed for the promotion, debate and deliberation of policy. On a national scale, the campaign to elect and re-elect Corbyn as leader transitioned into a new organization, Momentum. Best known for its slick and much followed social media operation, it also adapted to form a network of local groups across the country that were supposed to be localized centres allowing socialists to meet and discuss contemporary issues in their local areas. Meanwhile, The World Transformed (TWT) 'festival of ideas' was initially envisaged as a parallel event to the national Labour Party conference, which would incorporate art, politics, debate and socializing from a socialist perspective. Organized by young members, it quickly became oversubscribed, long queues outside its events usual rather than exceptional – young people were disproving the adage that they did not care about representative politics. These events spread into communities across the country, with local TWT days mirroring the format of the national event. Meanwhile with a narrower policy focus, specific groups of activists decided to test the new leadership's professed commitment to party democracy by starting campaigns to secure certain commitments in the party's election manifesto – on free movement of people, anti-Brexit, against private schools and, most notably, on securing a Green New Deal (GND). Impetus for the GND group came from an organic mix of senior Labour politicians in dialogue with grassroots members. One of the leading organizers of Labour for a Green New Deal recounted in an interview with Owain a conversation he had had with the then Shadow Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, Rebecca Long-Bailey, and her team, during which they had told him that to make the case forcefully for a GND, they needed pressure and ideas from below:

The leadership needed the conditions in which to make those decisions and so we were like, okay, what are we going to do to create the conditions for the leadership of the party to step into this politics.

This was an organic and relational way of defining a political party's purpose. Following a professional, widely followed and energetic social media and grassroots campaign run by volunteers, which included securing the support of most of the trade unions, the GND was accepted by Labour's



national conference as policy to an ecstatic response in the conference hall, television screens filled with pictures of a young and diverse audience cheering, singing, embracing. The energy felt unlike anything that had happened in recent memory in UK politics, amplified by the party's unexpected near miss at securing power in the 2017 general election.

The creativity and innovation within these organic communities were undoubtedly assisted by the presence of care within them. Owain noticed that as he participated in the work of some, that members would routinely provide one another with support over and above the transactional and instrumental goals of the group. Deep friendships were formed, with members supporting one another to work through difficult periods of mental health, access welfare services, fight unfair housing evictions and advocate for better government support for family members. Routinizing such acts as part of everyday practice within communities enabled diverse participation in campaigns – in other words, enhancing the freedom of more people to become involved.

Yet things did go horribly wrong for Labour Party socialists, culminating in a heavy loss at the December 2019 election, which was followed by the resignation of Corbyn, the subsequent victory of a non-left leader in a landslide win and then the steady removal of most socialist politicians from the party's shadow government team. There are many plausible and well-researched explanations in circulation explaining the party's election loss (e.g. Jones, 2020), but the focus here is upon the internal leadership dynamics of the party rather than its broader electoral fortunes. Certainly, the leader figure of Corbyn had ceased to command widespread support, years of attacks on him from within his own party and from the media taking their toll – while of course acknowledging that he too surely made mistakes along the way. Aside from the predictable attacks on the party's more ambitious and radical economic plans – such as the Green New Deal – the Brexit issue and continuing allegations of anti-Semitism, and the party's failures to adequately deal with both issues, seemed decisive in different but significant ways. Brexit created a schism within Labour to a greater extent than within the ruling Conservative Party. Having failed to persuade the then UK prime minister Theresa May of the need for a compromise solution, Corbyn was vulnerable to his own commitment to party democracy in the sense that as the months and years progressed, a strong movement in favour of discarding the referendum result and staging a

second referendum on EU membership gathered unstoppable momentum and strength of support, splitting Corbyn's support base down the middle and becoming the defining issue of the years 2017–19. Having promised to invigorate party democracy Corbyn seemed bound to follow the wishes of his members for offering voters a second referendum, despite probably not believing in the value of another referendum himself, and thus appearing to be indecisive. In terms of the organic dynamics of leadership, the effect was to create distrust and consternation within pro-Corbyn communities. Outside these communities, particularly in working-class areas of the UK, eastern parts of Wales, the Midlands and North of England, previously Labour strongholds, activists started reporting a fierce backlash to the party's more pro-EU positioning – Owain himself, and the candidate whose campaign he was managing, had to try to de-escalate situations of volunteers being threatened with physical violence by Brexit voters. Meanwhile, the anti-Semitism issue grew until it started leading national news bulletins and showed no signs of dissipating. For a group of political activists avowedly and proudly anti-racist, particularly, obviously, Jewish activists, the emotional toll proved devastating, causing hurt and dividing already fracturing groups of comrades. Summing up the general mood of activists in one pithy, but deadly accurate, social media post, one prominent young trade union leader asked simply: 'Is anyone else just so, so tired?'

Then of course came the crushing election loss and a further splintering of Labour Party socialists. It marked the culmination of the spectacular rise and not-quite-as-sharp fall of an organic political movement, whose future at the time of writing seems to hang in the balance. While some of the caring relationships between activists persist, a sense of organized connection between communities barely so. However, if a focus on the organic teaches us anything it is that such movements do not arise because of top-down leaders but are dynamic and to a great extent self-propelling: for as long as extreme wealth inequality and social injustices persist, similar movements to the one evidenced within the Labour Party of 2015–19 can re-emerge in energetic and purposeful ways. However, a focus on the organic also helps make visible some of the ways in which such leadership might not re-emerge – namely, the Corbyn project seemed to gain traction not only because of the strength of individual organic communities but by the way they were able to scale up and find common cause, no matter how temporarily that was achieved. We now move on to offer some explanation

for this connecting of the organic, a broadening upwards and outwards that helps translate and connect individual nodes of purpose into a potent purposeful movement.

## Chaining organic leadership

Thinking in terms of chains can help us move from the particular and localized to ways in which organic purpose and leadership can grow and develop over space. Sticking with the biological metaphor, this is about how we progress from planting a seedling to roaming through a forest. What we saw in evidence in the Labour Party example was the transition from particular community energies to the connection of communities within a bigger and more purposeful leadership endeavour, albeit one that subsequently collapsed.

We can make sense of these dynamics by turning to the writing of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, whose work has strongly informed the practice and tactics of social movements. Together and independently, they spent their careers theorizing how disparate groups of people can come together to enact profound change. They are often labelled as ‘post’ Marxist in the sense that their 1985 book, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, created waves when it was published because it made the case that progressive politics needed to move beyond a preoccupation with social class to incorporate a broad range of identity and other struggles – those for racial equality, equality regardless of gender or sexuality and climate justice predominantly. Their case was that people did not identify so much anymore along purely class lines and where they did those tended to intersect with other forms of identity. Therefore, to build movements capable of change it was not enough to focus only on the experiences of the working class – as such a class as originally envisaged within an industrial economy was anyway diminishing in the Global North along with heavy industry in general – but also had to engage with a broader range of struggles. Yet the question remains, how do these disparate identities, struggles and interests connect into a shared and meaningful purpose capable of enacting change through leadership?

