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**Beyond Unsustainable Leadership: Critical Social Theory for Sustainable Leadership**

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# Beyond Unsustainable Leadership: Critical Social Theory for Sustainable Leadership

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to prepare the ground for a new conceptual framework for the future study of leadership for sustainable development. The paper demonstrates the relevance of Critical Leadership Studies to future research on sustainable development policies and practices. A critical approach is also applied to concepts of sustainable development, with three paradigms of thought described. The approach taken is an extensive literature review in fields of leadership and sustainable development, with a focus on some of the broad assumptions and assertions in those literatures.

A key finding is that leadership studies drawing from critical social theory can provide important insights into future research and education on leadership for sustainability. This literature shows that some assumptions about leadership may hinder opportunities for social or organisational change by distorting our analysis of factors in change, and by distorting the agency of those not deemed to be leaders. These limitations are summarised as 'seven unsustainabilities' of mainstream leadership research.

The implications for practice are that efforts to promote organisational contributions to sustainable development should not draw uncritically upon mainstream approaches to leadership or the training of leaders. Instead, the paper suggests that, in the emerging fields of sustainability leadership scholarship and practice, full weight be given to the possibilities, theoretical and practical, of salient individual action whose collective, emergent and episodic aspects might not yet be adequately comprised in prevailing accounts of leadership. The authors believe this to be the first paper to provide a synthesis of insights from Critical Leadership Studies for research in sustainability.

Keywords: Sustainable Leadership, Sustainability Leadership, Leadership, Leadership Development, Critical Leadership.

Classification: Conceptual paper

## Introduction

In the face of limited progress on a range of social and environmental issues, many proponents and analysts of corporate action on sustainable development issues are calling for more leadership for sustainability (Redekop, 2010; Adams et al, 2011; Evans, 2011; Gallagher, 2012; Metcalf and Benn, 2013; Shriberg and MacDonald, 2013). Such calls reflect a desire for greater and swifter change, and in that context, researchers and educators can explore what is useful knowledge to enable such change. In this paper, we will argue that prevalent assumptions about the meaning of both the terms 'leadership' and 'sustainability' may hinder, not help, that interest in greater change.

We will demonstrate this limiting effect by placing both the concepts of leadership and sustainability under the scope of an analysis based on the primacy of discourse. We draw upon Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which starts from an awareness that the abuse, dominance, and inequality of power relations can be enacted, reproduced and, ultimately, resisted by text and talk (Fairclough, 1995). We will argue that the prevailing leadership imaginary, so far from supporting the transition to a sustainable society and economy, may actually hinder it and be itself unsustainable, in the sense that it depends on the discursive maintenance of power relations and a narrow range of organising possibilities (Gemmil and Oakley, 1992; Hurlow, 2008), and may thus discourage or disable more collective, collaborative or distributed forms of leadership, deliberation, organising and problem-solving (Hosking, 2006; Hurlow, 2008; Denis, Langley and Sergi, 2012). If this is the case, more of the same 'leadership' will not help the goal of sustainability.

We share with Evans (2011) and Western (2008) the view that dominant paradigms of leadership are part of the cause of the current crisis of unsustainability and will develop that argument in this paper. Therefore, precisely because we are interested in sustainability, we address leadership per se rather than limit analysis to leadership on sustainability topics. Though it may be expected for scholarship in this field to focus on those persons who have responsibility for social or environmental topics, given the state of conceptual development, we assess that it could leave untenable concepts to be imported from those who analyse and promote leadership per se. For instance, the new and still small amount of scholarship on leadership for sustainability, cited in our opening sentence, appears to describe leaders and leadership in terms that emphasise exceptionalism, personal 'authenticity', an individual locus of action and a generalised other that is the object of leadership. There is also evidence of sustainability-infused leadership development programmes uncritically incorporating assumptions about leadership (for instance Peterlin, 2016).

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3 Even those theorists who propose to break with mainstream notions of leadership may still repeat  
4 some of the ideas embedded in discourse. For example, the following statement may sound  
5 collaborative, but identifies leadership with a special individual who acts *upon* others: “[leadership  
6 is] a form of community praxis in which one coalesces and directs the energies of the group” (Evans,  
7 2011: 2). Impressive and helpful people do exist, but this paper will show that the prevailing  
8 discourse on leadership can limit our understanding of the potential for creating the greater change  
9 that inspires the calls for more leadership for sustainability.  
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14 Therefore, rather than a detailed deconstruction of existing texts on leadership for sustainability, in  
15 this paper we provide a broad synthesis of relevant literatures that either use, or can inform, a more  
16 critical approach, drawing on a field now called ‘Critical Leadership Studies’ (CLS). We then re-locate  
17 our inquiry within the context of sustainability by applying the same critical discourse perspective to  
18 assumptions and narratives about ‘sustainable development.’ Given the level of knowledge on  
19 sustainable development of most readers of this journal, we do not focus on a detailed literature  
20 review of that field, but outline three different paradigms within which to consider social, economic  
21 and environmental dilemmas. We integrate these critiques by outlining ‘seven unsustainabilities’ of  
22 mainstream leadership thinking, as well as the relevant antidotes. At that point we offer a definition  
23 of ‘sustainable leadership’ and conclude by outlining some potential implications for the future of  
24 research, practice and education.  
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32 Our definition will be purposely tentative. Rather than offering a systematic construction of a new  
33 concept of ‘sustainable leadership’, we are placing existing concepts of leadership and sustainability  
34 in the context of dominant narratives of ‘managerialism’ (Enteman, 1993) that we will show limit an  
35 assessment of the potential types and locations of action on sustainability. This process of tilling the  
36 conceptual earth will, we believe, allow many new ideas to bloom, including those that deploy  
37 structured approaches to define ‘sustainable leadership’ and ‘sustainability leadership’ concepts and  
38 theories. Without such insights from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), attempts at rigorous concept  
39 development in the organisational sciences (Podsakoff, et al, 2016) may be limited by assumptions  
40 that reflect dominant discourse.  
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48 Our argument does not mean that a focus on understanding or evolving the behaviour of senior role  
49 holders, such as chief executives or politicians, is not necessary, but that the assumptions that  
50 leadership is theirs *alone* to express and that leadership by special individuals is the most salient  
51 matter in organisational or social change, are both unhelpful and yet widely promoted by current  
52 work on leadership, with major implications for sustainable development.  
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## Defining Leadership and Sustainability

In this paper, we use the term 'sustainability' as short hand for the term 'sustainable development'. Since the adoption of the Brundtland Report by the UN General Assembly in 1987, 'sustainable development' has been promoted by many as an integrated way to address diverse dilemmas, such as poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, disease, discrimination, environmental degradation, crime, conflict and limited human rights or justice (WCED, 1987). That 'sustainable development' seems to offer all good things to all people has been one reason for its popularity and, some say, a reason for it leading to largely ineffectual activities on those dilemmas (Perez-Carmona, 2013).

Nevertheless, this "ambiguous compromise" (Purvis and Grainger, 2004: 6) has proved to be a resilient one. The adoption of seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations in 2015 marks a renewed interest in the hope that governments, cities, firms and other organisations can achieve progress on social and economic factors while not degrading the environment. Although the SDGs or 'Global Goals' may seem like an advancement on mainstreaming environmental considerations when compared to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which they replaced, conversely, they represent a dilution of the primacy of environment in the early stages of the promotion of sustainable development. This reflects how, over the years, the emphasis on the development of nations needs to be within the environmental 'carrying capacity' of the nation and planet, has been side-lined as the pursuit of economic growth predominated worldwide (Purvis and Grainger, 2004; Perez-Carmona, 2013).

The global trends in poverty, inequality, biodiversity loss, water tables and climate change are not promising (Worldwatch, 2015). Enabling greater leadership for 'sustainable development' therefore means enabling significant action on the various shared dilemmas that are meant to be addressed under this ambiguous term. We call them shared "dilemmas" here, rather than challenges or problems, to reflect both their complexity and to recognise a growing worldview that no longer regards them as problems to solve (as we will discuss below). We call them 'shared', because they involve collective causation, affect the many (albeit differentially) and will need collective action to address or adapt to them.

The 'sustainable development' concept typically groups these dilemmas into social, environmental and economic domains, while some also include culture (Sachs, 2015). Within these domains, a great diversity of theoretical perspectives exists. For instance, on environmental issues, some argue for the sustainable use of natural resources whereas others include respect for the welfare of animals or the preservation of landscapes (Pepper, 1996). Some argue that technological advances will solve most environmental problems, whereas others ask more critical questions about industrialisation

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3 within environmental limits (Jackson, 2009). On social progress, some focus on improving standards  
4 of living (Prahalad, 2004) where others focus on inequality, human rights, justice and good  
5 governance at various scales (Sen, 1999). On economic issues, there is a broad field of 'development  
6 economics' with differing emphases on the role of the state, of foreign direct investment, and about  
7 openness to international trade (Sachs, 1992). The 'sustainable development' framework is also  
8 applied to organisations within societies, such as business corporations, which has led to a variety of  
9 theories and initiatives in fields known as corporate social responsibility (Bendell, 2009), corporate  
10 accountability (Bendell, 2004), corporate sustainability (van Marrewijk, 2003) and social enterprise  
11 (Nicholls, 2006). To encourage self-awareness of participants in these arenas, in this paper we will be  
12 proposing three broad paradigms on sustainable development that people appear to be operating  
13 within.

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21 Just as the terms 'sustainability' and 'sustainable development' are deployed in quite different  
22 research and policy contexts and with different implied exclusions and inclusions, so the word  
23 'leadership' is used to mean or imply quite different things while seeming to represent a common,  
24 monolithic, understanding (Jackson & Parry, 2008). Unpicking such usages may not have direct value  
25 in deliberation or action, but can help prepare the ground for people to navigate the plurality of  
26 possibilities for leadership and sustainability. Amongst the many definitions of leadership in  
27 management studies, we will use the following to begin our discussion:

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33 "Leadership is any behaviour that has the effect of helping groups of people achieve something that  
34 the majority of them are pleased with and which we assess as significant and what they would not  
35 have otherwise achieved." (Bendell and Little, 2015: 15)

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38 Key to this definition is recognising leadership as a behaviour rather than a position of authority. In  
39 addition, it reflects the relational quality of leadership so that acts need to be welcomed by a  
40 majority of those in a group. Moreover, the external observer plays a key role when categorising acts  
41 as leadership. Specifically:

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45 "Leadership involves the ascription of significance to an act by us, the observer, where significance  
46 usually involves our assumptions or propositions about values and theories of change. If our theory  
47 of change is that the CEO has freedom of action and can impose change, then we would naturally  
48 look for leadership to be exhibited at that level. If our values are that profit-maximising for  
49 shareholders in the near term is a good goal, then we would not question a CEO's "leadership" if  
50 achieving such goals. We should note that these are rather big 'ifs'." (ibid: 15)

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3 By defining leadership in this way, we break with some of the mainstream assumptions in  
4 management and leadership scholarship and training, for instance, the idea that leadership exists as  
5 a quality that inheres in an individual. In the following section, we will explore how deep the  
6 criticisms go and the implications for enabling action on sustainable development.  
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## 10 11 12 **Insights from Critical Leadership Studies**

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14 As attention to leadership and its development grows in both the popular publishing and academic  
15 arenas, the last decade has seen a counter-trend of scholars who seek to unpack what they consider  
16 unhelpful assumptions and directions in the 'mainstream' approach to leadership. The aim of  
17 Critical Leadership Studies (CLS) is to investigate "what is neglected, absent or deficient in  
18 mainstream leadership research" (Collinson, 2011: 181). This approach involves understanding and  
19 exposing the negative consequences of leadership, by examining patterns of power and domination  
20 enabled by overly hierarchical social relations: questioning these 'exclusionary and privileged'  
21 discourses, and investigating the problematic effects that they have on organisational functioning  
22 and individual well-being (Ford, 2010; Ford et al, 2008).  
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29 Some CLS scholars draw upon 'Critical Theory', being motivated by a general emancipatory project,  
30 or by the goal of empowering grassroots and oppressed groups against the self-harming discourses  
31 that they co-produce or that are promoted by elites. Such research challenges discourse in the field  
32 of management and leadership that may be distorted in favour of capital and the owners of capital,  
33 gender exclusion and other forms of social violence, and unsustainable forms of commerce and  
34 industry (Fanon, 1961; Blunt and Jones, 1996; Nkomo, 2011). A key theme in such work is the  
35 critique of a set of ideas called 'Managerialism,' which value professional managers and their  
36 characteristic forms of analysis, authority and control, and their tendency to bring ever more aspects  
37 of life into the orbit of management (Enteman, 1993; Alvesson, 1992, Parker, 2002). There are  
38 parallels here with some critiques of international 'development' that influence approaches to  
39 sustainability, which we will return to below. Before that, in the next sections we summarise some  
40 of the main elements of the critique made by CLS, with preliminary ideas on implications for  
41 leadership scholarship and leadership development work that is motivated by concern for various  
42 shared dilemmas.  
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## 52 **The Individualist Mistake**

