Chapter 20: One reason there are many bad leaders is the misleading myth of "leadership"

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One reason why there are many bad leaders is the misleading myth of "leadership" itself. When speaking of "myth", we mean the multiple and subtle stories about people, power and change that are conveyed by the word "leadership." The myth of leadership over-emphasizes "leadership" as salient to organizational and societal outcomes (Meindl et al. 1985; Nielsen 2011). In this chapter we will suggest that the myth of leadership misleads people with senior roles, as well as those who aspire to such roles, those who observe or follow them, and anyone who seeks to create meaningful change. This over-emphasis on leadership therefore misleads human endeavor to produce poor organizational and societal outcomes which, research shows, people then blame on "bad leaders," precisely because of that over-emphasis on their salience. Therefore, a tragic cycle of over-emphasizing leadership is completed.

Our chapter will summarize for you some of the research that supports these views on the role of the leadership myth itself in providing a discoursal context from which bad leaders will inevitably emerge. Therefore, our chapter diverges somewhat from the scholarship on bad leadership that has grown since the nineteen seventies (Dixon 1976). Since then it has been explored mostly in accounts of "toxic leadership" and "corporate psychopathy" (Reed 2004; Walton 2007; Einarsen et al. 2007; Pelletier 2010) and more latterly in general leadership studies (Kellerman 2004, 2012; Schilling and Schyns 2014; Helms 2014; Brooks et al. 2020; Swiatek 2020). The arguments in our chapter diverge by emphasizing how leadership discourse in general is guilty, rather than a particular type of leadership concept or the type of person or traits that are promoted within certain contexts.

In this chapter, we will argue that the very idea of leadership retailed in the popular literature on leadership is itself bad. This popular literature consists of the countless books, articles and blogs that seek to advise aspiring leaders. In non-fiction, the books on business and management are a genre that sell well. On Amazon, it is the seventh best-selling genre of nonfiction, far higher than books on relationships, education, hobbies and home (Affleck 2017). Within that genre, many of the books focus on leadership. For instance, in May 2020, five of the *New York Times* top ten bestselling management books were about leadership (*New York Times* 2020). In this chapter we will refer to this popular mass-produced content as "leader-pulp" to distinguish it from the scholarly literature of leadership, within which we can make a secondary distinction between a somewhat naïvely empiricist mainstream on the one hand, and inquiry informed by critical social theory and discourse theory on the other (Bendell et al. 2017).

In this chapter we will suggest that "leader-pulp", with its narrow and uncritical concept of leadership and its relentless emphasis on the exceptional individual, has the effect of eroding faith in collective processes of deliberation and change and of colonizing agency on behalf of capital. We would add that it adumbrates fundamental principles of equity and participation in social and organizational processes, that it makes it harder to imagine, let alone enable a world-commons that is "free, fair and alive", as Bollier and Helfrich put it (2019, passim). And this at a moment when it might otherwise be possible to see in plain light that heroic individualism cannot match the scale or complexity of the global predicament (Bendell 2018). It is a conception of leadership that has metastasized from its place of origin in business to take up lodging in every corner of institutional and civic life, an idea that has divided the world into leaders and the putative objects of their leadership, those often described in leader-pulp as "your people" or "your team" – a ghost army, silent and inert unless they happen to be potentialized by a great, strong, visionary or inspiring leader.

In concluding, we will argue that if the myth of leadership was no longer allowed to upstage other modalities of collaborative agency, or, even better, if leadership was reimagined so that it was better adapted to the conditions of an open, democratic and equitable public sphere, then the question "why are there so many bad leaders?" might no longer seem so pressing and important.