We had to wait a while for their answer, but it arrived in 2005 when Laclau published a book on populism (Laclau, 2005), which was followed

by a similar contribution from Mouffe (2019). In these books the authors clarified and expanded on what they meant by a few of their key concepts. First, in terms of organizing approaches that solidified relations between groups, they differentiated between ‘differential’ and ‘equivalential’ logics. A differential logic can assemble a chain of association between groups who accept that while they are different, they are nevertheless part of the same system of purpose, forming important nodes within a shared chain, and that furthermore this chain shares a similar commitment to and faith in the institutions of the status quo. There is a smoothing over of social relations due to a perceived shared set of interests and expectations. Returning to the Bristol statue example from early in the chapter, a differential logic would tell us that the appropriate leadership approach for community groups who wanted the Colston statue removed would be to bring these demands to the various relevant local institutions – the landowners, the council and so on, which would deliberate upon the request and through engagement with the groups arrive at a solution. Each group or interest involved, while approaching the issue from a different perspective, would be viewed as sharing a common commitment to equality and so a solution would reveal itself. But, of course, it did not.

Hence an equivalential logic during the Black Lives Matter protests emerged through what Laclau and Mouffe call a chain of equivalence. Laclau tells us that a logic of equivalence, similarly to that of difference, also connects disparate interests and groups together in a chain; but an equivalential logic differs in that people here are seen as also united through a mutual antagonism against a hostile ‘outside’. That outside can be a government, a corporation or something more abstract, like capitalism, socialism or liberalism. In the Bristol example, the hostile outside was positioned by the protestors as being an intransigent formal system of governance that would not act, forcing the protestors to bypass it and to take matters into their own hands. There is a dark side to equivalence, however, and this is most clearly seen with racist movements, which bring together groups of people in shared antagonism to a racial ‘other’ whom they blame for the perceived ills of a society – the most striking contemporary example in the UK is the way in which many people and groups blame migrants, refugees and asylum seekers for strains and deficiencies in public services, overlooking the chronic cuts and underinvestment these services have been made to endure. For both Laclau

and Mouffe, equivalence is the hallmark of populist movements, which they characterize as those which make demands that cannot be answered or resolved by the status quo – they are inherently antithetical to any solution the establishment could or would propose and therefore meeting them would require a radical restructuring and reorientation of the system. On the far political right we see examples of such populism in calls for discriminatory laws that would remove a woman's autonomy over her own body or for non-white people to be removed from a country. Clearly adopting such legislation would violate the principles of a liberal democracy and cannot be introduced within such systems, hence addressing them would require changing the very system to a form of authoritarianism. Laclau's, and later Mouffe's, contribution was to state that there was nothing inherently right-wing about populism but that instead we needed to think of it as a kind of organizing structure. More left-leaning or even politically centrist groups can also adopt the features of populism to force radical change (Fougère and Barthold, 2020). Mouffe's (2019) later contribution was to underline that the crucial difference between left and right populism was that chains of equivalence on the left are – or at least should be – defined by their commitment to radical forms of democratic participation: they commit to the free play of ideas and opinions within the chain and consciously work towards establishing institutions and forums within which such a play can occur – and there is a close resemblance here to Munro and Thanem's (2018) emphasis on joyful encounters in the sense that the shared discovery of robust democratic participation keeps people engaged and accountable. There is, after all, a joy present in the process of mutual discovery, of hearing ideas that sound radical, even taboo. We will return to this model in our discussion of the environmental movement later.

The other concept from Laclau and Mouffe we need to consider is that of the 'empty signifier'. Empty signifiers are particular signifiers (usually single words or pithy phrases) that connect various people and groups in a chain of equivalence. Empty signifiers are unique in the sense that they are simultaneously meaning-full and meaning-light (Laclau, 2015). They are potent enough to inspire identification but loose enough to ensure that identification is shared widely: perhaps Barack Obama's 2008 election staple: 'Time for Change' captures this well, because many people could identify with it, but precisely what it meant was often difficult to interpret. This sometimes leads people to the mistaken assumption that empty

signifiers mean nonsense words free of meaning, whereas in reality they are so potent as to mean a great deal to people; it is just that the meaning may vary considerably depending on which part of a chain of equivalence you hear from. Empty signifiers are also related to real material demands and causes – for example, in a study Owain pursued with colleagues concerning the use of gender quotas within the UK Labour Party (Smolović Jones et al., 2020b), research participants drew heavily on the empty signifier of ‘equality’, which of course was loose enough to mean different things to different people but was also intimately connected to real experiences of inequality and real ideas for organizational reforms that proponents hoped would ensure gender equality amongst elected representatives. ‘Equality’ helped people make sense of the real demands and conditions that they wanted to achieve.

Focusing on the work of Laclau and Mouffe helps us see that purpose, if it is to be shared and impactful, needs to work through an organizational logic – either of difference or equivalence. These two are usually positioned in opposition to one another but in practice this is not always the case. For example, in the Black Lives Matter movement, some people and groups worked within institutions for reform while others sought the path of equivalence – both informed and fed one another. Adopting this view simultaneously accepts that purpose is a driving force of leadership but also that for purpose to transcend beyond the local, it needs to work through chains and will adapt in the process. However, we do need to acknowledge that Laclau and Mouffe were writing before digital technology and social media had properly taken hold in political or commercial spheres. While the dynamics of language and the political are similar today, the speed at which they circulate and adapt has now surely been radically altered by technology. Now that we have provided some theory for better understanding how purposeful leadership develops within organic communities and can escalate and scale up to something more widespread, in a chain of equivalence, we unpack this proposition in more depth through the example of environmentalism movements. We begin by considering the problem of the climate crisis and the challenges it offers to any purposeful leadership.

## **Climate crisis – challenges and some hope**

To understand the possibilities of leadership to address the climate crisis we of course first need to better understand the distinctive contours of the problem. This is a huge undertaking and one we cannot possibly hope to cover in any comprehensive way here, but what we can do is point to a central dynamic relating to the role of human beings and their economic systems in creating and perpetuating the crisis. This in turn will help us clarify the challenges for a leadership whose purpose is halting and reversing climate change and all of the inequalities that stem with and from it.