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54 The mainstream literature and practice of leadership development is largely addressed to the  
55 cultivation of a group already defined as leaders, rather than to the development of collective,  
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3 relational or dialogical leadership. Leaders are routinely described as needing to be authentic,  
4 visionary, driven and emotionally intelligent. The image of the leader that emerges from what  
5 Gosling and Bolden (2006) call the 'repeating refrain' of leadership competencies is of a deracinated  
6 superman (or, in a feminized variant that emphasizes collaboration, intuition and nurturing, a  
7 superwoman). This 'hero-focus' has received criticism over the past 15 years from within the  
8 mainstream management literature (Olssen, 2006; Palus et al, 2012). In such work the term "hero" is  
9 used as the contemporary dominant concept of special courageous person who saves others, rather  
10 than more mythic notions of hero, which we will discuss further below. We find that even the  
11 explicitly 'post-heroic' or egalitarian accounts of leadership as bottom-up or, variously, as distributed  
12 (Brown and Hosking, 1986; Woods et al, 2004), transformational (Bass, 1998), or 'servant'  
13 (Greenleaf, 1977) may not fully address the degree to which these ideas are undermined by lingering  
14 positional metaphors of hierarchy, or by their failure to address questions of gender or, worse, are  
15 co-opted by hierarchical, instrumentalist managerialism (Fletcher, 2004). The CLS analysis of the  
16 implicit hero focus of leadership studies provides a deeper critique in at least four key areas. We  
17 summarise these areas in turn, before discussing other dimensions of CLS.  
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27 First, CLS theorists have sought to investigate the 'dark side' of contemporary leadership practice,  
28 exploring issues such as domination, conformity, abuse of power, blind commitment, over-  
29 dependence and seduction (Conger, 1990; Calas and Smircich, 1991; Gemmil and Oakley, 1992;  
30 Whicker, 1996; Mellahi et al, 2002; Khoo and Burch, 2007; Marcuse, 2008; Schyns and Schilling,  
31 2013; Sheard et al, 2013). They have coined terms such as 'toxic leadership' (Benson and Hogan,  
32 2008; Pelletier, 2010); 'destructive leadership' (Einarsen et al 2007); 'leadership derailment' (Tepper,  
33 2000); and, 'aversive leadership' (Bligh et al, 2007). Other scholars have discovered tendencies for  
34 narcissism and psychopathy amongst senior role holders and how that can be encouraged by  
35 popular discourses about leaders being special and powerful (de Vries and Miller, 1985; Bendell,  
36 2002; Trethewey and Goodall, 2007; Vaktin, 2009; Gudmundsson & Southey, 2011). Evans (2011)  
37 characterises the prevailing model as 'exploitative leadership' and argues that such masculinised,  
38 hierarchical leadership reproduces in small the domination of nature by humanity. For scholars  
39 interested in the social dimension of sustainability, including matters of fairness, justice and  
40 wellbeing, these dark sides of leadership will be of concern.  
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50 The mainstream literature, to the extent that it makes or recognises this critique, responds not with  
51 a deepened critique of leadership but by offering in mitigation qualities like humility, authenticity,  
52 emotional intelligence or self-knowledge, while leaving unchallenged the assumption that 'leaders'  
53 pursue exclusively corporate goals by largely instrumental means (Collins, 2001; Adair, 2003;  
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3 George, 2003; Kouzes and Posner, 2003). Characteristically, this literature keeps up the search for an  
4 ideal trait description of the leader: lists of qualities, propensities, behaviours and habits proliferate,  
5 often including 'character' and authenticity, as we will examine in a moment (George, 2003; Gardner  
6 et al, 2011).  
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10 The second analytic turn in CLS aims in part to reveal the flaws of this traits-focus, and of secondary  
11 efforts to promote values and authenticity amongst leaders. We do not have space here to rehearse  
12 in detail the critiques of the trait approach but will summarise. To begin with, it is not unreasonable  
13 to argue that leadership is, of necessity, idiographic, episodic and situationally inflected, to the  
14 extent that no imaginable set of descriptors could apply to all potential leaders (Fairhurst and Grant,  
15 2010). Leadership trait lists tend merely to describe competent human beings, emphasising, for  
16 example, honesty and intelligence (Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1991; Zingheim et al, 1996). The effort to  
17 identify traits might itself be seen as serving the very bureaucratic impulse to which leadership, with  
18 its implied freedom of moral action, is the remedy. The reliability, stability and predictive value of  
19 trait descriptions are all in any case contested. The most telling critique of traits suggests that their  
20 pursuit is a circular process in which socially constructed discourses of leadership are interrogated  
21 from within the constraining assumptions of those same discourses (Burr, 1995). Traits are, from this  
22 view, not internal personal structures but "social processes realised on the site of the personal"  
23 (Gergen, 1994: 210).  
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33 One response to the dark sides of leadership has been to focus less on traits (real or imagined) than  
34 on helping people with senior responsibilities to reflect upon, clarify, articulate and live by their  
35 most important values, and, ostensibly, to help legitimise values-based behaviour in professional  
36 life. Courses under the heading 'Authentic Leadership' pursue that aim. Executives are encouraged  
37 to seek coherence between their life story and their seeking or holding a senior organisational role  
38 (George, et al, 2007). Potential benefits may include greater self-confidence, appearing more  
39 authentic in one's job, enhanced oratorical skill and higher levels of motivation from colleagues  
40 (Gardner et al, 2011; Leroy et al, 2015). Typically, participants in authentic leadership programmes  
41 are offered opportunities for systematic self-exploration; these processes, however, could be  
42 characterised as opportunities for self-justification, as exploration of self is framed by the aim of  
43 constructing narratives that explain one's right to seniority within a corporation – an almost 'divine'  
44 right to lead. Self-realizations that might undermine one's ability to work for certain firms, or  
45 transform the basis of one's self-worth, or challenge one's assumption of self-efficacy, do not appear  
46 to be encouraged (Bendell and Little, 2015). For scholars interested in transforming organisations so  
47 they reduce their harm on the environment and society, or increase their positive contributions, the  
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3 exploration of values in authentic leadership may seem like a start, but it could be unhelpfully  
4 limited.

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6 Authentic Leadership scholarship and trainings may be ignoring the insights from critical sociology;  
7 on how our perspectives and senses of self are shaped by language and discourse (Gergen, 1994;  
8 Fairclough, 1995; Burr, 1995). Such insights challenge the view that we can achieve depths of 'self-  
9 awareness' by reflecting on our experiences and feelings without the benefit of perspectives from  
10 social theory. Authentic leadership builds on assumptions about the nature of the individual,  
11 including the assumption that our worth comes from our distinctiveness.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, Adorno  
12 (1973) has even claimed that the word 'authenticity' is simply jargon. He argues it is characteristic of  
13 a nostalgic post-Christian impulse to replace the 'authority of the absolute' (such as a God) with  
14 'absolutised authority' (whether that is from an organisation, law or the rectitude of a leader).  
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22 A third set of analyses shows how a focus on leader's values, charisma and other attributes serves to  
23 distract from and deproblematise issues of the legitimacy, or not, of power-wielding roles in  
24 organisations and societies. When we consider leadership, we are considering how groups of people  
25 decide how to act: addressing ancient questions of social and political organisation which are  
26 subjects of long, lively and diverse intellectual traditions. They are investigated today in fields as  
27 diverse as political philosophy, public policy studies, civil society studies, and international  
28 development studies. We cannot delve into these areas in this paper, but suffice to note that a  
29 recurring theme in these fields is that matters of decision-making involve reflection on processes  
30 that support the rights, dignity and contribution of all individuals in groups. Yet studies of leadership  
31 often render unproblematic modes of decision-making and patterns of power (Gemmill and Oakley,  
32 1992; Western, 2008). Given that good governance is such a central question for sustainable  
33 development, this subtle side-lining of questions of accountable governance is a concern. This draws  
34 parallels with the comments from various scholars relating to the literal and linguistic separation of  
35 leader and follower. Learmonth and Morrell for example, suggest that the "institutionalised" usage  
36 of the terms leader/follower automatically construct a master/slave dialectic, reducing the capacity  
37 of "followers' to question their leaders' basic authority" (2016: 2). In this then, it may be beneficial  
38 to reframe leadership language in a more open and less hierarchical manner. Fairhurst (2009)  
39 emphasises the term 'leadership actor' to cover the plurality of individuals who may be involved in  
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51 <sup>1</sup> Vedic philosophies provide critiques of, and explanations for, why we might enjoy a process of self-  
52 construction via self-reflection exercises. An emphasis on the 'authentic self' might be regarded as an effort to  
53 find a 'rock of safety against the cosmic and the infinite' (Aurobindo, 1972: 229). Aurobindo further argues  
54 that an aspect of our consciousness is 'not concerned with self-knowledge but with self-affirmation, desire,  
55 ego. It is therefore constantly acting on mind to build for it a mental structure of apparent self that will serve  
56 these purposes; our mind is persuaded to present to us and to others a partly fictitious representative figure of  
57 ourselves which supports our self-affirmation, justifies our desires and actions, nourishes our ego.' (p 229).  
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3 acts of leadership within an organisation. A fourth set of analyses in CLS looks at how the hero focus  
4 of mainstream leadership studies attributes responsibility for outcomes disproportionately to  
5 individuals occupying a hierarchal position at the apex of an organisation, thereby obscuring the  
6 importance of other situational and contextual factors and limiting our insight into how change  
7 happens. Psychological research since the 1980s has demonstrated that people, across cultures,  
8 tend to exaggerate the significance of the actions of individuals when compared to other factors  
9 shaping outcomes (Meindl et al, 1985). The researchers concluded that this was evidence that we  
10 are susceptible to seeing 'leadership' when it isn't necessarily there or important - a collectively  
11 constructed 'romantic discourse'. Their work reflects the 'false attribution effect', widely reported  
12 by social psychologists, as people's tendency to place an undue emphasis on internal characteristics  
13 to explain someone's behaviour, rather than considering external factors (Jones and Harris, 1967).  
14 Perhaps our susceptibility to this effect arises because we are brought up with stories of great  
15 leaders shaping history, and this myth is perpetuated in our business media today (Bendell and  
16 Little, 2015).

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18 Drawing upon these insights, Gemmill and Oakley (1992) frame leadership itself as a 'social myth'  
19 which creates and reinforces the illusion that individual leaders are in control of events and  
20 organisational performance. That is, the existence and valorisation of leaders serves to repress  
21 uncomfortable needs, emotions and wishes that emerge when people work collaboratively  
22 (Gemmill, 1986; Gastil, 1994), and subsequently, individuals are able to project their worries and  
23 anxieties onto individual leaders, who are seen as omniscient and all-powerful. Members are  
24 therefore able to perceive themselves as free from anxiety, fears, struggles and the responsibility of  
25 autonomy (Bion, 1961), but may also fail to recognise that they are inducing their own learned  
26 helplessness and passivity: that is, they "willingly submit themselves to spoon feeding, preferring  
27 safe and easy security to the possible pains and uncertainty of learning by their own effort and  
28 mistakes" (Gemmill and Oakley, 1992: 98). For Gemmill and Oakley therefore, leadership – in the  
29 form widely assumed today - is dangerous and inherently unsustainable, leading to infantilization  
30 and mass deskilling. They stress the need to denaturalise take-for-granted assumptions in order to  
31 develop new theories of leadership which 'reskill' organisational members; encourage collaborative  
32 working environments; and do not rely on superhuman individuals.