The myth that leadership is primarily important and exists everywhere means that there will be more bad leaders

A useful starting point in answering the question of why there are so many bad leaders is to ask why there are so many leaders in the first place, whatever their qualities of good or bad. That is, to ask why it is a conventional contemporary assumption that politicians, chief executives, generals, newspaper proprietors, head-teachers, even managers or supervisors, are often regarded as "leaders". It has become routine to refer to practically anyone as a leader. Head teachers have become "school leaders"; an institute devotes itself to the development of "healthy and resilient veterinary leaders" (*Veterinary Leadership Institute* 2020). This widespread usage leads to the question of whether leadership is something ancillary to professional roles, or an occasional distraction from the main event – the execution of well-defined professional functions by competent people in organizations characterized by mutuality and collaboration. In this chapter, we will summarize arguments supporting the latter view. We will show that describing people as leaders rather than simply professionals, serves to distract everyone from questions of the basic competence of the person.

Another problem with the ubiquity of the idea of leadership today is the hierarchy that it suggests applies to all of us. When leaders are everywhere, non-leaders, if there are any left, are necessarily demoted to the rank of "followers". Even they can be drawn into this totalizing frame of leadership: Alarcon (2015) tells us that "being a follower is just as important as being a leader" and Hyatt (2016) notes that "great leaders" are followers. If our identity within an organization or community must relate to leadership or non-leadership, then it means we are being constituted within a hierarchy of relative specialness or power. In this chapter we will show how this insidious spread of hierarchical thinking then invites the pursuit, use and praise of inequitable power, and the potential for unaccountable behaviors.

The idea that people are leaders, not professionals, means their unethical behavior is more likely to be excused

One example of a US politician may help demonstrate how discussing people's professional performance in terms of "leadership" is a distraction from egregious conduct. When Kelly Arnold, chair of the Republican party in Kansas, was asked why Mike Pompeo, the US Secretary of State at the time, liked to shout obscenities at journalists, he explained that he "…has a leadership style of getting things done and he won't let anyone stand in his way" (Dmitrieva 2020). Mr. Arnold may have answered a question that had not been put, but in doing so he laid out an image of political leadership – as strength personified, unencumbered by awkward requirements like public accountability or by any noticeable concern about the questionable affordances of a mandate.

Elsewhere, Pompeo himself gives us another, quite different, image of leadership: Christians, he says, must lead by "remaining humble … by listening intently and carefully" (Pompeo 2019). Thus Mr. Arnold and Mr. Pompeo give us two apparently contradictory images of leadership. It is unlikely that either of them gave the matter much thought – rather that both are drawing from a readily accessible stock of leadership tropes found in the popular literature on leadership. In such texts, antagonistic ideas are held together by sheer force of rhetoric: adjectival inflation and hyperbole serving as paradoxical tensioning bars that hold together ideas that would otherwise fly apart. The strong leader lets no one stand in the way, while the humble leader "listens intently" and possesses "fierce resolve" (Collins 2005, passim): these and a hundred other bromides in mainstream leadership texts can be thought of as the droning analects of a folk psychology of leadership – one that is slow to notice anomalies and make appropriate accommodations. Taken as a body, however, such sentiments can be seen to possess a "discursive regularity" (Foucault 1972, passim) that trumps any need for lower-level regularities in the way leadership is construed or described. The question for us is not whether such explanations and descriptions are coherent in themselves, but how they relate to social practices: whether, for instance, they enable or inhibit processes of deliberation and problem-solving at the scale demanded by the global predicament. It seems to us that, when it comes to leadership, the social imagination has been compromised by a collective alexithymia: that the descriptive resources people draw on to think about leadership are trapped within a conception of individualism which, as de Tocqueville put it, is the social and political order that enacts the moral order of selfishness (de Tocqueville 1835/1840/2000).

As a formulary, leader-pulp is the basis of a mass-produced leadership stripped of all but the most platitudinous and sentimental nods to morality, such as holding up a Bible for a photograph on a street brutally cleared of peaceful protesters. These leadership texts may not in themselves be "bad" but form a screen behind which the most egregiously bad leadership can hide. Thus, we are surrounded by accounts of and demands for leadership and yet falter when we try to conceive of a morally-informed leadership that speaks to the highest human possibilities. Instead, we find only repetitive injunctions to "get things done", and "remain humble". In this chapter we hope to persuade readers that the idea of leadership has been reduced by the leader-pulp literature to a device for mere profit-seeking and that, in allowing it so to be diminished, we have also allowed the word to be

given to every variety of bad conduct, every lesser tyranny, and fatally to diminish our collective capacity to face global dilemmas.