In recent years a philosophical school called post-humanism has pointed the finger squarely at human beings in general and stated that the big problem with climate change is our self-obsession, the fact that we always put ourselves front and centre of all considerations in life; an alternative would be to overcome the ego of the human and instead try to see the interrelated and systemic nature of the planet's ecosystems. This is a helpful mindset to have in general – think more about the needs of rivers, animals and coral reefs, less about our own transient and short-term wants. The trick post-humanism pulls is 'decentring' the human, meaning that it offers a way of understanding any action such as leadership proceeding amidst and with a host of non-human actors (Latour, 2018). When we stop assuming that humans are the centre of the universe, post-humanists often also take a further step, one which is more controversial than the first. They ask the question: are humans really the ones in charge – are humans truly the masters of nature or are they the ones being manipulated by objects? Adopting this focus can be instructive because it helps draw attention to the way in which certain behaviours of organizations have become taken for granted as normal due to a naturalizing of certain human-technological relations, which become automated within systems over time. Why do so many people buy new phones every two years or new disposable clothes every two minutes? Perhaps this is not a matter of free human will but one of technology controlled by no one in particular prompting and pushing human beings to behave in one way rather than another. What this tells us is that humans over-estimate the extent of their agency over the non-human (Braidotti, 2019). For example, the geography of a place and its lack of public transport can lead people to buy bigger cars, which then in turn lead them into an automated lifestyle based on driving said highly polluting cars – human choice does not factor into the equation much here, as most people

do not have much choice other than going to work every day and moving around. The obvious implication of this view is that even if humans consciously wanted to address the climate crisis, to underestimate the self-perpetuating dynamics of things like fossil fuels, new mobile phones, planes, cars and so on could prove fatal – these non-human objects themselves can drive the way our lives are organized. But this post-human position also seems problematic, as what in the end it does is to assign agency to the non-human, whereas surely when one looks more closely at who decides to instigate and continue with a certain geographical feature (e.g. no public transport) or path of production (e.g. fracking over investment in solar power), such agency surely resides with human beings, albeit these are humans locked within a current economic system that appears addicted to particular interests. To pick up on C Wright Mills's (1959) personal issues versus public problems approach, but in the words of Mann (2021: 6):

Changing the system requires systemic change: the fossil fuel disinformation machine wants to make it about the car you choose to drive, the food you choose to eat, and the lifestyle you choose to live, rather than the larger system and incentives. We need policies that will incentivize the needed shift away from fossil fuel burning towards a clean, green global economy.

Although post-human perspectives can help us see the reliance of humans on technology and material objects, the big problem with them is that they tend to avoid addressing economics in any meaningful way and thereby also fail to get to the heart of a problem, which is that the future of the planet is being endangered by human-made economic relations. Centring the human as a point of analysis here seems vital, therefore. Or to be more specific, we need to look more closely at a sub-set of human beings, namely the very wealthiest, who are disproportionately responsible for carbon emissions (Monbiot, 2017) – for example, a recent study showed that 1 per cent of the population who fly regularly are responsible for 50 per cent of all emissions from aviation (Gössling and Humpe, 2020). Going further, we can add the obvious conclusion that the planet's wealthiest, although most responsible for climate change, are also the least likely to suffer from its catastrophic consequences, as they 'occupy privileged niches in the habitat while the poor tend to work and live in the more toxic and hazardous zones' (Harvey, 2016: 188), something that has been the case since the dawn of the industrial revolution, when it was workers who lived in polluted mill towns and cities rather than the owners (Malm, 2016). Environmental leadership,



it therefore seems, at least if it has ambitions to reverse global warming, needs to focus on economic systems that generate large wealth disparity, as this wealth disparity not only has effects for how much warming is generated but also for who bears the consequences. From this perspective, environmental leadership is inseparable from a form of contemporary politics that is hostile to capitalism in its current guise, as it is capitalism that is the driver of turbo charged carbon emissions. Environmental writer and journalist George Monbiot, speaking on the comic Frankie Boyle's BBC talk show in 2019, captured this sentiment succinctly, in a widely shared monologue which argued that continuing along a path of constant economic growth is contradictory to environmental sustainability, and therefore a different ideology must be adopted as part of a holistic system change:<sup>1</sup>

We've got to find a better way of measuring human welfare than perpetual growth. We've got to start ramping down all fossil fuel production and leave fossil fuels in the ground and at the same time, and this is the nice bit of it, it turns out that through massive rewilding, ecological restoration you can draw down a load of the carbon dioxide we have already produced. Huge amounts, allowing the forests to come back, the marshes to come back, the sea floor to recover from trawling.

We've got to go straight to the heart of capitalism and overthrow it. Credit where it is due, Monbiot does not try to avoid the hard questions: avoiding environmental catastrophe probably does mean a fundamental redesign of systems, which in turn means that the current economic system – capitalism – itself may be unsustainable. But is this necessarily so? Is there not an argument to be made that capitalism itself can be reformed to harness environmental change? From this perspective, the entrepreneurialism of the capitalist can be incentivized to create innovative technological and economic solutions that will help us out of this mess without changing much at all about who owns and directs modes of production. This would mean believing that the market will incentivize innovations in renewable energy, home insulation and so on, and essentially stabilize in their favour, enabling widespread and cheap proliferation to consumers. Unfortunately, of course, this technology has been with us for quite some time but is yet to be widespread to anywhere near the extent that it needs to be. Fossil fuels and intensive agriculture in particular continue to be more profitable to giant multinationals and so these are the routes pursued. Beyond renewables, big business has become increasingly

interested in something called geoengineering, mechanical solutions that promise to draw down deposits of carbon in the air and to inject chemicals within the environment to push carbon dioxide into the stratosphere. The appeal is that were the technology to work, capitalism would not necessarily need to change fundamentally, as we could merely store excess carbon underground and negate the effects of already emitted carbon. The technology seems tenuous at present, however, with significant dangers to health and life a real possibility – fears, for example, of generating mass planetary darkness and acid rains – and the chances of it becoming operational to a sufficient degree in time to save the planet seem limited (Buck, 2019).

Perhaps, then, what is needed is a more ‘moral’ leadership of capitalism. Of course, as we noted earlier, the majority of followers, at least in the United States, appear to already think that they do work for ethically responsible leaders. Equally, if we believe the vast tomes of corporate social responsibility literature and the glossy public relations of multinational corporations, we already exist in the era of moral leadership within capitalism. Yet the world continues to heat at an exponential rate, so something is clearly amiss. Either what we are being told is inaccurate or woefully insufficient. What we have left in terms of options therefore seems to be limited to leadership of environmentally sustainable capitalism or an economy that is not predicated upon compound economic growth. It is within the remit of the former that most leadership research to date has focused. For example, Kempster and Carroll’s (2016) edited volume positions itself as concerned with a shift from ‘market capitalism’ to ‘moral capitalism’, with appeals to ‘grow well’. This is a welcome and pragmatic intervention into the field as it asks us to engage our collective intelligence to re-imagine leadership as something that builds a sustainable and collective capitalist economy that offers primacy to human flourishing. Yet it could also be a prisoner to boundaries of its own making – moral capitalism and growing well can be interpreted as oxymoronic statements. From this perspective any form of growth can only be bad for the environment and as capitalism is fundamentally premised on perpetual compound growth, then by extension any form of capitalism cannot be morally acceptable, at least if we judge a moral good by its ambitions to save and preserve life and ecosystems. This critique is one commonly levelled by eco-socialists.