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34 Various other theorists (although not explicitly rooted in CLS) have reached similar conclusions. For  
35 example, Ashforth (1994) argues that authoritative leaders often engage in behaviours such as  
36 belittling of followers, self-aggrandisement, coercive conflict resolution, unnecessary punishments  
37 and the undermining of organisational goals. Schilling (2009) and Higgs (2009) also report that  
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3 leaders often exhibit behaviours which aim at obtaining purely personal (not organisational) goals,  
4 and may inflict damage on others through constant abuses of power. Finally, and in a similar vein to  
5 Gemmill and Oakley (1992), a number of theorists (Conger, 1990; Padilla, Hogan and Kaiser, 2007)  
6 proposed that the behaviour of 'followers' may also contribute to destructive practices- especially in  
7 regard to self-esteem issues, the playing of power games, and treating the leader as an idol.<sup>2</sup> As  
8 many scholars of sustainability in general, and 'leadership for sustainability' in particular, are  
9 interested in enhancing change, these disempowering effects of dominant assumptions about  
10 leadership should be a concern.  
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16 The four CLS critiques of the hero-focus of mainstream leadership studies all relate to a form of  
17 'methodological individualism', assuming that significant insight into a social situation can be derived  
18 from analysing the motivations and actions of very few individuals (Basu, 2008). Their research has  
19 shown how focusing on an individual leader can enforce an *a-contextual* and short-termist view; one  
20 that pays little attention to broader socio-economic processes, planetary concerns or collective  
21 wellbeing. Whilst differences exist between the aims and objectives of the critical scholars cited thus  
22 far, at the heart of these debates is the notion that a reliance on overly hierarchical  
23 conceptualisations of leadership may have problematic impacts on organisational effectiveness,  
24 well-being, and broader social change: they are irreconcilable with creating sustainable societies  
25 (Evans, 2011; Gordon, 2010; Western, 2008; Sutherland et al, 2014; Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). That  
26 is, for all their focus on attempting to achieve economically effective outcomes (which, indeed, is the  
27 primary 'selling point' of mainstream understandings, and the belief on which they are predicated),  
28 they fail to acknowledge the importance of long-term socially sustainable, efficacious and humane  
29 relationships between and among organisational actors.  
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### 39 Assuming Purpose

40 What is the purpose of leadership? Many case studies offered in leadership scholarship assume that  
41 the purpose of organisations is to achieve economic goals, rather than goals associated with equity,  
42 democracy and environmental sustainability (Jackson and Parry, 2008). A review of the assumed or  
43 proposed outcomes of leadership within twenty-five years of scholarship, showed that all types of  
44 outcome exist within an instrumentalist approach that concerns improving organisational  
45 performance, rather than considering the purpose of the organisation, the performance issue  
46 concerned, or the impact on stakeholders (Hiller, et al 2011). The mainstream corporate view of  
47 leadership is typically expressed in 'econophonic' and 'potensiphonic' terms – the taken-for-granted  
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54 <sup>2</sup> We must note that many scholars assume the word 'follower' as little more than the inverse of the word  
55 'leader', a form of hypostatisation that tends to support the naturalisation of hierarchy, rather than it's  
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3 language that prioritises economic outcomes over all others and potency, power and performance  
4 over other human modalities (Promislo and Guccione, 2013). There has been little room for doubt  
5 and reflection on the purpose of business, work and economic progress within that leadership  
6 discourse. Thus, the challenging of econophonic and potensiphonic language in leadership studies  
7 can be an emancipatory activity, and key to nurturing “reciprocal, sustaining relationships among  
8 people and between humans and nature” (Evans, 2011: 2).

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13 For some theorists, the prevalent assumptions of managerialism can be seen within an imperialist  
14 economic context – pointing toward the idea that under modern capitalist society, centralisation,  
15 hierarchy, domination, exploitation, manipulation, oppression and scapegoating are inherent  
16 features of life (Barker, 1997; Mannoni, 1956; Bhabha, 1994). If this is the context for one’s analysis,  
17 then the ‘social myth’ of leadership we have described in this paper can be regarded as one of many  
18 nodal points in a discursal web of ideas and practices whose effect is to infantilise and prepare  
19 mass audiences for compliance in their own exploitation. Other nodes being, for instance, discourses  
20 about the salience of the individual consumer; the universality of market mechanisms; the  
21 impracticality of challenging dominant discourses; or the pathological nature of opposition and the  
22 necessity for ‘security’.

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Despite our earlier criticisms of the assumptions and approaches within ‘authentic leadership,’ its  
focus on self-development *could* provide an opening for work on the deeper personal  
transformations that might allow for different types of purpose to be clarified and pursued through  
leadership acts.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the importance of purpose to leadership is receiving greater attention  
from leadership scholars, without that purpose being assumed to be congruent with narrowly  
defined corporate goals (Kempster, et al 2011). Growing interest in sustainability leadership or  
sustainable leadership can be seen in that context: an effort to plug the purpose gap in  
contemporary corporate life. A business rationale for corporate leaders to be clear on a purpose  
beyond narrow corporate goals is also developing as some researchers argue that firms with a clear  
public purpose do better financially over the longer term (Big Innovation Centre, 2016).

The concept of sustainability in these initiatives is, however, limited and potentially counter-  
productive, as we will discuss below. Therefore, unless the interest in purposeful business and  
purposeful leadership allows for a deeper exploration of sustainability than that which aligns simply

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<sup>3</sup> It is worthy of note that authentic leadership and other approaches that focus on values have begun to be  
criticised from another perspective altogether: that they don’t help managers’ careers (Pfeffer, 2015). Such  
criticisms may provoke more debate in mainstream scholarship but are not aligned with the deeper  
questioning of purpose we explore here.

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3 with existing corporate interests, it is unlikely to address this limitation to mainstream leadership  
4 approaches.  
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### 6 **Beyond Critical Analysis**

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8 To address some of the shortcomings in mainstream leadership scholarship and training, some CLS  
9 scholars study and propose a more emergent, episodic and distributed form of leadership, involving  
10 acts that individuals may take to help groups achieve aims they otherwise might not (Bendell and  
11 Little, 2015; Western, 2008). The focus therefore shifts towards effective group processes, on which  
12 there is a range of scholarship to draw upon, within and beyond the CLS field.  
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17 Research on 'distributed leadership' has shown how leadership actors can emerge anywhere in an  
18 organisation and that leadership becomes a cultural trope around which motivated action accretes,  
19 a position supported theoretically by sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995), activity theory (Bedny et al,  
20 2000), communities of practice theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and practice theory (Schatzki, 1996).  
21 Unfortunately, when it is presented as a practice that mitigates hierarchical power, especially in  
22 business organisations, distributed leadership sometimes becomes little more than a way of  
23 rhetorically extending employees' freedom of action (and weight of responsibility) while maintaining  
24 circumscriptive rules (Dainty et al, 2005; Woods et al, 2004). Thus, we conclude that the absence of  
25 a critical framework to deconstruct assumptions about leaders, goals, and legitimacy can hamper  
26 studies that explore post-heroic and distributed forms of leadership.  
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34 In recent years the term 'collective leadership' has emerged as "an umbrella concept that includes  
35 studies... applying the core insight of relationality to the key problems in [organisation and society]...  
36 Relationality reveals the individual as a node where multiple relationships intersect: people are  
37 relational beings" (Ospina and Foldy, 2015: 492). Some use the term to include distributed, shared,  
38 and co-leadership, due to an assessment that they all focus more on complex relations between  
39 individuals. "Collective leadership shifts attention from formal leaders and their influence on  
40 followers to the relational processes that produce leadership in a group, organization or system.  
41 Relationality motivates attention to the embeddedness of the leader-follower relationship in a  
42 broader system of relationships and to the meaning-making, communicative and organising  
43 processes that help define and constitute these relationships" (Ospina and Foldy, 2015: 492).  
44 Further than this, various scholars note the potential of more collective forms of leadership as a  
45 'sustainable' organisational practice, given that it allows for empowerment, reduces alienation, and  
46 increases democracy and participation (Western, 2008; Evans, 2011).  
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3 Framed in this way, collective leadership could be viewed as an agenda that rises to the critiques  
4 from CLS. However, many studies and recommendations described as 'collective leadership' retain a  
5 belief in the salience of special individuals who can be identified as leaders, whether by role or by  
6 act. In addition, some studies of collective leadership efforts in organisations have found that it is  
7 used rhetorically by managers who pursue individual aims within inefficient bureaucracies (Davis  
8 and Jones, 2014). It is the more radical approaches within the collective leadership field, particularly  
9 concerning the non-profit sector, that resonate with the insights of CLS and could therefore be used  
10 in a new conception, theory and practice of sustainable leadership. However, what is equally  
11 important for such a new approach is to have the same critical perspective on sustainable  
12 development as we have offered on leadership.  
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### 22 **Three Paradigms in Sustainability**

23 In the same way that Critical Discourse Analysis can reveal limiting assumptions in the field of  
24 leadership, it can do that in the field of Sustainable Development. As described at the start of our  
25 paper, Sustainable Development and its related activities became established in the late 1980s. It  
26 was offered as a coherent agenda for governments around the post-Cold War world. It also  
27 coincided with the rise of another idea for public policy, called New Public Management (NPM),  
28 which regarded citizens as users of services and incorporated practices from the private sector  
29 (Schachter, 2014). Looking back, NPM (and its closely related tropes of leadership and  
30 entrepreneurialism) can be seen to have colonised the process of learning and change for  
31 sustainability, reducing it to a problem that can be solved by management and technology driven by  
32 leadership in a process dominated by capital (Bessant, et al 2015; Perez-Carmona, 2013; Steurer,  
33 2007). Intentional or not, this colonisation was aided by the growth of voluntary corporate  
34 engagement with sustainability which then influenced the understandings of policy makers, experts  
35 and campaigners on how to approach social and environmental problems (Ball and Bebbington,  
36 2008). A counter process was also occurring with the transfer of concepts of environmentalists and  
37 social justice campaigners into the private sector, thus leading to what Anderson and Mungal (2015)  
38 describe, albeit in a different sector, as the inter-sectoral transfer of discourses.  
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49 Critical Discourse Analysis reminds us that ideological effects work at the level of phrases. It invites  
50 us to question how a phrase can encourage certain perspectives and not others. One way that  
51 occurs is by 'collocation'. The term 'Sustainable Development' is a collocation; that is, two-words  
52 combined into a single term. It is a risk of collocations that they have the effect of de-problematizing  
53 their constituent terms - in this case both 'Sustainable' and 'Development' - and replacing them with  
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3 a new ideologically-loaded term. One risk is that important questions of what is development is  
4 displaced by a focus instead on what might be distinctly “sustainable”. Thus, when considering  
5 sustainability, we should attempt to uncover assumptions about development, including  
6 assumptions about ‘social’ progress. There is a long tradition of this fundamental questioning of  
7 progress in the anti-development or post-development fields, which typically argue that the  
8 development concept is an extension of colonialist and imperialist power relations in the global  
9 economy (Sachs, 1992; 1999: 2015: Rahnema and Bawtree, 1997). Given that readers of this journal  
10 are likely to be well-versed in the literature on sustainability, we will not detail the critiques in the  
11 same way did with leadership, but instead offer a conceptual framework which draws upon them.

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18 The framework of ‘Three Paradigms in Sustainability’ that we offer here makes broad generalisations  
19 to invite reflection on worldviews. Different countries, classes, genders, races and professions,  
20 amongst other categories one could identify, have different experiences of the diverse dilemmas  
21 touched upon by ‘sustainability.’ Our own generalising is intended to help broaden perspectives on  
22 what sustainability could mean, and what various interpretations and assumptions about it may be  
23 producing through us.

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28 In this paper, we offer a simple categorisation of paradigms in sustainability thinking: Reformation,  
29 Revolution and Restoration: i.e. broad brush strokes on the ways of thinking about and approaching  
30 shared dilemmas. In doing so we seek to reveal some of the hidden ideological work that the terms  
31 ‘sustainable development’ and ‘sustainability’ may have been doing in ways counterproductive to  
32 people’s expressed interests.

### 33 Reformation

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38 Many scholars of the history of sustainable development explain how the concept “was originally  
39 devised as a political ideal by conservationists to persuade the governments of developing countries  
40 to undertake less environmentally damaging development paths” (Purvis and Grainger, 2004: 31).  
41 This led the early discourse on sustainable development to be quite precise about the environmental  
42 aspects of what an economy might aspire to, which was summarised well by Herman Daly (1990) in  
43 5 principles (Table 1).