When Pompeo swore at journalist Mary Louise Kelly during an official interview, it followed a pattern all-too familiar to anyone who has glanced at this literature. But the point here is not to say that Mike Pompeo is a bad leader. In any case, the more important question should be whether he is a good Secretary of State. The point is that, whether or not he is either of those things, the mere word "leadership" adduced in justification or explanation of his conduct by a commentator like Kelly Arnold, simply shifts attention away from other possible descriptions and explanations of competence and conduct. Therefore, it makes it harder to imagine other modes of political or professional practice and especially modes that thrive through collaborative and distributed agency.

This example highlights how the idea that people are leaders not professionals means unethical behavior is more likely to be open for discussion. That shows how the popularity of the idea of leadership is itself a factor in how people are excused for bad behaviors.

The idea of leadership invites impossible striving, superficial behaviors, and narcissistic self-regard amongst leaders

Whereas the word "leader" mobilizes multiple symbolical, political and historical effects, upon close examination it becomes problematic to define. Any attempt to define it involves packaging together a range of personal attributes and behaviors, outcomes and observer opinions. As such, the terms "leader" and "leadership" cannot achieve the materiality demanded of them by their fans. As such, the word "leader" is an empty signifier (Laclau 2006, p. 103) that necessitates all manner of adjectives being added to it by popular writers, journalists and academics, such as "strong", "authentic", "good" or "bad". That provides a fertile context for the perpetual production of both leader-pulp and academic management fads, which may have problematic effects psychological insecurity, as we will now explain.

In a typical leader-pulp piece, a self-proclaimed expert or "thought leader" addresses a readership of other presumed leaders. Note that, while the implied ideal reader is a senior executive with relative freedom of action, actual readers are likely to occupy less exalted roles in which they are not paid to have visions, but to obey someone else's. Here, the leadership experts say, are the five, seven, eleven or 23 things you must be, know or do to inspire "your people", to build "your team", to "lead like a winner". In one such text you are told you should "treat your team with respect" and "show them sincere compassion, as they'll be able to tell if you're genuinely concerned for them" (Ramamoorthy 2020). In the same piece, the author uses 26 adjectives for leadership and three qualifying prohibitions (as in "be confident, but not arrogant"). In this compulsive list-making one can hear an echo of the preoccupation with traits that dominated leadership scholarship for decades.

With the focus on wish-lists for being a leader, both the leader-pulp and much management education uphold the idea that leadership involves one possessing special character and capability. That invites people to think of themselves as special as they seek and gain more authority in organizations and societies, and even more special once

they begin to be praised for their leadership. The impact of this concept of leadership on individuals who consider themselves aspiring or actual leaders is important to consider. It could invite and reward narcissistic self-regard (Higgs 2009). As tutors in leadership courses we have often heard from students, of all ages, who express a desire for a career status to match their view of themselves or their desire to be special. How to support self-exploration, self-esteem and self-efficacy (Bandura 1986), without decay into unreflective narcissism, is an important role for tutors and mentors, which is not aided by the leader-pulp and mainstream ideas on leadership.

Narcissism is often connected to psychological insecurity. It is likely to be influenced by early childhood experiences (Kernis 2001), but how we experience organizations and communities is also a factor (Higgs 2009). Not only does the notion of leadership suggest specialness is good and admirable, leader-pulp offers an impossibly diverse array of attributes and capabilities to learn and exhibit. Striving for what is impossible can be an unhelpful influence on individuals, as it invites insecurity and pretense. When these ideological constructs of preferred leadership attributes and behaviors become widely accepted, then those people who are more adept at acting them, necessarily superficially, will be promoted and supported. As such, the existence of "leadership" as a fake empty signifier, filled with unachievable complex arrays of desirable capabilities, can invite and rewards superficiality, insecurity and narcissism. These are attributes of what many people consider to be "bad leaders" (Higgs 2009).