If continuous compound growth is inseparable from the dynamics of capitalism, it is no wonder that the agents of capital are keen for everyone to 'nibble' at peripheral environmental solutions, such as consumer choices (buying greater volumes of commodities but ensuring that these are greener commodities) rather than focusing on the 'core dynamics of what capital is about' (Harvey, 2014: 252): endless economic growth. You might counter this statement by arguing that environmental disasters are surely bad for everyone, including capitalists. Yet we know that the impacts of such disasters are unevenly distributed, meaning that it is the poorest in the Global South who suffer the most, people who also happen to be those with the least in terms of spending power. It is naïve to imagine that major ecological catastrophes will mark an end to capitalism, which will and does find a myriad of ways to profit from the climate crisis. One of these is through producing and selling 'green' commodities but another is the darker practice of 'disaster capitalism' (Harvey, 2014), which means leveraging environmental collapse for profit. For example, the melting of the Arctic ice sheets spells disaster for most people but for certain fossil fuel capitalists offers even more opportunities to drill for oil; it also paves the way for developing housing and infrastructure in underpopulated geographies currently more protected from environmental disasters. The scarcity of certain aspects of nature essential for survival (clean water, air, etc.) provides ample scope for further monetization and hence also the accrual of profit:

Capital cannot help but privatise, commodify, monetise and commercialise all those aspects of nature that it possibly can. Only in this way can it increasingly absorb nature into itself to become a form of capital – an accumulation strategy – all the way down into our DNA. This metabolic relation necessarily expands and deepens in response to capital's exponential growth. It is forced on to terrains that are more and more problematic.

(Harvey, 2014: 261)

We, of course, need to be careful here not to generalize into all of capitalism and capitalists but rather to point at the general force that propels the system. The trap at play is that while many individual capitalists may baulk at the idea of disaster profiteering, the system itself in its current manifestation incentivizes such behaviour, and so any purposeful leadership offering an alternative will need to confront and overcome this fact.

We should also take a moment to reflect on the emotional side of our current plight and the alienation it creates between people and nature

(Harvey, 2020). This is commonly referred to as a ‘rift’ (Foster et al., 2011) – meaning that our economies, modes of production and consumption, have led to people becoming detached from the nature of which they are a part – something we reflected on in [Chapter 4](#) in relation to Total Management and the technological control of work. They instead occupy a ‘second nature’ (Harvey, 2011: 185), one which feels as if it is entirely made and sustained by humans. We can disappear into endless cycles of binge-watching Amazon Prime videos without paying attention to the significant energy consumption at play in storing and sending large chunks of data. By this reckoning people lose a sense of connection to the cycles and patterns of nature, such as changes in the seasons and weather. We can buy various fruits and vegetables at all times of the year; we wake up and go to sleep at times dictated by our employers rather than by the available light and our own health needs; we defy geographical distance by taking flights; our bodily fitness is dictated by apps and wearable technology rather than by how we intuitively feel. Yet many of us do know that something is amiss in our contemporary lifestyles, but feel helpless and unable to effect any meaningful change – this is the recent phenomena of eco-depression and anxiety (Powell, 2020). However, alienation is not entirely a negative experience because it can also compel us to seek out more innovative and creative forms of leadership to address the crisis that we feel through our emotions as being wrong. As people sense a gap between the promises of a system to provide us with happy, healthy and fulfilling lives and the realities of alienation, they start to organize. We have already outlined our view of organic leadership as offering a structure for this organizing, but it is worth briefly reflecting on some alternative pathways, some of which fit well with our theory and others that stand in opposition to it. To help us with this we draw on Harvey’s (2016) organizational typology.

The most obvious of these is authoritarianism. When we think of authoritarianism it is tempting to regard it either through the grainy media reels of history or through dystopian sci-fi; yet if you take a look at the world around you, the creep of authoritarianism is impossible to miss. As we wrote this chapter: a surprising body of corporate media and business interests in the United States seemed comfortable with the notion of a losing Donald Trump being handed the presidential election despite his claims of voter fraud being spurious; much of the media in the Global North, which opposed Trump’s attempted coup, also somewhat surprisingly

continued to support a similar coup by the far right in Bolivia; Hungary, Turkey and Poland shifted ever closer to a form of authoritarian rule; the brutal authoritarian regime in Saudi Arabia continued to be a central power within fossil capital; the ruling Russian elite continued to exercise power through violence; a far-right autocrat ruled in Brazil; a theocratic regime ruled Iran; a reactionary nationalist ruled in India; most significantly a form of authoritarian capitalism with some shades of communism ruled China.

So, if the climate crisis is to be addressed it is perhaps naïve to imagine that this can be achieved through purely democratic means and will instead need to be filtered through the self-interest of autocratic states – of most relevance here is persuading growing economies like India, China and Brazil that they need to sacrifice growth in ways that were never accepted by the more established economies of the Global North during the industrial revolution. Focus on the tilt towards authoritarianism and the growth of China to a position of dominance has led some writers to predict that one increasingly likely mode of addressing the crisis could be thought of as ‘Climate Mao’ (Mann and Wainwright, 2017), meaning heavy state investment and intervention in green technologies and economic forms without democratic input, a similar approach pursued by China to grow its economy as an industrial and manufacturing giant but channelled towards a green transition. The flip side of authoritarianism is that it might also involve an even more brutal ‘exterminism’ (Frase, 2016), where regimes accept that mass casualties abroad and domestically are inevitable and instead enact brutal policing and military solutions for protecting a ruling elite from harm. Authoritarianism seems a highly unlikely mode through which any organic and democratic leadership could enact more egalitarian change. This signals to us that any form of organic leadership cannot be tied to only environmental issues but needs to pay closer attention to broader socio-economic issues and trends, defending principles of democracy whenever and wherever possible, while also combating wealth inequality, which usually makes states more vulnerable to authoritarian and xenophobic leadership.