#### 44 The Daly Principles

- 45 1. Limit the human scale to a level which, if not optimal, is at least  
46 within the carrying capacity and is therefore, sustainable.
  - 47 2. Achieve technological change that increases efficiency and durability  
48 while limiting throughput.
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3. Preserve the harvesting rate of renewable resources at a level below the regenerative capacity of the environment.
4. Preserve waste emission rates at a level below the assimilative capacity of the environment.
5. Restrict non-renewable resource use to levels equalled by the creation or accessing of renewable substitutes.

*Table 1: The Daly Principles*

The social elements to early views on sustainable development included the eradication of extreme poverty and malnutrition; the achievement of comprehensive literacy; and increasing average life expectancies to that of the industrialised Western nations. Education and employment were seen as the motors for these social advances. The concept of “development” was accepted as mostly a material phenomenon, rather than involving other aspects of human improvement, such as extending democratic rights and justice throughout all organs of society, or outcomes such as happiness and wellbeing (Sachs, 1999).

Apart from concern about the odious debts of poor governments, the early sustainable development approach did not look deeply at economic systems. Many people working in charities or development agencies struggled to say anything about the economic ‘pillar’ of sustainable development beyond the rule of law, corruption issues or the dangers of dumping subsidised products in poor markets (Purvis and Grainger, 2004). In most intergovernmental organisation reports and popular writings on sustainable development in the 80s and 90s, forms of regulated capitalist market economies were assumed as the norm, where a sustainably-developed economy would involve a mixture of enterprises, cooperatives, state owned companies, stock markets, private banks and single fiat currencies (Sachs, 1999). This was not surprising given the hope at the end of the Cold War that progress could be made without recourse to traditional left-right intellectual conflicts. Despite the absence of ideas on political economy, given the economic-focus of many government, business and civil society leaders in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the extent of poverty, pollution and habitat destruction, the social and environmental aims of sustainable development still represented a substantial reformation of capitalism.

Over the years this lack of an explicit perspective on economics provided the opportunity for powerful trends to influence what sustainability came to mean. Economic globalisation proceeded at pace, where international institutions forced market reforms in return for debt rescheduling, and international treaties were agreed to bring down barriers to trade and finance. The interests of multinational corporations and banks were a powerful force shaping the discourse of many

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3 governments and the field of international cooperation (Bendell, 2004). Therefore, sustainable  
4 development increasingly came to mean sustaining economic growth in the medium term (Perez-  
5 Carmona, 2013). This process was effectively crowned when economic growth became central to  
6 some the new SDGs in 2015 (United Nations, 2015). Therefore, the mainstream discourse on  
7 sustainable development today may reflect a moral imagination but a weak Reformation Approach  
8 to our socioeconomic systems.  
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### 12 13 Revolution

14 Development Studies and Development Cooperation had existed for almost half a century before  
15 the Earth Summit made Sustainable Development more famous in 1992 (Sachs, 1992). Many  
16 scholars of development placed it in the context of centuries of past colonialism and imperialism,  
17 suggesting that “development” was the new face of attempts to dominate and expropriate wealth  
18 (Frank 1969). That tradition of radical critique of global capitalism, its corporations and banks, had  
19 influenced some of the earliest post-colonial independent nations across the global South. By the  
20 1990s the policy influence of anti-imperialist development thinkers had waned.  
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26 Some advocates of sustainable development brought a strong rights-based agenda, with a focus on  
27 social justice, anti-corruption and greater democracy, including workplace democracy (Sachs, 1999).  
28 These interests are paralleled by Critical Leadership Studies (CLS) scholars who do not explicitly  
29 frame their work as concerning the social dimensions of sustainable development. But their focus on  
30 workplace practices and the role of management reminds us that social sustainability is not an  
31 abstract end-goal, but something that can be recursively built into practice on a day-to-day basis.  
32 This draws parallels with the notion of ‘prefigurative politics’ (Maeckelbergh, 2009), where means  
33 are seen to be *as important* as the ends; where they are inextricably linked and blurred, which  
34 rejects a focus on either means or ends at the expense of the other. Many of these analysts don’t  
35 call for a revolution in capitalism to achieve workplace rights and democracy, but in comparison to  
36 those that ignore or misunderstand the human rights agenda within sustainable development, their  
37 views seem quite revolutionary.  
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46 The environmental aspect of the critique of international development (Jordan and O’Riordan 2000)  
47 has not appeared to influence many newly independent nations, with a modernist notion of social  
48 progress through industrialisation and consumer society being widely embraced (Bendell, 2004). Yet  
49 their fundamental question to those who believed it was possible to reform dominant  
50 socioeconomic systems has not gone away: How can economic growth be reconciled with  
51 environmental constraints, or meeting basic needs be prioritised over the endless potential desires  
52 of humankind?  
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3 Many grassroots movements around the world, including agricultural workers, unionists and  
4 representatives of indigenous groups, have kept the critique going. At times, the critique has gained  
5 international notoriety (Utting, 2015). The 'Anti-Globalisation Movement', came to world notice in  
6 1999 due to protests at the Seattle meeting of the World Trade Organisation, and then the 'Occupy  
7 Movement' again in 2011, beginning in Wall Street, New York. Neither of those movements clearly  
8 advocated a focused set of proposals for the rules of a different socioeconomic system or a strategy  
9 for how to implement it, instead, focusing on pluralising discussion beyond neo-liberal economics.  
10 That is not to say there are not a range of specific proposals made by people who engage in such  
11 activism, ranging from reforming laws on trade, corporations, taxation and monetary systems  
12 (Bendell, 2004).  
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19 In summary, despite efforts like the World Social Forum, a Revolutionary Approach to sustainable  
20 development has largely been restricted to critique and segmented in separate realms of concern  
21 such as environmental conservation or social development. Examples of government efforts to  
22 implement what some would call a 'left wing' approach to achieving sustainability, by transforming  
23 socioeconomic systems, are therefore difficult to find (Utting, 2015). Nevertheless, some still hope  
24 that a Revolutionary Approach is possible, perhaps inevitable. Crucially, they believe there is enough  
25 time, and that we can and should 'progress.'  
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### 31 Restoration

32 In the past decade, a view has emerged in the West that suggests neither a Reformation or  
33 Revolution of our socioeconomic systems is a sensible aspiration when faced with our current  
34 predicament. That analysis is based, in particular, on the latest climate science and the absence of  
35 significant global emissions reductions. Some consider that a 'near term collapse' in socioeconomic  
36 systems is inevitable and possible in the lifetime of today's children (Mulgan, 2011; Jamieson, 2014;  
37 Foster, 2015). Others go further in questioning the survival of the species itself beyond this century.  
38 Parallel to this debate is the rise to prominence of the 'anthropocene' concept with its defining  
39 acceptance that human beings have set in motion a mass extinction as major as any produced by  
40 Earth-system changes over geological time (Hamilton et al, 2015).  
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48 From these perspectives 'sustainable development' is seen as a concept that has already failed, and  
49 was destined to fail as it ignored the inherent contradictions between our form of economic  
50 development and the achievement of environmental sustainability or social equity. Sustainable  
51 Development is therefore argued by Foster (2015) as the concoction of a delusional mind-set which  
52 assumed that progress, in particular technological progress, is inevitable and always desirable. Some  
53 argue this progressivist mind-set comes from a subconscious attachment to having something  
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3 important to contribute to that outlives us, given a decline in the experience of a cosmic sense to life  
4 (e.g. God) or of nature as sacred. Advocates of this view also critique the assumption that humans  
5 can control their destiny on planet Earth, or beyond.  
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8 From this standpoint, climate change is viewed as a tragedy, not just a problem to be solved. The  
9 focus of these analysts and activists becomes one of adaptation to the coming catastrophes,  
10 including cultural and psychological adaptation. One of the leading academic commentators on this  
11 approach calls for "a therapeutic politics of retrieval, renewing kinds of deep resilience which these  
12 communities have progressively lost, along with a recovered sense of realistic human possibility and  
13 an acknowledgement of the tragedy in which we have involved ourselves and the planet" (Foster,  
14 2015: 1).  
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20 This paradigm resonates with and extends a century and more of critical sociology, including  
21 Ferdinand Tonnies (1887) on the commodification of life and Jurgen Habermas (1984) on how both  
22 bureaucratic and market systems colonise the 'lifeworld' of communities. The paradigm also reflects  
23 a depth of critiques of economic development, and therefore sustainable development, that have  
24 been made previously by representatives of indigenous peoples who challenged the processes that  
25 are destroying their traditional ways of life, such as in tropical rainforests. For instance, the  
26 Pachamama Alliance involve Ecuadorean forest peoples who call for people with modern lifestyles  
27 to "change the dream" by which they live by.  
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33 The Restoration Approach to collective dilemmas can involve at least four elements: the restoration  
34 of humility, wildness, of wholeness and of resilience. First, the restoration of humility, recognising  
35 the hubris that humans could control nature or each-other comprehensively and indefinitely.  
36 Connected to this is an emphasis on the restoration of 'wildness'. In the environmental sphere that  
37 involves greater emphasis on working with natural processes, such as the rewilding of landscapes. In  
38 the social sphere this concept is being used to invite us to consider how a less domesticated  
39 approach to our own lives might look as well as suggesting we need to become more awake to our  
40 interdependence with nature (Foster, 2015).  
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47 This awareness connects to a third element, which is the restoration of our wholeness: the assumed  
48 separation of nature and humans is challenged as causal in our malaise, and thus transcended. There  
49 are variants on this theme, with differing emphases on how we understand and talk about nature  
50 and humans within that (Perez de Vega, 2015). Some draw upon both ancient wisdom traditions and  
51 new sciences to explain the limits of viewing humans as separate from and manipulating of 'other'  
52 life (Eisenstein, 2011).  
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3 These three elements culminate in the socio-economic arena with the restoration of resilience. That  
4 has been defined as “the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganise while  
5 undergoing change, so as still to retain essentially the same function, structure, identity and  
6 feedbacks” (Hopkins, 2008: 54). For instance, a town can be regarded as a system that can grow  
7 resilience as changes to its supplies of energy and sustenance change. Others draw inspiration for  
8 human communities from how some living systems bounce back from disruptions with a stronger  
9 system, such as organisms that overcome some infections (Taleb, 2012).

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14 Some use the term ‘retrieval’ for describing what this approach to our predicament implies,  
15 returning to aspects of what we have progressively lost since the start of the European  
16 Enlightenment (Foster, 2015). The argument is not that everything pre-modern is positive or needs  
17 to be restored, but that much is to be retrieved from past cultures, philosophies, and technologies.  
18 We adopt the term ‘Restoration’ to describe this approach, as it foretells this as a major social  
19 movement and potentially a new era. We have explained this approach - or antithesis - to  
20 Sustainable Development, in more detail than either Reformation or Revolution as it is more recent  
21 and marginal in discourses on policy and organisations.

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28 The youth of the Restoration Approach is one reason why its social dimensions have not been widely  
29 discussed. What will human rights, fairness, justice, power and governance look like in societies that  
30 take this approach? Given how some efforts to revive past approaches to life and culture can involve  
31 a brutal rejection of compassion-based values in the exuberance of fundamentalism, the social  
32 dimension of the Restoration Approach will be important to engage.

### 33 34 35 36 37 Working Across Paradigms

38 Given that the Sun will explode one day in the future, infinite ‘sustainable development’ of human  
39 society on Planet Earth is unachievable and so the term is a linguistic device to provide a meeting  
40 place for different people and ideas to work on the shared dilemmas of our time. Sustainable  
41 development may have been attractive at helping us to cooperate on diverse dilemmas while  
42 suspending controversies over religion and political economy. Existing theories of exploitation of  
43 poorer countries by imperial powers could be side-lined, along with critiques of capitalism at a time  
44 of hope after the Cold War. Differing religious motivations for caring about the other could be  
45 silenced with emphasis on the shared values and targets that delegates could state agreement on. If  
46 keeping people talking was the aim, sustainable development has been successful.