The spread of the idea of leadership was driven by a corporate need for fake authenticity

The leader-pulp literature is a relatively new phenomenon. It can be traced to the post-war turn, brilliantly documented by Boltanski and Chiapello (1999/2006), from a hierarchical and bureaucratic model of the firm to an ostensibly more democratic and inclusive model of organization that could accommodate aspirations to creativity, commitment and employee autonomy. In theory, there was to be less scope in the new organizations for people who merely kept order: so managers must learn to be leaders. On the face of it, this related turn was from managerialism based on rational action – Weber's *zweckrationalitat* (Weber 1978, passim) – to a value-based form of action embodied in the leader and subject to social and communicative norms of conduct – *wertrationalitat* (Weber 1978, passim). Management was the art of measurement, stability and prediction, but the new firms were to be agile and responsive. Leaders were therefore imagined, unlike managers, to bring about constant change and "galvanise people by the power of the vision and by their skills as midwives of other people's talent" (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999/2006, p. 78).

A short piece in *Harvard Business Review* was an early landmark in this shift in discourse. In *Managers and leaders: Are they different?*, Abraham Zaleznik proposed that leaders, unlike managers, were "active rather than reactive, shaping ideas … evoking images … and establishing specific desires" (Zaleznik 1977, p. 71). This shift from bureaucratic to values-driven organizing, has not occurred evenly in time or space and is often more a matter of rhetoric. Just as the protestant work ethic sits uneasily with hedonic consumerism, so the residual structures and hierarchies of Fordism are at odds with the idea of the networked, autonomous employee whose engagement is secured by means of purposeful work. It produces tensions that are carried in the persons of

"manager-leaders". Their first duty may be to keep the machines running but with this new story they must also strive to be "authentic" and "visionary". For leader-pulp, the remedy for this tension lies in rhetorical inflation.

> Compelling leaders are resolved. They embody faith and commitment to their message, which builds a belief in their authenticity. Their strength is rich and deep. (Daum 2014)

Note here the echo of Weber, who, paraphrased by Cavalli, thought that "the people's trust seems to derive … principally from the strength of the leader's conviction" (Cavalli 1986, p. 60).

Rhetorical inflation does not stop at the injunction to be authentic. "How *genuinely* authentic are you?" asks an article on the INSEAD website (our italics), continuing: "Genuine authenticity is not restricted to when you are … aiming to secure that lucrative contract" (Knight 2014). Surely, authenticity is impossible under such conditions. Authenticity is quite the opposite of strategic. Yet authenticity is sought and prized at the heart of a form of capitalism that "… has helped to dissolve historical communities, has fostered atomism, which knows no frontiers or loyalties, and is ready to close down a mining town or savage a forest habitat at the drop of a balance sheet" (Taylor 1991, p. 7). In the idea of the authentic leader we see industrial capital arguing against itself – a system that mechanizes, standardizes, renders fungible and surveils everything and everyone, that pauperises workers while seducing them as consumers, that favors the return on capital above all other social goods – that system pretends to prize the spontaneous, the unbiddable, the irreducibly real, then, finding it unbiddable and all too real, standardizes the authentic in the form of a thousand Jack Welches. As two commentators in the prime purveyor of leader-pulp, *Harvard Business Review*, contort:

> Our growing dissatisfaction with sleek, ersatz, airbrushed leadership is what makes authenticity such a desirable quality in today's corporations. (Goffee and Jones 2005, p. 1)

Or, as we would put it, a hypostatized "we" now demands of us a "sleek, ersatz" corporate-friendly "authenticity".

It is not just that authenticity has been corrupted and instrumentalized, but that in its pointless pursuit we risk losing the possibility of exploring our humanity. Therefore, a façade of discussions of fake "authenticity" blocks a deeper dialogue and enquiry into personal meaning and purpose. That means people are less able within organizations to support each other in understanding what is really important to them. After decades of this impairment to social dialogue, it is not surprising then that many senior role holders act in ways that appear ethically dubious or provide justifications that sound fallacious.