We are currently living somewhere between authoritarianism and what Harvey refers to as corporate and state managerialism. Harvey describes this category as a ‘weak’ form of authoritarianism, in the sense that it occupies a grey zone between elected governments and technocratic governance by unelected institutions. In such a logic, climate change is

addressed through major international agreements, which are informed by scientific and economic evidence, which are implemented and enforced through bureaucracy and regulation. Clearly in liberal democratic states there are opportunities for a form of organic leadership to press for more radical change within this organizational logic – as has been the predominant focus to date. Indeed, maybe this form of organizing will work because at present there appears to be a growing consensus globally that climate change is real and that something should be done about it. The big drawback with this mode of organizing is that to date it has been mostly ineffective – temperatures continue to rise above any manageable level and the parts per million of carbon in the atmosphere continue to grow. So, we clearly need to think of ways in which democratic and political challenges can be more effectively planned and executed.

Conservatism may also provide a solution to the climate crisis in the sense that it could adapt from its current blend of neoliberalism and nationalism to a more traditional focus on conserving localized ecologies. Such forms of conservatism have a long if waning tradition of valuing nature as a pre-eminent force, whose aesthetic and wondrous, yet often violent aspects, need to be left alone from human interference as far as possible. Conservatism has played a role in some campaigns against airport expansion in recent years, although it has proved to be a roadblock to wider environmental leadership, as its focus tends to be on the local aesthetics of a specific geographical area rather than on the bigger issue of climate change globally (Spicer, 2019).

Finally, we need to consider eco-socialism and its cousin of decentralized communitarianism. Eco-socialism means connecting the interests of workers with those of environmentalists. Presently, under the ownership of capitalists, the means of production are used in ways that are making the climate crisis worse. Eco-socialists want ownership of the means of production to switch to workers and communities. Under this new form of ownership, democratic forms of governance and leadership would be introduced to ensure properly sustainable production responsive to the needs of people and nature. The most substantial policy ideas that have emerged from this perspective have formed around the holistic programme of a Green New Deal (GND) (Pettifor, 2019). In a nutshell the GND is a package of economic solutions, where democratic forms of nationalization of key industries would co-exist with ambitious state investment in green

technologies and urban redesign. It also advocates a rethinking of what societies regard as skilled and valued work – a reframing where carbon neutral work such as caring, teaching and green manufacturing are rewarded far more than carbon intensive work (Aronoff et al., 2019). The argument in favour of this approach is that it offers a way of reducing wealth inequality, empowering more people through democratic participation and tackling climate change simultaneously. Its emphasis on mass democratic participation sits well with the precepts of organic leadership. On the downside, we need to acknowledge the prospect of a GND globally as remote at present and it has yet to be embraced by an electorate of a significant size, although we note that the current US vice president, Kamala Harris, co-sponsored GND legislation when she sat as a senator, which points to some hope for its progression.

Sitting somewhere between conservatism and eco-socialism is ‘decentralised communitarianism’ (Harvey, 2016: 184). This mode of organization is anti-capitalist in the sense of advocating communalism and shared resources rather than competition and compound growth. It advocates for self-sustaining eco communities, democratically controlled through horizontal modes of governance, such as large-scale assemblies that would make decisions. This is a mode of organization that, similarly to conservatism, prioritizes a closer relationship to localized nature. Critics of the approach, however, worry about the possibility of co-ordination between many of these communities were they to proliferate; there is also a key tension in place in the sense that the localized focus of such communities, and their necessary autonomy, does not provide a template for engendering more global forms of change. Given that the focus of this form of organization is local it is quite possible that its growth would be patchy and limited, meaning that pockets of decentralized communitarianism would have to find ways of co-existing within a larger context of authoritarianism or corporate and state managerialism. Finally, reverting to a simpler, less technologically developed mode of life in autonomous local communities is not for everyone, and persuading mass publics of the virtues of this style of life feels like a challenging task. However, there is no reason why a form of organic leadership cannot advocate for the freedom of people to choose this way of life and support them to establish such communities, on the proviso that it is not something forced undemocratically on society as a whole.

Now that we have set the scene of the problem of environmental crisis and provided some additional organizational solutions, we can move on to consider these in relation to contemporary examples of environmental leadership, through the Indigenous campaign for environmental justice at Standing Rock, the Sunrise Movement and Extinction Rebellion.

## **Learning from contemporary climate movements**

This is an exciting time to be a climate activist or someone simply very interested in transitioning societies to carbon neutrality. At whatever scale you look, there appears to be green discourse or action. Of course, much of this might simply be empty political sloganeering or cynical corporate marketing posing as meaningful action, the phenomenon known as greenwashing. But there are signs and flickers of life now in numerous places that cannot be ignored. Together, we are going to argue, these may constitute the beginnings of an organic leadership that can make meaningful advances in reversing climate change. Here we will mostly focus on the leadership of climate movement activism, but we will return at the end to reflect on the relationship of this to more formal political and civic leadership, the realm referred to by Harvey (2016) as corporate and state managerialism. The former may infuse the latter with democratic energy and a radical drive largely missing at present. In looking for organic leadership on climate, we will primarily focus on the leadership that has emerged from Indigenous people and young people.

While it is unwise to generalize, and certainly to romanticize, we can learn much from how many Indigenous communities practice leadership in and through land (Evans and Sinclair, 2016; Spiller et al., 2020; Warner and Grint, 2012). Aboriginal, Māori and Native American Indigenous people have a view of place, space and time that is distinctive, seeing the present as intimately connected to a live ancestry and nature:

Indigenous notions of time consider the present to be structured entirely by our past and by our ancestors. There is no separation between past and present, meaning that an alternative future is also determined by our understanding of our past. Our history is the future.

(Estes, 2019: 23)



In this view, nature is alive, ubiquitous and generative. Water, for example, ‘is animated and has agency; it streams as liquid, forms clouds as gas, and even moves earth as solid ice – because it is alive and gives life’ (Estes, 2019: 19). From this perspective what we do now in leadership terms is a matter of stewardship, of connecting the past, present and future to a sense of responsibility to nature. In the words of Spiller et al. (2020: 518):

Indigenous leadership is grounded in an animated world of affection between humans and cosmos, where we are evolving together – entwined in sacred kinship. Leaders, including those at the helm of organizations, are kaitiaki, active stewards, for the wellbeing of others in social ecologies. The radical implication for collective leadership is for all leaders, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to take up the role of actively being stewards and caretakers of communities and ecologies in service of the wellbeing of others, including the environment. It involves mutual exchange and collective will and is sustained from one generation of leadership to the next.