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53 Many involved in intergovernmental processes today argue that it is pragmatic to maintain this  
54 approach in order to arrive at agreement on such initiatives as the SDGs. However, as such limited  
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3 progress is made on critical issues like climate change, the avoidance of deeper questions of political  
4 economy and of belief may not have been so pragmatic after all.  
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7 What approach to sustainability is most relevant today? Reformation, Revolution or Restoration? In  
8 this paper, we have not discussed the latest data on a range of shared dilemmas or the scale and  
9 rate of effective response. We think that there is much cause for concern. But we also recognise that  
10 each approach can frame and inform helpful action, while each approach can marginalise important  
11 considerations or justify poor action. So rather than assessing which paradigm is the most accurate  
12 starting point, after all they are all just social constructions, what is important is to help people  
13 consider what each might imply if pursued with rigour and creativity. From this perspective,  
14 sustainability leadership must begin with helping people to think about their thinking about  
15 sustainability.  
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## 22 **Implications for Sustainable Leadership**

23 Combining our critique of prevalent approaches to both leadership and sustainability, seven main  
24 'unsustainabilities' in mainstream leadership can now be proposed (Table 2). This prepares the  
25 conceptual ground for the development of new approaches to sustainable leadership research,  
26 practice and education.  
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### 30 Table 2: The Seven Unsustainabilities of Leadership

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34 1. *Ignoring purpose, or assuming the primary purpose to be the benefit of an employer;*  
35 2. *Assuming or believing a senior role holder to be most salient to organisational or social*  
36 *change;*  
37 3. *Ignoring the political and moral aspects of an exclusive focus on enhancing the agency of*  
38 *senior role holders;*  
39 4. *Assuming that 'leader' is a continuing quality of a person rather than a label;*  
40 5. *Assuming that the value of an individual lies mostly in their confidence in their distinctiveness;*  
41 6. *Assuming that leadership development is about learning more rather than about unlearning;*  
42 7. *Believing that material progress is always possible and best.*  
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50 Clearly critique in itself is not a sufficient contribution. Western (2008: 21), for example, suggests  
51 that "critical theorists must go beyond identifying 'bad leadership practice' and aim to create and  
52 support successful ethical frameworks for leadership", and Sutherland et al (2014) argue that  
53 attention should be paid to understanding "how organisational alternatives to mainstream  
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3 understandings of leadership might be constituted” (Sutherland et al, 2013: 16). Therefore, we can  
4 flip the seven criticisms into the following seven recommendations for more sustainable leadership:  
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7 1. Explore purpose and meaning as central to personal and professional action. By doing so,  
8 enable individuals to clarify their provisional understanding of personal aims and how they may, or  
9 may not, relate to existing organisational aims, to support a more holistic assessment of personal  
10 and organisational performance.  
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13 2. Recognise that organisational or social change is affected by people at all levels and through  
14 social processes, so knowledge about collective action is key. By doing so, encourage people to learn  
15 more about how groups can function more effectively through enhanced collaboration.  
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19 3. Consider the political and moral aspects of authority and bases for legitimacy of leadership  
20 acts. By doing so, encourage a focus on how one’s potential actions relate to the needs of the  
21 collective, stakeholders and wider society.  
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- 24  
25 4. Recognise that ‘leader’ is a label and people can take acts of leadership without it meaning  
26 they are permanent and stable ‘leaders’. Understanding this provides a valuable opportunity for  
27 developing overall leadership capacity within organisations, rather than mistakenly seeing it as the  
28 domain of a chosen, or emergent, few.  
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32 5. Appreciate the value of an individual is as much through their similarities and connectedness  
33 to others and all life, as through their distinctiveness. Doing so allows a move away from seeing  
34 organisations as natural hierarchies, towards pluralistic sites characterised by ongoing debate,  
35 discussion and deliberation.  
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39 6. Understand that leadership development is about both learning new ideas and unlearning  
40 existing ones. In this regard, practitioners can be encouraged to let go of limiting assumptions as  
41 they develop critical consciousness, and therefore simultaneously oppose practices as well as  
42 propose new approaches.  
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46 7. Realise that personal purpose and meaning can ultimately transcend notions of material  
47 progress in any form or the associated means of control. Doing so challenges the consequentialist,  
48 means-end philosophies of contemporary business and organisation, and instead promotes an  
49 ideology centred on compassion and creating a new world in the shell of the old (Gordon, 2010)  
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53 Although these recommendations are about leadership, they indicate we must go beyond a narrow  
54 focus on individual leader’s abilities, skills, attributes and behaviours (Bendell and Little, 2015), and  
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3 toward developing all organisational actors' critical thinking skills (Brookfield, 1987), and creating  
4 spaces in which to discuss future possibilities for sustainability (Evans, 2011). Although the  
5 recommendations are about 'sustainability,' the seventh is important for allowing a new perspective  
6 to emerge, considering what we have described as a 'Restoration Approach,' currently being  
7 triggered by the latest environmental science. As described above, such a paradigm challenges the  
8 progressivist and modernist assumptions in both the prevalent ideas of leadership and sustainability  
9 that are unlikely to help us consider coping with severe disturbance, rather than more 'progress'  
10 through greater control (Foster, 2015).  
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16 In social studies, we appreciate how theoretical development can take many forms and does not  
17 require making predictions based on a theory (Abend, 2009). Instead, our main theoretical  
18 contribution is to provide a framework for interpretation of claims about leadership for  
19 sustainability. Affecting people by revealing limiting assumptions embedded in, and reproduced by,  
20 leadership discourse has been documented in areas beyond sustainability (Alvesson and Spicer,  
21 2012). Therefore, our work has practical implication in that synthesising critiques and making them  
22 available to people and scholars engaged in sustainability may reduce the influence of limiting  
23 concepts. Therefore, we limit our predictions to this process of consciousness-raising. We contend  
24 that professionals who avoid the seven unsustainabilities of leadership will enable more positive (or  
25 less negative) change; that organisations which promote avoidance of the seven unsustainabilities of  
26 leadership will witness more positive (or less negative) change, and; if designers or commissioners of  
27 leadership development avoid the seven unsustainabilities of leadership then they will encourage  
28 more effective change-enabling capabilities from their participants.  
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38 At this point we can offer a tentative definition:

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40 *Sustainable leadership is any ethical behaviour that has the intention and effect of helping groups of*  
41 *people address shared dilemmas in significant ways not otherwise achieved.*  
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44 We regard the concept of sustainable leadership to include seven necessary conditions (Podsakoff,  
45 et al, 2016). First, that leadership involves a behaviour, or act, which can also include an intentional  
46 non-action. Second, that the act is ethical, according to a framework held by the person and capable  
47 of being understood by observers. Third that the behaviour helps groups of people achieve  
48 something. Fourth, that the achievement relates to addressing shared dilemmas, such as economic,  
49 social, environmental or cultural problems that affect many people. Fifth, that the change is  
50 significant, according to both the group affected and the observers, including people who wish to  
51 describe leadership, like ourselves. This recognises the subjective nature of ascribing leadership.  
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3 Sixth, that the behaviour created an effect that was additional, whereby if it had not occurred then  
4 the outcome would not likely have been achieved. We recognise this element is based on our  
5 theories of change and is a difficult element to assess. Seventh that the person exhibiting the  
6 behaviour intended to pursue positive change on the dilemma. We hope that the definition of  
7 sustainable leadership serves to remind us that leadership is about change involving acts rather than  
8 positional power, sustainability is about dilemmas which might not be solved, that both intention  
9 and effect are important to consider, and that the significance of acts will be attributed by observers  
10 based on their own values and assumptions.  
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16 For the reasons explained in the introduction, our paper does not provide a systematic review of the  
17 prior use of the term 'sustainable leadership' in either academic publications or contemporary public  
18 discourse. However, some brief comments on how our concept relates to other interpretations will  
19 help clarify what we mean and what we do not. First, we note that the term "sustainable leadership"  
20 has been used to refer to leadership whose positive effects are sustained, or whose effectiveness  
21 does not fade over the tenure of the individual concerned (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2004). Although  
22 the longevity of an impact of an action is an interesting consideration, by not questioning aims and  
23 outcomes, nor the salience of the individual compared to other factors, this conception of  
24 sustainable leadership falls short of our purposes in encouraging a spectrum of action on social and  
25 environmental dilemmas.  
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33 Second, there have been magazine articles and blogs that interpret sustainable leadership as  
34 involving the quality of personal resilience and openness in dealing with complex challenges (Glaser  
35 and Entine, 2014). In academia, variants of this approach include those that argue that heightened  
36 complexity and interconnectedness of economy and society today means that senior managers need  
37 to cultivate mind-sets to be better able to interpret their organisational environment (Tideman et al,  
38 2013). While it is important to consider personal wellbeing and mind-sets in any analysis of  
39 leadership, we do not consider the resilience and open mindedness of a senior manager to be  
40 sufficient elements in a construct that would be relevant to significant action on social and  
41 environmental dilemmas.  
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48 Third, there is a conception of sustainable leadership which defines it as the opposite of exploitative  
49 leadership, where the former involves a person, with earned authority, helping groups of people  
50 achieve the progress they desire on sustainability issues (Evans, 2011). Our proposed concept of  
51 sustainable leadership shares much in common with this perspective but we do not think it helpful  
52 to imply leadership is a quality cohering in one person, instead seeing it as more emergent, episodic  
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3 and distributed. We aim to avoid reification, and regard leadership as simply a word, not an actual  
4 quality of one person.  
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7 A fourth approach also seeks to make a connection between environmental consciousness and an  
8 approach to leadership. Western (2008) regards human society as an element within our ecology,  
9 and thus views organisations and communities as complex living systems. Therefore, sustainable  
10 leadership can be viewed as a systems-conscious approach, as the Cambridge Centre for  
11 Sustainability Leadership (CISL) has advocated (Bendell and Little, 2015). Given the complex and  
12 dynamic interdependence found in the natural environment, it is a stimulating metaphor for  
13 reflection on organisations and societies. However, to argue that we can read off from nature  
14 insights for a better form of leadership might distract us from how such views remain our  
15 interpretations of nature and thus are socially constructed and could embody and exert power  
16 relations in themselves.  
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23 Fifth, there is a literature which regards sustainable leadership as an approach by senior managers  
24 to the design of organisational change processes to address sustainability issues profitably (Avery,  
25 and Bergsteiner, 2011; Galpin and Whittington, 2012). This is an important area of work, but could  
26 reinforce limiting assumptions about the locus of change, that even a focus on organisational culture  
27 for inspiring staff initiative may be unable to counteract.  
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32 In future, further work could be done to develop hypotheses about sustainable leadership and even  
33 how to measure it. That would involve the development of a 'nomological network' of terms related  
34 to conditions within the definition we propose. However, in line with the interest in promoting  
35 change for sustainability through research, we think our research can be built upon by considering  
36 the following five broad knowledge needs:  
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- 40  
41 - The extent and form of limiting assumptions within prevalent approaches to both leadership  
42 and sustainability, in both scholarship and practice, including within the emerging fields of  
43 'sustainability leadership' or 'sustainable leadership'.  
44  
45 - Inter-disciplinary insights on organisational and social change processes that address shared  
46 dilemmas and relate to individual practices. In particular, drawing on ideas from social  
47 movements and other change processes often overlooked by mainstream approaches to  
48 leadership.  
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50 - Insights on effective collective leadership to address shared dilemmas in society. In  
51 particular, knowledge on group dynamics for democratic deliberation and decision-making.  
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- The content and effectiveness of alternative pedagogies for leadership development, which draw on at least some of the seven recommendations for sustainable leadership described above. Including non-classroom based approaches.
- The cultural specificities versus commonalities of approaches to leadership and sustainability, especially in non-Western contexts.

### The Papers in this Issue

One of the implications of Critical Leadership Studies is the likely benefit to scholarship, practice, and education of drawing upon theories and experiences from outside the corporate sphere. We respond to that view in this special issue on sustainable leadership, with papers that explore such leadership from different academic disciplines and in non-corporate settings. Each paper draws upon the field of leadership studies, but incorporates it with another discipline. One paper draws on psychology, focusing on environmental activists. The other papers draw on education studies and focus on those who work with children. With both their subject matter and the theories mobilised, we hope the field for future research on sustainable leadership is usefully broadened.

In the following paper, Nadine Andrews' explores the "Psychosocial factors influencing the experience of sustainability professionals" as they try to lead change towards pro-environmental decision-making in their organisations. Her method of "Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis" offers us an up-close look at the mental frames and motivations of leaders working on sustainability. The findings help us see how psychological theories and research are useful to understanding how the contemporary sustainability professional copes with the challenges and tragedies of our environmental situation. It points to an area that will require more focus in sustainability management as people gravitate towards a 'Restoration Approach' to sustainability that includes recognition of forthcoming loss and tragedy.