The myth of leadership undermines engagement in collective action, thereby enabling bad decisions by people with power

It need not have come to this. In the parallel universe of serious scholarship, leadership, so far from remaining a central idea of modern life, has tended to dwindle in significance. Fifty years ago, Jeffrey Pfeffer proposed that leadership might not be a significant factor

in organizational outcomes (Pfeffer 1970). Meindl et al. (1985) went further. They looked at the relationship between performance outcomes, good and bad, and the strength of leadership attributions and found that people tended to think that positive outcomes were down to leaders, absent any evidence other than their own independent (but inapplicable) experience. The authors concluded that faith in leaders must be in part a romantic delusion, albeit a delusion that could have real force: the "romance of leadership".

While they were over-emphasizing leadership, the research respondents in Meindl et al.'s (1985) study were playing down broad structural, organizational and economic effects: preferring a fantasy to the banal reality of organizational life, the reality that things happen because people turn up and do their jobs. Or don't – deliveries don't arrive, trains are delayed by sheep on the line: the apparent order of the *gesellschaft* is the surface tension on a great sea of accident and improvisation.

Gary Gemmill and Judith Oakley (1992) argue that, so far from being "unquestionably necessary for the functioning of an organisation", the myth of leadership is a "sign of social pathology" that produces "massive learned helplessness", characterized by an inability to imagine viable alternatives (Gemmill and Oakley 1992, p. 2). This last is a quality of what Glynos and Howarth might call a "fantasmatic" representation – a framing device that smooths and domesticates the otherwise intolerable ambiguities and contradictions of social reality (Glynos and Howarth 2007; see also Salter 2016), one that has invaded the public sphere and whose encroachment displaces and occludes other possibilities. Gemmill and Oakley conclude that

> for change to occur it is necessary to experiment with new paradigms and new behaviours to find more meaningful and constructive ways of relating and working together. While such social experimentation is … marked by uncertainty, difficulties, awkwardness, disappointment and tentativeness of actions, it is indispensable if people are to experience a non-alienated mode of existence in … work or in society as a whole. (Gemmill and Oakley 1992, p. 8)

We may decide that whether or not there is a definable social process or relation that we may call "leadership", and whether or not something called leadership is a significant factor in organizational and social outcomes, the *idea* of leadership performs a psycho-social function, as narrative or discoursal effect, that domesticates the difficult ambiguities of life by proposing the need for authority, reassurance and fast determinations. Pompeo's method of "getting things done and not letting anyone stand in the way" has, for many people, an appealing simplicity in a world thrown otherwise on the intricacy, uncertainty and plurality of collective deliberation, democracy and mutuality in the face of intractable, multifaceted problems.

We have argued here, in debate, against what we think is a pernicious idea of leadership, a fantasmatic representation, a "social pathology". Whether it is as a discoursal effect or cognitive schema, the idea of leadership conditions the general view of organization, problem-solving and social choice in such a way as to derogate democracy and collective deliberation and to deform the social field in favor of capital and its craving for a higher return. We believe that the mass-produced visionary-authentic leader, loaded with strength of conviction about nothing that matters, fits neatly into a whole apparatus of exclusion, domination and mass infantilization, one that is corrosive of democracy, social solidarity and most importantly, one that is ill-adapted to the scale, urgency and

complexity of the political, environmental, social and economic challenges that humanity faces right now. Its corollary is mass-produced individuals, with marketable passions and personal branding, presumed to be inspirable via iPhone over their soy-milk flat-whites. None of this is to say that there are not extraordinary individuals distinguished by their force of character or clarity of insight who play a significant role in the public sphere – but by exaggerating the importance of leadership and placing individual exceptionalism at the center of affairs we risk weakening confidence in collective, inclusive and democratic forms of deliberation, and, paradoxically, in those democratically legitimized forms of authority that utterly eclipse any residual illusions about genuinely authentic leaders, sleek or not.