Owain used to live and work in New Zealand and his most memorable experiences there were from engaging with Māori people. Early on he met staff from Māori TV, who were interested in his Welsh language heritage and spoke at length of the similarities between efforts underway in Aotearoa and Cymru to preserve and grow both the Welsh and Māori languages. He participated in a ceremony to be officially welcomed to the local marae, a sacred and social Maori meeting place. At the beginning of leadership development programmes, the team he was working with would begin the programme of learning through a Mihimihi, a Maori tradition where people introduce themselves by talking about their genealogy but also their connection to their local nature, their rivers, mountains and so on. This kind of introduction grounds the engagements to come, helping to situate them in a deeper sense of purpose, as stewards of a particular place to which the leadership of the group has a responsibility (Evans and Sinclair, 2016).

Understanding the connection of land to Indigenous people helps us better understand how and why environmental struggle has always been at the heart of Indigenous struggles for justice and recognition. Land, after all, was what was viciously taken from Indigenous people, who were murdered and allowed to die in their millions to make way for settler communities. Nick Estes (2019) collapses past struggles with the ongoing campaign of Indigenous tribes at the Standing Rock Reservation, North Dakota, to oppose construction of the Dakota Access oil pipeline. Here purpose, place and community are vividly brought to life as things that persevere through generations of struggle are brought to life in the present campaign against

fossil capital. In essence, a number of Indigenous Nations, including Estes' own Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, opposed construction of the pipeline because of the damage it would cause to the local environment and to sacred sites. In organic terms, the struggle was situated in a particular geographical community but was also a cause that assembled seven Indigenous nations, for the first time in seven generations, to unite to resist invasion (Estes, 2019:14).

Estes explains that while certain settlers may view nature as something to exploit and extract for financial gain, 'for the Oceti Sakowin, Mni Sose, the Missouri River ... is alive ... Nothing owns her, and therefore she cannot be sold or alienated like a piece of property (How do you sell a relative?). And protecting one's relatives is part of enacting kinship and being a good relative, or Wotakuye' (Estes, 2019: 24).

At the heart of resistance was the camp established by Indigenous Nations at the Sacred Stone site near the Missouri River. The site enabled the campaigners to form a vibrant and welcoming community, forged by both common commitments to their live ancestral traditions and the violence committed against them, a violence that persisted in the present. Women and LGBT people played prominent leadership roles and the ethos of the camp was one of welcome and inclusivity. In our organic terms, the campaign and camp were able to scale up beyond the immediate communities of Lakota to make the pipeline resistance symbolic of a broader struggle against fossil capital. As Estes notes, the very word Lakota translates as ally, meaning that it was written deep in the traditions of its people to welcome in supporters – something that happened in abundance over the summer of 2016, when the camp grew to accommodate thousands of people.

The protest actions were peaceful but assertive, yet met with fierce violence from private security and local police, such as the use of CS gas (which can cause blindness) and attack dogs (Estes, 2019: 50).

Similar tactics from private security and police followed, such as lacing water cannons with pepper spray, firing tasers and rubber bullets. At the end of Barack Obama's presidency, the Army Corps declined permission for the pipeline to cross the Missouri River, but this decision followed weeks of inaction, all while people watching via media and social media became increasingly agitated. The action from Obama was too little too late, as the incoming president Donald Trump reversed the decision, in keeping with

his aggressive support for fossil capital. Despite initially failing, the protest action did provide a focus for resistance to the continued growth and spread of fossil energy, working from the basis of localized Indigenous communities outwards to energize a broad base of activists, particularly young people. Indeed, a District Court judge temporarily shut down the pipeline pending an environmental review and though one of President Biden's first tasks was to stop the construction of the transnational KXL pipeline from Canada across the United States, the Dakota access pipelines continues to operate at the time of writing (February, 2021).

Much of the energy and inspiration for climate politics in recent years has emerged from young people, whose organizing and messaging through social media has inspired millions globally. They, after all, are the people who will largely have to live with the consequences of climate change. The emergence of a vigorous series of youth movements has provoked a wave of enthusiasm and interest, but also cynicism and a disappointingly patronizing tone from some quarters. We are unashamedly in the former camp and view the surge of youth interest in climate politics as indicative of a potentially organic leadership. In 2018 the Swedish school pupil Greta Thunberg, who we have already discussed, was moved by the extreme weather events in her home country and dismayed by what she saw as her government's intransigence on meaningfully addressing climate change. Her solution was to go on strike. Strikes can be an effective tactic because they hold the potential to invert relationships of power at work – the bosses of organizations are forced to face up to the fact that they cannot operate without certain key workers and, if the strike is well organized, bosses can be compelled to open a dialogue that concedes to some or all of the demands of those on strike. They are potentially empowering events, as strikers discover a power and agency, as well as meaningful relations of solidarity. Greta Thunberg's strike caught the imagination of the public – again via social media – as here was an unassuming and solemn individual with no formal basis of power nevertheless acting *as if* she did have power. Of course, soon enough, she did wield significant influencing power, as her actions were mimicked and adapted by digitally savvy school pupils globally. In a short space of time, school strikers were marching through the major cities of the world, drawing the ire of the right-wing press in the UK, and Thunberg herself was identified and targeted by the then US president Donald Trump, in attacks that felt akin to schoolyard bullying.

In the United States, a movement called the Sunrise Movement was formed to influence national political representatives. Initially it sought to dissuade and shame candidates for the Senate and House of Representatives from receiving money from the fossil industry, but it soon graduated to be largely a campaigning organization for the Green New Deal. Drawing support from the young waitress-bartender-turned-progressive Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, herself adept at social media communication, as well as from more established politicians, such as Senator Ed Markey, the movement has waged a concerted campaign to persuade Democrats to adopt the Green New Deal as policy – an approach mimicked in the UK organization Labour for a Green New Deal discussed earlier. The Sunrise Movement is proudly anti-establishment, and even organized a sit-in of the office of the House of Representatives Speaker, Nancy Pelosi, demanding that all Democrats cease taking money from the fossil industry and that they support Green New Deal legislation, an action supported by Ocasio-Cortez. Such actions are as much designed for their impact on social media audiences as they are on ostensive political ‘targets’ such as Pelosi. The relationship between the Sunrise Movement and its more formal political backers indicates an organic leadership at work. Birthed in communities of young people, communicating in schools and online, with a shared set of experiences of lacking political representation at a national level on climate change, the movement offers a moral direction to political leaders. Such leaders, it is clear, may provide advice on tactics, but take their direction from the movement. One of the effects of this relationship is the formation of fascinating bonds of solidarity between older political leaders and youth activists. For example, when the veteran Ed Markey, a politician who some would say had been stagnating in political office, seemed to find an energetic rebirth through the youth climate movement, the movement in turn had his back. When more establishment and corporate Democrats challenged Markey in a primary for his senatorial seat, it felt like a deliberate move from the party leadership to punish a supporter of a youth movement that had challenged the party’s power structures. Markey’s opponent, Joseph Patrick Kennedy III (grandson of the famous US politician Robert F. Kennedy), was endorsed by Pelosi, for example, and drew significant corporate donations. So, the Sunrise Movement mobilized online and in person, 74-year-old Markey’s

re-election campaign fuelled by a youth movement, and a commanding victory was secured.