An element of Andrews paper is the wellbeing of the professional engaged in leadership for sustainability. Professional wellbeing is also a theme in Kaz Stuart's paper which researches the practice of people who work with children. "It may be obvious from the word itself that 'sustainability' is about the future. Therefore, as a policy paradigm, it invites attention to children alive today, as well as more abstract notions of future generations," notes Stuart. Moreover, "despite their centrality to sustainability policy, children and young people have not had a comprehensive place in corporate sustainability practice or research." With the last two papers in this special issue we seek to address that, as both include case studies on working with young people. Stuart uses concepts of distributed leadership (Woods et al, 2004) and system leadership

(Senge et al, 2015) to structure an exploration of how people managing children's centres in the UK are addressing difficult challenges brought on by austerity.

Stuart finds that the model is helpful for leaders of children's centres. In such contexts, it is normal for managers to be motivated by values, which provides a suitable context for increasing delegation of decisions and collaboration on improving professional practice at large. The relevance of these findings for management and leadership in other organisations and sectors may therefore depend on the sense of purpose that staff hold.

Readers may note some similarities between 'system leadership' and the idea of collective leadership that we described earlier in this paper. The emphasis within 'system leadership' narratives is on creating broader changes in contexts by focusing on root causes and wider relations. The concept appears, therefore, to hold potential for sustainability management in general. While it focuses on relatedness and collectives, time will show whether it involves some of the problems with mainstream refrains of leadership, such as an assumption of the special salience of an individual for organisational and social change. Perhaps a paradox will emerge in system leadership, given the emphasis on both system and individual. Going forward, we see opportunities for more research on the use of systems methods of organisational change, such as soft systems methodology (Checkland, 2001), within the system leadership field.

As we have criticised current orthodoxies in leadership studies, we wish to avoid any new orthodoxies in our critical field. One benefit from Critical Leadership Studies is that it may encourage a new synthesis, as mainstream ideas are adapted. Criticism of "heroic" approaches to leadership is one area where this dialectic may be possible. In "Heroic ecologies: embodied heroic leadership and sustainable futures", Olivia Efthimiou moves beyond contemporary notions of heroes as exceptionally brave saviours, so as to revive and reapply the cultural notion of a "hero's journey" that is open to us all. That is, a journey of challenge, trauma, triumph and transcendence that contributes to a community. Efthimiou explores connections between that idea of heroism, sustainability, embodied leadership and wellbeing. She makes the case for how a revised understanding of heroism may be considered as an embodied system of sustainable leadership. She synthesises the claims made by practitioners who use the hero's journey with young people, to suggest that a whole model of heroic sustainable leadership development could be deployed.

Efthimiou's paper reminds us of the usefulness of personal orientations towards truth-seeking, collective consciousness, meaning-making, courage to uphold principles, courage to unlearn and, ultimately, to allow one's reinvention. A critical discourse lens would encourage future analysis of

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3 what is gained and lost through using the term and concept “hero” to describe and promote these  
4 orientations in people, as well the labelling of these as qualities especially for “leaders”. A question  
5 must remain whether dominant contemporary ideas on heroism could encourage people on heroic  
6 leadership training to aspire to be recognised for moments of special bravery and potency, with  
7 problematic consequences.  
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11 All three papers explore personal issues and wellbeing, reflecting how discussions of sustainable  
12 leadership invite us to consider how the professional challenges we all work on ultimately involve  
13 very personal processes. They remind us of the enduring relevance and power of a focus on  
14 leadership and its development, despite the various pitfalls we have discussed in our paper.  
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## 21 **Conclusions**

22 From drawing upon sociologically-informed critiques of both ‘leadership’ and ‘sustainability’, we  
23 have argued that prevalent notions of these concepts are unhelpful to either practitioner or  
24 researcher engagement with the shared dilemmas of our time. We have explained how the idea of  
25 leadership, as a myth of potent individual action, has been deployed in the service of unsustainable  
26 growth and exploitation. Those who suggest that the world needs bigger and bolder leadership in  
27 the transition to a just and sustainable world must ask whether or not the leadership they imagine is  
28 the product of wishful thinking fed by an infantilising managerial dispositif (Gemmill and Oakley,  
29 1992). Instead, we have argued that the idea of leadership must be disentangled in its discursal  
30 function in the service of oppression before it can be reconfigured as a modality of democracy and  
31 placed in the service of justice and sustainability.  
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39 By applying the same critical stance to the mainstream discourse on sustainable development, we  
40 outlined three major paradigms, which we argued are key to be aware of to locate one’s own efforts  
41 or scholarship on this topic. We integrated and summarised these critiques by stating Seven  
42 Unsustainabilities of Leadership and therefore made seven recommendations for more sustainable  
43 leadership. We choose the term sustainable leadership due to it emphasising that dominant notions  
44 of leadership are unsustainable as well as our current planetary predicament.  
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49 Given the urgency and scale of contemporary shared dilemmas, new research and education on  
50 such sustainable leadership is required in at least the five areas we identified. That future knowledge  
51 may help people who operate from within any of the paradigms of sustainability.  
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# Beyond Unsustainable Leadership: Critical Social Theory for Sustainable Leadership

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to prepare the ground for a new conceptual framework for the future study of leadership for sustainable development. The paper demonstrates the relevance of Critical Leadership Studies to future research on sustainable development policies and practices. A critical approach is also applied to concepts of sustainable development, with three paradigms of thought described. The approach taken is an extensive literature review in fields of leadership and sustainable development, with a focus on some of the broad assumptions and assertions in those literatures.

A key finding is that leadership studies drawing from critical social theory can provide important insights into future research and education on leadership for sustainability. This literature shows that some assumptions about leadership may hinder opportunities for social or organisational change by distorting our analysis of factors in change, and by distorting the agency of those not deemed to be leaders. These limitations are summarised as 'seven unsustainabilities' of mainstream leadership research.

The implications for practice are that efforts to promote organisational contributions to sustainable development should not draw uncritically upon mainstream approaches to leadership or the training of leaders. Instead, the paper suggests that, in the emerging fields of sustainability leadership scholarship and practice, full weight be given to the possibilities, theoretical and practical, of salient individual action whose collective, emergent and episodic aspects might not yet be adequately comprised in prevailing accounts of leadership. The authors believe this to be the first paper to provide a synthesis of insights from Critical Leadership Studies for research in sustainability.

Keywords: Sustainable Leadership, Sustainability Leadership, Leadership, Leadership Development, Critical Leadership.

Classification: Conceptual paper



## Introduction

In the face of limited progress on a range of social and environmental issues, many proponents and analysts of corporate action on sustainable development issues are calling for more leadership for sustainability (Redekop, 2010; Adams et al, 2011; Evans, 2011; Gallagher, 2012; Metcalf and Benn, 2013; Shriberg and MacDonald, 2013). Such calls ~~for leadership~~ reflect a desire for greater and swifter change, ~~and~~ in that context, researchers and educators can explore what is useful knowledge to enable such change. In this paper, we will argue that prevalent assumptions about the meaning of both the terms 'leadership' and 'sustainability' may hinder, not help, that interest in greater change.

We will demonstrate this limiting effect by placing both the concepts of leadership and sustainability under the scope of an analysis based on the primacy of discourse. We draw upon Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which starts from an awareness that the abuse, dominance, and inequality of power relations can be enacted, reproduced and, ultimately, resisted by text and talk (Fairclough, 1995). We will argue that the prevailing leadership imaginary, so far from supporting the transition to a sustainable society and economy, may actually hinder it and be itself unsustainable, in the sense that it depends on the ~~discoursal-discursive~~ maintenance of power relations and a narrow range of organising possibilities (Gemmil and Oakley, 1992; Hurlow, 2008), and may thus discourage or disable more collective, collaborative or distributed forms of leadership, deliberation, organising and problem-solving (Hosking, 2006; Hurlow, 2008; Denis, Langley and Sergi, 2012). If this is the case, more of the same 'leadership' will not help the goal of sustainability.

We share with Evans (2011) and Western (2008) the view that dominant paradigms of leadership are part of the cause ~~of~~ the current crisis of unsustainability and will develop that argument in this paper. Therefore, precisely because we are interested in sustainability, we address leadership per se rather than limit analysis to leadership on sustainability topics. Though it may be expected for scholarship in this field to focus on those persons who have responsibility for social or environmental topics, given the state of conceptual development, we assess that ~~it~~ could leave untenable concepts to be imported from those who analyse and promote leadership per se. For instance, the new and still small amount of scholarship on leadership for sustainability, cited in our opening sentence, appears to describe leaders and leadership in terms that emphasise exceptionalism, personal 'authenticity', an individual locus of action and a generalised other that is the object of leadership. There is also evidence of sustainability-infused leadership development programmes uncritically incorporating assumptions about leadership (for instance Peterlin, 2016).

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6 Even those theorists who propose to break with mainstream notions of leadership may still repeat  
7 some of the ideas embedded in discourse. For example, the following statement may sound  
8 collaborative, but identifies leadership with a special individual who acts *upon a group* others:  
9 “[leadership is] a form of community praxis in which one coalesces and directs the energies of the  
10 group” (Evans, 2011: 2). Impressive and helpful people do exist, but this paper will show that the  
11 prevailing discourse on leadership can limit our understanding of the potential for creating the  
12 greater *change which change that* inspires the calls for more leadership for sustainability.

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16 Therefore, rather than a detailed deconstruction of existing texts on leadership for sustainability, in  
17 this paper we provide a broad synthesis of relevant literatures that either use, or can inform, a more  
18 critical approach, drawing on a field now called ‘Critical Leadership Studies’ (CLS). We then re-locate  
19 our inquiry within the context of sustainability by applying the same critical discourse perspective to  
20 assumptions and narratives about ‘sustainable development.’ Given the level of knowledge on  
21 sustainable development of most readers of this journal, we do not focus on a detailed literature  
22 review of that field, but outline three different paradigms within which to consider social, economic  
23 and environmental dilemmas. We integrate these critiques by outlining ‘seven unsustainabilities’ of  
24 mainstream leadership thinking, *and the antidotes that are relevant to sustainability as well as the*  
25 *relevant antidotes*. At that point we offer a definition of ‘sustainable leadership’ and conclude by  
26 outlining some potential implications for the future of research, practice and education.

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32 Our definition will be purposely tentative. Rather than offering *ing* a systematic construction of a new  
33 concept of ‘sustainable leadership’, we are placing existing concepts of leadership and sustainability  
34 in the context of dominant narratives of ‘managerialism’ (Enteman, 1993) that we will show limit an  
35 assessment of the potential types and locations of action on sustainability. This process of tilling the  
36 conceptual earth will, we believe, allow many new ideas to bloom, including those that deploy  
37 structured approaches to define ‘sustainable leadership’ and ‘sustainability leadership’ concepts and  
38 theories. Without such insights from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), attempts at rigorous concept  
39 development in the organisational sciences (Podsakoff, et al, 2016) may be limited by assumptions  
40 that reflect dominant discourse.

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45 Our argument does not mean that a focus on understanding or evolving the behaviour of senior role  
46 holders, such as chief executives or politicians, is not necessary, but that the assumptions that  
47 leadership is theirs *alone* to express and that leadership by special individuals is the most salient  
48 matter in organisational or social change, are both unhelpful and yet widely promoted by current  
49 work on leadership, with major implications for sustainable development.

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## Defining Leadership and Sustainability

In this paper, we use the term 'sustainability' as short hand for the term 'sustainable development'. Since the adoption of the Brundtland Report by the UN General Assembly in 1987, 'sustainable development' has been promoted by many as an integrated way to address diverse dilemmas, such as poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, disease, discrimination, environmental degradation, crime, conflict and limited human rights or justice (WCED, 1987). That 'sustainable development' seems to offer all good things to all people has been one reason for its popularity and, some say, a reason for it leading to largely ineffectual activities on those dilemmas (Perez-Carmona, 2013).

Nevertheless, this "ambiguous compromise" (Purvis and Grainger, 2004: 6) has proved to be a resilient one. The adoption of seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations in 2015 marks a renewed interest in the hope that governments, cities, firms and other organisations can achieve progress on social and economic factors while not degrading the environment. Although the SDGs or 'Global Goals' may seem like an advancement on mainstreaming environmental considerations when compared to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which they replaced, conversely, they represent a dilution of the primacy of environment in the early stages of the promotion of sustainable development. This reflects how, over the years, the emphasis on how the development of nations needs to be within the environmental 'carrying capacity' of the nation and planet, has been side-lined as the pursuit of economic growth predominated worldwide (Purvis and Grainger, 2004; Perez-Carmona, 2013).