We have shown in this chapter that the widespread over-emphasis of leadership salience misleads human endeavor to produce poor organizational and societal outcomes which, research shows, people then blame on "bad leaders," precisely because of that over-emphasis on their salience. Therefore, a tragic cycle of over-emphasizing leadership is completed: there are so many bad leaders because people focus on leaders. We wish to note the irony here, as we participate with you in this tragic cycle of leadership. The fact that we are writing about leadership and you are reading about it in yet another book on the topic is reflective of a misallocation of attention that makes bad social and organizational outcomes likely, and therefore, to the criticism of "bad leaders," whether or not those people are the most significant cause of those bad outcomes.

Leadership as a special kind of action, not a special kind of person, during times of turbulence and breakdown

There can be another image of leadership – as an active verb embodied by individuals who accept common humanity and who intervene to encourage dialogue, the exact opposite of the "Pompeos" who don't let people stand in their way as they get things done. Such individuals do not pursue leadership for its own sake, but, if anyone thinks it important, what they do might be called leadership. If we were to describe this form of leadership as authentic or passionate or inspiring, it would only be after the fact. If, despite having denounced leadership list-makers, we were to say what this leadership depended on, we would suggest habits of patient observation and critical reflexivity given shape and direction by a principled commitment to intersubjectivity and mutual deliberation. A leader then would not be a Frankenstein's monster made of traits glued-together by wishful thinking, but someone who – mindful of the relative legitimacy of their claims and actions, instrumentalizing only themselves and objectifying no-one – has no thought whatsoever of leadership and intervenes only in and from a community animated by collaborative agency. Such leadership may be an exercise in not-knowing and its characteristic mood the subjunctive, but the commitments on which it rests need not be fragile or tentative. Those commitments are to mutuality and public deliberation, as opposed to the atomized shouting match to which an unedited digital media deteriorates; to internationalism as opposed to globalized capital; to imagination and acceptance of aporia rather than self-certainty and dogma; to a "mistrustful sensitivity to the normative infrastructure of the polity" (Habermas 2009, p. 55), rather than slavish flocking; to co-existence and collaboration rather than competition. Engagement in the political process in a dynamic and open democracy is its exemplary manifestation. The vitality and generativity of that process, setting aside for the moment questions of party or policy, is fatally weakened by what Habermas calls a "yearning for charismatic figures

who stand above the political infighting" and an "attraction to charismatic nonpoliticians" (Habermas 2010). Yes, the political traumas of 2020 were widely foreseen.

The international emergency unfolding as we write (in May 2020) shows clearly that, set beside competence and compassion, charisma is otiose; that capital seems helpless, its "global leaders", with a few honorable exceptions like Kent Taylor of Texas Roadhouse (*Karunavirus* 2020), lost and pointless in the face of natural force majeure. Instead, this emergency, and the even greater one of climate chaos that awaits behind it, demands that we invite one other to engage in dialogue about the difficulties and unknowns that can generate anger, anxiety and grief. Dropping the bad idea of leadership that has been enshrined in leader-pulp and practiced in the mini-feudal states that are modern corporations will be essential in humanity's "deep adaptation" to our climate predicament (Bendell 2018). In that process, supportive reminders between us all to return to compassion, curiosity and respect will be more important than bold gestures by individuals (self-)labelled as exceptional. Amidst crisis and, for many, the breakdown of normal life, people of all ranks and none are stepping up to help their communities and society. Perhaps these could be described as acts of "breakdown leadership," if only to build awareness of an alternative to the bad idea of leadership that helped bring us towards crisis and collapse. From such dialogue and amidst such selfless action, people may be able to find their own ingenious ways to retreat from the growth-fixated industrial consumer society for which nothing is sacred, over which a self-appointed cadre of bad – really very bad – leaders have presided for too long.

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Abstract

We argue – in the spirit of debate that informs this book – that whether or not there are bad leaders, the very idea of leadership, especially the idea as it is currently retailed in the popular literature of leadership, is itself bad. That literature, with its relentless emphasis on the exceptional individual, has the effect of eroding faith in, and competence

for, collective and democratic processes of deliberation and change that match the scale and complexity of the interlocking problems faced by humanity.