In April 2019, a social movement called Extinction Rebellion (XR) – a movement driven primarily by younger people – occupied strategic sites across London: Oxford Circus, Marble Arch, Waterloo Bridge and Parliament Square. These were high-profile and highly disruptive actions that caused major disruption and inconvenience to hundreds of thousands of people, and no doubt to the income streams of many businesses. The internet exploded with activity. Disruption, of course, was the whole point – climate disaster will undoubtedly be rather more than inconvenient in the decades to come and forms of direct action, such as those by Extinction Rebellion, simulate in milder form the more widespread shattering of the normal that climate change will bring forth. During the London occupations Owain and his partner happened to be in town to celebrate a birthday. They walked from the bus station in Victoria down to the South Bank of the Thames, where they were due to go to an exhibition. Of course, they had heard about the protests and decided to walk through a couple of the camps. Steeling themselves for the normal stress of navigating Parliament Square – people crammed onto pavements with cars circulating all around – they instead walked into a fairly serene open space. People had set up camp and the space was peppered with some stalls, tents and conversation. Breathing a sigh of relief, they took their time threading through the assembled people. Walking on the north bank of the Thames the traffic noise and fumes returned until they reached Waterloo Bridge. Normally this is a nice enough crossing; albeit one where dawdling is not terribly advised, unless you don't mind attracting the tutting of busy Londoners zipping to and from work and social appointments. On this day, though, the road was closed off and the whole of the bridge was occupied by Extinction Rebellion activists, plus at least as many again who were simply interested passers-by. It was a diverse crowd, lots of young people, particularly younger women, although it still felt like a space with an over-representation of white people (more on this later). Replacing the cars was a throng of people, in various stages of sociality and debate. Speakers addressed smaller and larger clusters of protestors and passers-by. Communal kitchens fed people for free, supported by some local businesses. From a small stage, a musician played to the crowd. What was meant as a brief walk-through turned into hours of conversation and listening, as Owain was drawn into proceedings –

although he did eventually leave later that afternoon. Leaving the scene, Owain and his partner were caught in an excited conversation – two people who were supportive of the need for more radical action on climate but did not define themselves or their politics as ‘environmentalists’. They left the bridge wondering if, after all, they were environmentalists, if that meant imaginative use of public space and re-envisioning the pace of life in ways that fit with human need for connection, stimulation and imagination.

Returning to suburban Milton Keynes, Owain became something of an informal ambassador for Extinction Rebellion. He had some long conversations with friends and acquaintances who were less impressed with the action, in particular the fact that it had caused widespread disruption to transport. Sure, he would counter, but imagine the disruption to your life when the mass flooding starts or when your children are unable to source enough food and drinking water. He would also emphasize that these were largely younger people and that we needed to follow their lead and explore ways in which we could support them rather than talking down at them. These were lines he had adopted from social media but also from his in-person engagements in London.

Extinction Rebellion is notionally modelled on principles of decentralized communitarianism (Harvey, 2016). The occupations were a good example of prefiguration (Graeber, 2014b), a notion that comes from anarchist politics, which means modelling the kinds of practices you want to see adopted more generally in the world. The belief of such organizations is that when people see and experience these practices, they will be more likely to demand that they are adopted on a larger scale. As we saw with Owain’s experiences, prefiguration can have a powerful effect – it can draw you into a leadership purpose through direct experience in a community and people who have such positive experiences can then move outwards, spreading the message further afield. There are elements of organic leadership at play in this system. XR emphasizes that it is a leaderless movement (Sutherland et al., 2014). Certainly, in Owain’s hours on Waterloo Bridge it was hard to discern any central coordination. Instead, people had clustered into groups based on activities or discussion topics. Hence driving the purpose of the leadership seemed to be democratic practices rather than the position or status of any particular individuals. More broadly, Extinction Rebellion is committed to the principle of citizens’ assemblies, where ordinary people are given enough time and

access to information to be able to make decisions on their own behalf, without the need for elected representatives, such as MPs. This model was adopted by the organization during its actions in London and elsewhere, as participants in the action were the ones directing the strategy of the action, the structure of the various camps and the practices taking place in those camps.

Relatedly, XR is committed to radical forms of transparency, which means that it is an open movement with no prerequisites for participation – anyone can wander in and out. On the one hand, this makes it more vulnerable to infiltration from opposing forces and agents, but on the other it also encourages a culture of open and notionally equal communication. This emphasis on transparency and leaderless organization is where XR departs from the organic leadership formulation. In organic leadership there is space for structure, for a degree of hierarchy and for the presence of leaders but embedded within, answerable to and within, a co-dependent relationship with a community. XR on the other hand advocates emergent direction based on mass participation. This kind of emphasis can feel liberating, but it can also lead to a loss of identity and coherence and the experience of the Occupy movement in 2011–12 suggests that such movements may have more impact on shifting debates than on practical policy changes. Certainly, as time has progressed the purpose underlying XR's strategy has felt increasingly difficult to pinpoint. The movement started to target public transport, causing inconvenience and consternation to commuters – surely a counter-intuitive move given that getting out of cars and into buses and trains would appear to be an important step in mitigating climate change. Yet as XR is a decentralized and equal movement it cannot prevent various of its supporters taking whatever action they deem necessary. It has an inability to place boundaries around how a movement will develop and grow and this can stoke imaginations and provoke innovation but can also lead to situations of confusion and mixed messages. Into 2020, for example, XR UK explicitly stated on its Twitter feed that it was not a socialist organization and disowned some of its supporters who displayed a banner saying: 'socialism or extinction'. It was a surprising interjection, given that it did feel like the centre of an organization drawing boundaries around the kinds of views its supporters could and could not express. Returning to our notion of leadership as needing to expand outwards to become organic, dismissing a significant

proportion of the population, particularly young people, committed to broadly socialist solutions to climate change (such as the Green New Deal), felt uncharacteristically restrictive. As a commenter on Twitter noted, this felt like an organization committing itself to climate liberalism, which was a step change from its original, more anarchist tendencies. Extinction Rebellion UK responded by saying that the group does not ‘trust any single ideology’ and confirmed that ‘we are not a socialist movement’.<sup>2</sup>

On the other side of the political spectrum, XR has been criticized for not being open enough to more conservative tendencies. Andre Spicer (2019), in an appreciative critique of XR, questioned whether the movement’s tactics and language could ever attract people outside the broadly left and ‘rebel’ bubble. These are valid points but as Spicer himself acknowledges, perhaps it was never XR’s intention to draw in a majority of people but rather enough people to shift the debate.