The global trends in poverty, inequality, biodiversity loss, water tables and climate change are not promising (Worldwatch, 2015). Enabling greater leadership for 'sustainable development' therefore means enabling significant action on the various shared dilemmas that are meant to be addressed under this ambiguous term. We call them shared "dilemmas" here, rather than challenges or problems, to reflect both their complexity and to recognise a growing worldview that no longer regards them as problems to solve (as we will discuss below). We call them 'shared', because they involve collective causation, affect the many (albeit differentially) and will need collective action to address or adapt to them.

The 'sustainable development' concept typically groups these dilemmas in-to social, environmental and economic domains, while some also include culture (Sachs, 2015). Within these domains, a great diversity of theoretical perspectives exists. For instance, on environmental issues, some argue for the sustainable use of natural resources whereas others include respect for the welfare of animals or the preservation of landscapes (Pepper, 1996). Some argue that technological advances will solve

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6 most environmental problems, whereas others ask more critical questions about industrialisation  
7 within environmental limits (Jackson, 2009). On social progress, some focus on improving standards  
8 of living (Prahalad, 2004) where others focus on inequality, human rights, justice and good  
9 governance at various scales (Sen, 1999). On economic issues, there is a broad field of 'development  
10 economics' with differing emphases on the role of the state, of foreign direct investment, and about  
11 openness to international trade (Sachs, 1992). The 'sustainable development' framework is also  
12 applied to organisations within societies, such as business corporations, which has led to a variety of  
13 theories and initiatives in fields known as corporate social responsibility (Bendell, 2009), corporate  
14 accountability (Bendell, 2004), corporate sustainability (van Marrewijk, 2003) and social enterprise  
15 (Nicholls, 2006). To encourage self-awareness of participants in these arenas, in this paper we will be  
16 proposing three broad paradigms on sustainable development that people appear to be operating  
17 within.

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23 Just as the terms 'sustainability' and 'sustainable development' are deployed in quite different  
24 research and policy contexts and with different implied exclusions and inclusions, so the word  
25 'leadership' is used to mean or imply quite different things (Jackson & Parry, 2008) while seeming to  
26 represent a common, monolithic, understanding (Jackson & Parry, 2008). Unpicking such usages may  
27 not have direct value in deliberation or action, but can help prepare the ground for people to  
28 navigate the plurality of possibilities for leadership and sustainability. Amongst the many definitions  
29 of leadership in management studies, we will use the following to begin our discussion:

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34 "Leadership is any behaviour that has the effect of helping groups of people achieve something that  
35 the majority of them are pleased with and which we assess as significant and what they would not  
36 have otherwise achieved." (Bendell and Little, 2015: 15)

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39 Key to this definition is recognising leadership as a behaviour rather than a position of authority. In  
40 addition, it reflects the relational quality of leadership so that acts need to be welcomed by a  
41 majority of those in a group. Moreover, the external observer plays a key role when categorising acts  
42 as leadership. Specifically:

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45 "Leadership involves the ascription of significance to an act by us, the observer, where significance  
46 usually involves our assumptions or propositions about values and theories of change. If our theory  
47 of change is that the CEO has freedom of action and can impose change, then we would naturally  
48 look for leadership to be exhibited at that level. If our values are that profit-maximising for  
49 shareholders in the near term is a good goal, then we would not question a CEO's "leadership" if  
50 achieving such goals. We should note that these are rather big 'ifs'." (ibid: 15)

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6 By defining leadership in this way, we break with some of the mainstream assumptions in  
7 management and leadership scholarship and training, for instance, the idea that leadership [being](#)  
8 [exists as](#) a quality that inheres in an individual. In the following section, we will explore how deep  
9 the criticisms go and the implications for enabling action on sustainable development.  
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### 13 **Insights from Critical Leadership Studies**

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15 As attention to leadership and its development grows in both the popular publishing and academic  
16 arenas, the last decade has seen a counter-trend of scholars who seek to unpack what they consider  
17 unhelpful assumptions and directions in [what they identify as](#) the 'mainstream' approach to  
18 leadership. The aim of Critical Leadership Studies (CLS) is to investigate "what is neglected, absent  
19 or deficient in mainstream leadership research" (Collinson, 2011: 181). This approach involves  
20 understanding and exposing the negative consequences of leadership, by examining patterns of  
21 power and domination enabled by overly hierarchical social relations: questioning these  
22 'exclusionary and privileged' discourses, and investigating the problematic effects that [they](#) [has](#)  
23 [on](#) organisational functioning and individual well-being (Ford, 2010; Ford et al, 2008).  
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29 Some [scholars in the critical leadership](#) [CLS scholars](#) [field](#) draw upon 'Critical Theory', [being](#), [Their](#)  
30 [work is](#) motivated by a general emancipatory project, or by the goal of empowering grassroots and  
31 oppressed groups against the self-harming discourses that they co-produce or that are promoted by  
32 elites. Such research challenges discourse in the field of management and leadership that may be  
33 distorted in favour of capital and the owners of capital, gender exclusion and other forms of social  
34 violence, and unsustainable forms of commerce and industry (Fanon, 1961; Blunt and Jones, 1996;  
35 Nkomo, 2011). A key theme in such work is the critique of a set of ideas called 'Managerialism,'  
36 which value professional managers and their characteristic forms of analysis, authority and control,  
37 and their tendency to bring ever more aspects of life into the orbit of management (Enteman, 1993;  
38 Alvesson, 1992, Parker, 2002). There are parallels here with some critiques of international  
39 'development' that influence approaches to sustainability, which we will return to below. Before  
40 that, in the next sections we summarise some of the main elements of the critique made by [critical](#)  
41 [leadership studies](#) [CLS](#), with preliminary ideas on implications for leadership scholarship and  
42 leadership development work that is motivated by concern for various shared dilemmas.  
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### 49 **The Individualist Mistake**

50 The mainstream literature and practice of leadership development is largely addressed to the  
51 cultivation of a group already defined as leaders, rather than to the development of collective,  
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6 relational or dialogical leadership. Leaders are routinely described as needing to be authentic,  
7 visionary, driven and emotionally intelligent. The image of the leader that emerges from what  
8 Gosling and Bolden (2006) call the 'repeating refrain' of leadership competencies is of a deracinated  
9 superman (or, in a feminized variant that emphasizes collaboration, intuition and nurturing, a  
10 superwoman). This 'hero-focus' has received criticism over the past 15 years from within the  
11 mainstream management literature (Olssen, 2006; Palus et al, 2012). In such work the term "hero"  
12 is used as the contemporary dominant concept of special courageous person who saves others,  
13 rather than more mythic notions of hero, which we will discuss further below. We find that even the  
14 However, even explicitly 'post-heroic' or egalitarian accounts of leadership as bottom-up or,  
15 variously, as distributed (Brown and Hosking, 1986; Woods et al, 2004Gronn, 2000; Leithwood et al,  
16 2009), transformational (Bass, 1998), or 'servant' (Greenleaf, 1977) may not fully address the degree  
17 to which these ideas are undermined by lingering positional metaphors of hierarchy, or by their  
18 failure to address questions of gender or, worse, are co-opted by hierarchical, instrumentalist  
19 managerialism (Fletcher, 2004). The CLS analysis of the implicit hero focus of leadership studies  
20 provides a deeper critique in at least four key areas. We summarise these areas in turn, before  
21 discussing other dimensions of CLS.  
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29 First, CLS theorists have sought to investigate the 'dark side' of contemporary leadership practice,  
30 exploring issues such as domination, conformity, abuse of power, blind commitment, over-  
31 dependence and seduction (Conger, 1990; Calas and Smircich, 1991; Gemmil and Oakley, 1992;  
32 Whicker, 1996; Mellahi et al, 2002; Khoo and Burch, 2007; Marcuse, 2008; Schyns and Schilling,  
33 2013; Sheard et al, 2013). They have coined terms such as 'toxic leadership' (Benson and Hogan,  
34 2008; Pelletier, 2010); 'destructive leadership' (Einarsen et al 2007); 'leadership derailment' (Tepper,  
35 2000); and, 'aversive leadership' (Bligh et al, 2007). Other scholars have discovered tendencies for  
36 narcissism and psychopathy amongst senior role holders and how that can be encouraged by  
37 popular discourses about leaders being special and powerful (de Vries and Miller, 1985; Bendell,  
38 2002; Trethewey and Goodall, 2007; Vaktin, 2009; Gudmundsson & Southey, 2011). Evans (2011)  
39 characterises the prevailing model as 'exploitative leadership' and argues that such masculinised,  
40 hierarchical leadership reproduces in small the domination of nature by humanity. For scholars  
41 interested in the social dimension of sustainability, including matters of fairness, rights-justice and  
42 wellbeing, these dark sides of leadership will be of concern.  
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49 The mainstream literature, to the extent that it makes or recognises this critique, responds not with  
50 a deepened critique of leadership but by offering in mitigation qualities like humility, authenticity,  
51 emotional intelligence or self-knowledge, while leaving unchallenged the assumption that 'leaders'  
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7 pursue exclusively corporate goals by largely instrumental means (Collins, 2001; Adair, 2003;  
8 George, 2003; Kouzes and Posner, 2003). Characteristically, this literature keeps up the search for an  
9 ideal trait description of the leader: lists of qualities, propensities, behaviours and habits proliferate,  
10 often including 'character' and authenticity, as we will examine in a moment (George, 2003;  
11 [GardnerCooper et al, 201107](#)).

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14 The second analytic turn in CLS aims in part to reveal the flaws of this traits-focus, and of secondary  
15 efforts to promote values and authenticity amongst leaders. We do not have space here to rehearse  
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17 in detail the critiques of the trait approach but will summarise. To [begining](#) with, it is not  
18 unreasonable to argue that leadership is, of necessity, idiographic, episodic and situationally  
19 inflected, to the extent that no imaginable set of descriptors could apply to all potential leaders  
20 (Fairhurst and Grant, 2010). Leadership trait lists tend merely to describe competent human beings,  
21 emphasising, for example, honesty and intelligence (Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1991; Zingheim et al,  
22 1996). The effort to identify traits might itself be seen as serving the very bureaucratic impulse to  
23 which leadership, with its implied freedom of moral action, is the remedy. The reliability, stability  
24 and predictive value of trait descriptions are all in any case contested. The most telling critique of  
25 traits suggests that their pursuit is a circular process in which socially constructed discourses of  
26 leadership are interrogated from within the constraining assumptions of those same discourses  
27 (Burr, 1995). Traits are, from this view, not internal personal structures but "social processes realised  
28 on the site of the personal" (Gergen, 1994: 210).