The final aspect of XR that we need to consider is its emphasis on direct action. As Andreas Malm (2021) passionately advocates, little in the way of dramatic social change has ever come about solely through moderate and moderately communicated demands; direct forms of action can be effective in shifting the frame of debate and re-aligning people’s coordinates. His book, provocatively titled *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, advocates a scaling up of environmental movement tactics to forms of direct action that hurt the flow of fossil capital. XR’s tactics in this regard felt less precise, targeting spaces and the overall flow of people and goods; where it did exercise precision actions, these could feel misdirected (e.g. commuter trains). XR’s occupations invited arrest by police to make a point regarding the strength of its commitment and, in its view, the misguided priorities of the authorities. These tactics are controversial, particularly to the extent that poorer people, women and people from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds may have a very different attitude to arrest and the police than richer white men (Gayle, 2019). For some white men, arrest may come as an inconvenience but could also be experienced as something of an adventure and source of a future anecdote with friends and colleagues. For other people, however, experiences with the police have far more negative associations, as highlighted through the Black Lives Matter protests and ongoing campaign. Direct action and civil disobedience, as effective as they might be in forcing power to take notice, can also dampen the potential for participation and inclusion.



We conclude this exploration of XR and the broader moment in climate activism by asking, after all, whether we need a unified climate movement at all. It seems unrealistic, as Spicer (2019) notes, that a large majority of people will find their way to the cause through the same kinds of identifications and tactics. Climate is one of those issues that reaches across political identifications and is related to in distinct ways. Searching for a single movement such as XR, which can represent everyone, seems unrealistic and indeed undesirable. The challenge rather appears to be for an organic leadership that loosely connects various strands and traditions around notions of climate action. Some of these groups and movements will find closer association than others – for example, those within an anarchist tendency and those from an eco-socialist Green New Deal tendency seem to have enough of a shared commitment to democracy and participation to find common ground, even if the anarchists find themselves unable to sign up to solutions that require state directed mass investment in infrastructure. Indeed, such loose but purposeful leadership does not need an overwhelming majority to make major breakthroughs but enough of a coalition between Indigenous people, young activists, trade unionists, workers, supportive businesspeople and supportive mainstream political leaders to leverage significant influence. While our focus here has been upon organic movements and the purposeful leadership they can offer, we also need to remind ourselves of some of their limitations. Such movements cannot be purely leaderless because ultimately, they need senior political leaders with the power to enact legislative and policy change – hence why the Sunrise Movement with its focus on applying pressure on the career prospects of US politicians has proven an interesting case study. This does not mean that formal political leaders should exert leadership *over* movements but should mean that leaders can emerge from movements and then continue to be held to account in and through them. To date evidence of such organicism is thin on the ground – with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and her allies in Congress exceptions who prove the rule. Yet in the United States it is easier for activists to organize to unseat sitting political representatives who do not take issues such as climate change seriously, a challenge far harder in the more closed party systems of the UK and other European countries. Thinking in terms of organic leadership may help us to see the challenge of purposeful leadership more clearly: building vibrant and purposeful local communities; identifying and nurturing leaders within

and from such communities, who can be held to account in and through them; and, finally, building up in terms of scale, digitally and otherwise, establishing broad-based coalitions who can coalesce around signifiers, such as climate, that speak to many diverse peoples.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter tackled the significant perspective of leadership as purpose. Its starting point was that purpose can lead as much as, if not more than, people, process, position or product. This makes intuitive sense, as we only need to think about examples such as big charities like Oxfam to realize that an underlying purpose can outlive the individuals who occupy an organization at any one time. Purposes define what kind of leadership is possible, setting parameters for the kinds of issues that organizations pursue and the types of practices that will or will not be adopted. Purpose is inseparable from ethics, and indeed any purpose worthy of its name will be an ethical purpose. This does not mean, however, that a leadership purpose should be understood in a unitary, uncontested manner. On the contrary, purposes are usually hotly contested and indeed part of the appeal of leadership as purpose is that it can focus our attention on important ethical debates about what leadership should or should not achieve.

When considering the ethics of leadership purpose, you can focus primarily on leaders or on ethical processes of leadership. It is useful to reflect on what comprises an ethical leader, as doing so can help us think about the kinds of actions and beliefs we value in leaders, and to hold them to account according to these standards; but it is ultimately a flawed perspective in the sense that theories in this area seem to adopt a relativist view of what counts as ethical, some versions of which suggest that it merely depends on the context and predominant views of followers. Viewing ethical purpose as established and contested through process is more helpful because it can help us see the kind of purpose that groups generate together. Rather than adopt the strong relativist perspective we highlighted care and democracy as two purposes important to us, ones that are also significant in the literature. Taken together, we stated, enhances people's capacity to flourish and to experience freedom. What this process driven perspective lacks, however, is a properly political interpretation of

where purpose is formulated and how it can be worked with to build energy and coalitions for change.

We therefore formulated a political theory of leadership purpose that is also informed by the ethical stipulations of care and democracy. Referring to this theory as organic leadership, we made the case that such purposeful leadership is necessarily fostered within specific communities of shared experience, be that experience one of culture, class, struggle, geography or something else entirely. Drawing on the theory of Gramsci, we saw the emergence of knowledge and leaders within such communities as an organic process, whereby leaders emerge from within communities but are also democratically accountable to communities. These leaders speak from and with the contextually rich lived experience of a community. To illustrate this perspective, we told the story of the rise of Jeremy Corbyn and his followers within the Labour Party, as well as their subsequent defeat and decline. This drew attention to the need for any leadership to transition beyond the localized nature of communities, to a broader chain across whole societies, if it is to organically grow and prove impactful. Leadership within the environmental movement(s) offers perhaps the best example of such leadership at work, as the environment seems to act as a powerful signifier that can unite a diverse range of people around a particular cause. We spent some time unpacking the issue of climate change in order to better position it as one that demanded purposeful leadership that challenged the hegemony of fossil capital. Movements that do this have been particularly led by young people and Indigenous communities – although they have yet to gain hegemonic power within any particular country, they are undoubtedly growing in influence and offer a hopeful, purpose-rich view of the future.

## Notes

- 1 <https://twitter.com/georgemonbiot/status/1116629547305164800?lang=en>.
- 2 <https://twitter.com/xrebellionuk/status/1300794775138906114?lang=en>.

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