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34 One response to the dark sides of leadership has been to focus less on traits ([r-real or imagined](#)),  
35 than on helping people with senior responsibilities to reflect upon, clarify, articulate and live by their  
36 most important values, and, ostensibly, to help legitimise values-based behaviour in professional  
37 life. Courses under the heading 'Authentic Leadership' pursue that aim. Executives are encouraged  
38 to seek coherence between their life story and their seeking or holding a senior organisational role  
39 (George, et al, 2007). Potential benefits may include greater self-confidence, appearing more  
40 authentic in one's job, enhanced oratorical skill and higher levels of motivation from colleagues  
41 (Gardner et al, 2011; Leroy et al, 2015). Typically, participants in authentic leadership programmes  
42 are offered opportunities for systematic self-exploration; these processes, however, could be  
43 characterised as opportunities for self-justification, as exploration of self is framed by the aim of  
44 constructing narratives that explain one's right to seniority within a corporation – an almost 'divine'  
45 right to lead. Self-realisations that might undermine one's ability to work for certain firms, or  
46 transform the basis of one's self-worth, or challenge one's assumption of self-efficacy, do not appear  
47 to be encouraged (Bendell and Little, 2015). For scholars interested in transforming organisations so  
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6 they reduce their harm on the environment and society, or increase their positive contributions, the  
7 exploration of values in authentic leadership -may seem like a start, but it could be unhelpfully  
8 limited.  
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11 Authentic Leadership scholarship and trainings may be ignoring the insights from critical sociology  
12 on how our perspectives and senses of self are shaped by language and discourse (Gergen, 1994;  
13 Fairclough, 1995; Burr, 1995). Such insights challenge the view that we can achieve depths of 'self-  
14 awareness' by reflecting on our experiences and feelings without the benefit of perspectives from  
15 social theory. Authentic leadership builds on assumptions about the nature of the individual,  
16 including the assumption that our worth comes from our distinctiveness.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, Adorno  
17 (1973) has even claimed that the word 'authenticity' is simply jargon. He argues it is characteristic of  
18 a nostalgic post-Christian impulse to replace the 'authority of the absolute' (such as a God) with  
19 'absolutised authority' (whether that is from an organisation, law or the rectitude of a leader).  
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24 A third set of analyses shows how a focus on leader's values, charisma and other attributes serves to  
25 distract from and deproblematise issues of the legitimacy, or not, of power-wielding roles in  
26 organisations and societies. When we consider leadership, we are considering how groups of people  
27 decide how to act: ~~we~~-addressing ancient questions of social and political organisation which are  
28 subjects of long, lively and diverse intellectual traditions. They are investigated today in fields as  
29 diverse as political philosophy, public policy studies, civil society studies, and international  
30 development studies. We cannot delve into these areas in this paper, but suffice to note that a  
31 recurring theme in these fields is that matters of ~~decision-making~~~~decision-making~~ involve reflection  
32 on processes that support the rights, dignity and contribution of all individuals in groups. Yet studies  
33 of leadership often render unproblematic modes of ~~decision-making~~~~decision-making~~ and patterns of  
34 power (Gemmill and Oakley, 1992; Western, 2008). Given that good governance is such a central  
35 question for ~~s~~Sustainable ~~d~~Development, this subtle side-lining of questions of accountable  
36 governance is a concern. [This draws parallels with the comments from various scholars relating to  
37 the literal and linguistic separation of leader and follower. Learmonth and Morrell for example,  
38 suggest that the "institutionalised" usage of the terms leader/follower automatically construct a  
39 master/slave dialectic, reducing the capacity of "followers' to question their leaders' basic  
40 authority" \(2016: 2\). In this then, it may be beneficial to reframe leadership language in a more open](#)  
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48 <sup>1</sup> Vedic philosophies provide critiques of, and explanations for, why we might enjoy a process of self-  
49 construction via self-reflection exercises. An emphasis on the 'authentic self' might be regarded as an effort to  
50 find a 'rock of safety against the cosmic and the infinite' (Aurobindo, 1972: 229). Aurobindo further argues  
51 that an aspect of our consciousness is 'not concerned with self-knowledge but with self-affirmation, desire,  
52 ego. It is therefore constantly acting on mind to build for it a mental structure of apparent self that will serve  
53 these purposes; our mind is persuaded to present to us and to others a partly fictitious representative figure of  
54 ourselves which supports our self-affirmation, justifies our desires and actions, nourishes our ego.' (p 229).  
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6 [and less hierarchical manner. Fairhurst \(2009\) emphasises the term 'leadership actor' to cover the](#)  
7 [plurality of individuals who may be involved in acts of leadership within an organisation.](#)  
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12 A fourth set of analyses in CLS looks at how the hero focus of mainstream leadership studies  
13 attributes responsibility for outcomes disproportionately to individuals occupying a hierarchal  
14 position at the apex of an organisation, thereby obscuring the importance of other situational and  
15 contextual factors and limiting our insight into how change happens. Psychological research since  
16 the 1980s has demonstrated that people, across cultures, tend to exaggerate the significance of the  
17 actions of individuals, when compared to other factors shaping outcomes (Meindl et al, 1985). The  
18 researchers concluded that this was evidence that we are susceptible to seeing 'leadership' when it  
19 isn't necessarily there or important - a collectively constructed 'romantic discourse'. Their work  
20 reflects the 'false attribution effect', widely reported by social psychologists, as people's tendency to  
21 place an undue emphasis on internal characteristics to explain someone's behaviour, rather than  
22 considering external factors (Jones and Harris, 1967). Perhaps our susceptibility to this effect arises  
23 because we are brought up with stories of great leaders shaping history ~~(it is easier to tell stories~~  
24 ~~that way),~~ and this myth is perpetuated in our business media today (Bendell and Little, 2015).  
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30 Drawing upon these insights, Gemmill and Oakley (1992) frame leadership itself as a 'social myth'  
31 which creates and reinforces the illusion that individual leaders are in control of events and  
32 organisational performance. ~~We will briefly explore facets of this critique. That is,~~ the existence and  
33 valorisation of leaders serves to repress uncomfortable needs, emotions and wishes that emerge  
34 when people work collaboratively (Gemmill, 1986; Gastil, 1994), and subsequently, individuals are  
35 able to project their worries and anxieties onto individual leaders, who are seen as omniscient and  
36 all-powerful. Members are therefore able to perceive themselves as free from anxiety, fears,  
37 struggles and the responsibility of autonomy (Bion, 1961), but may also fail to recognise that they  
38 are inducing their own learned helplessness and passivity: that is, they "willingly submit themselves  
39 to spoon feeding, preferring safe and easy security to the possible pains and uncertainty of learning  
40 by their own effort and mistakes" (Gemmill and Oakley, 1992: 98). For Gemmill and Oakley  
41 therefore, leadership – in the form widely assumed today - is dangerous and inherently  
42 unsustainable, leading to infantilization and mass deskilling. They stress the need to denaturalise  
43 take-for-granted assumptions in order to develop new theories of leadership which 'reskill'  
44 organisational members; encourage collaborative working environments; and do not rely on  
45 superhuman individuals.  
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6 Various other theorists (although not explicitly rooted in CLS) have reached similar conclusions. For  
7 example, Ashforth (1994) argues that authoritative leaders often engage in behaviours such as  
8 belittling of followers, self-aggrandisement, coercive conflict resolution, unnecessary punishments  
9 and the undermining of organisational goals. Schilling (2009) and Higgs (2009) also reported that  
10 leaders often exhibit behaviours which aim at obtaining purely personal (not organisational) goals,  
11 and may inflict damage on others through constant abuses of power. Finally, and in a similar vein to  
12 Gemmill and Oakley (1992), a number of theorists (Conger, 1990; Padilla, Hogan and Kaiser, 2007)  
13 proposed that the behaviour of 'followers' may also contribute to destructive practices- especially in  
14 regard to self-esteem issues, the playing of power games, and treating the leader as an idol.<sup>2</sup> As  
15 many scholars of sustainability in general, and 'leadership for sustainability' in particular, are  
16 interested in enhancing change, these disempowering effects of dominant assumptions about  
17 leadership should be a concern.  
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23 The four CLS critiques of the hero-focus of mainstream leadership studies all relate to a form of  
24 'methodological individualism', assuming that significant insight into a social situation can be derived  
25 from analysing the motivations and actions of very few individuals (Basu, 2008). Their research has  
26 shown how focusing on an individual leader can enforce an *a-contextual* and short-termist view; one  
27 that which pays little attention to broader socio-economic processes, planetary concerns, or  
28 collective wellbeing. Whilst differences exist between the aims and objectives of the critical scholars  
29 cited thus far, at the heart of these debates is the notion that a reliance on overly hierarchical  
30 conceptualisations of leadership may have problematic impacts on organisational effectiveness,  
31 well-being, and broader social change: they are irreconcilable with creating sustainable societies  
32 (Evans, 2011; Gordon, 2010; Western, 2008; Sutherland et al, 2014; Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). That  
33 is, for all their focus on attempting to achieve economically effective outcomes (which, indeed, is the  
34 primary 'selling point' of mainstream understandings, and the belief on which they are predicated),  
35 they fail to acknowledge the importance of long-term socially sustainable, efficacious and humane  
36 relationships between and among organisational actors.  
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### 43 Assuming Purpose

44 What is the purpose of leadership? Many case studies offered in leadership scholarship assume that  
45 the purpose of organisations is to achieve economic goals, rather than goals associated with equity,  
46 democracy and environmental sustainability (Jackson and Parry, 2008). A review of the assumed or  
47 proposed outcomes of leadership within twenty-five years of scholarship, showed that all types of  
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51 <sup>2</sup> We must note that many scholars assume the word 'follower' as little more than the inverse of the word  
52 'leader', a form of hypostatisation that tends to support the naturalisation of hierarchy, rather than it's  
53 questioning.  
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6 outcome exist within an instrumentalist approach that concerns improving organisational  
7 performance, rather than considering the purpose of the organisation, the performance issue  
8 concerned, or the impact on stakeholders (Hiller, et al 2011). The mainstream corporate view of  
9 leadership is typically expressed in 'econophonic' and 'potensiphonic' terms – the taken-for-granted  
10 language that prioritises economic outcomes over all others and potency, power and performance  
11 over other human modalities (Promislo and Guccione, -2013). There has been little room for doubt  
12 and reflection on the purpose of business, work and economic progress within that leadership  
13 discourse. Thus, the challenging of econophonic and potensiphonic language in leadership studies  
14 can be an emancipatory activity, and key to nurturing "reciprocal, sustaining relationships among  
15 people and between humans and nature" (Evans, 2011: 2).

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20 For some theorists, the prevalent assumptions of managerialism can be seen within an imperialist  
21 economic context – pointing toward the idea that under modern capitalist society, centralisation,  
22 hierarchy, domination, exploitation, manipulation, oppression and scapegoating are inherent  
23 features of life (Barker, 1997; Mannoni, 1956; Bhabha, 1994). If this is the context for one's analysis,  
24 then the 'social myth' of leadership we have described in this paper can be regarded as one of many  
25 nodal points in a discursal web of ideas and practices whose effect is to infantilise and prepare  
26 mass audiences for compliance in their own exploitation. Other nodes being, for instance, discourses  
27 about the salience of the individual consumer; the universality of market mechanisms; the  
28 impracticality of challenging dominant discourses; or the pathological nature of opposition and the  
29 necessity for 'security'.

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35 Despite our earlier criticisms of the assumptions and approaches within 'authentic leadership,' its  
36 focus on self-development *could provide an opening for work on the deeper personal*  
37 transformations that might allow for different types of purpose to be clarified and pursued through  
38 leadership acts.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the importance of purpose to leadership is receiving greater attention  
39 from leadership scholars, without that purpose being assumed to be congruent with narrowly  
40 defined corporate goals (Kempster, et al 2011). Growing interest in sustainability leadership or  
41 sustainable leadership can be seen in that context: an effort to plug the purpose gap in  
42 contemporary corporate life. A business rationale for corporate leaders to be clear on a purpose  
43 beyond narrow corporate goals is also developing as some researchers argue that firms with a  
44 clear public purpose do better financially over the longer term (Big Innovation [GroupCentre](#), 2016).

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<sup>3</sup> It is worthy of note that authentic leadership and other approaches that focus on values have begun to be criticised from another perspective altogether: that they don't help managers' careers (Pfeffer, 2015). Such criticisms may provoke more debate in mainstream scholarship but are not aligned with the deeper questioning of purpose we explore here.

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7 The concept of sustainability in these initiatives is, however, limited and potentially counter-  
8 productive, as we will discuss below. Therefore, unless the interest in purposeful business and  
9 purposeful leadership allows for a deeper exploration of sustainability than that which aligns simply  
10 with existing corporate interests, it is unlikely to address this limitation to mainstream leadership  
11 approaches.  
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### 13 14 **Beyond Critical Analysis**

15 To address some of the shortcomings in mainstream leadership scholarship and training, some CLS  
16 scholars study and propose a more emergent, episodic and distributed form of leadership, involving  
17 acts that individuals may take to help groups achieve aims they otherwise might not (Bendell and  
18 Little, 2015; Western, 2008). The focus therefore shifts towards effective group processes, on which  
19 there is a range of scholarship to draw upon, [within and](#) beyond the CLS field.  
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23 Research on 'distributed leadership' has shown how leadership actors can emerge anywhere in an  
24 organisation and [that](#) leadership becomes [a](#) cultural trope around which motivated action accretes,  
25 a position supported theoretically by sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995), activity theory (Bedny et al,  
26 2000), communities of practice theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and practice theory (Schatzki, 1996;  
27 [Nicolini, 2012](#)). Unfortunately, when it is presented as a practice that mitigates hierarchical power,  
28 especially in business organisations, distributed leadership sometimes becomes little more than a  
29 way of rhetorically extending employees' freedom of action (and weight of responsibility) while  
30 maintaining circumscriptive rules (Dainty et al, 2005; Woods et al, 2004). Thus, we conclude that the  
31 absence of a critical framework to deconstruct assumptions about leaders, goals, and legitimacy can  
32 hamper studies that explore post-heroic and distributed forms of leadership.  
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37 In recent years the term 'collective leadership' has emerged as "an umbrella concept that includes  
38 studies... applying the core insight of relationality to the key problems in [organisation and society]...  
39 Relationality reveals the individual as a node where multiple relationships intersect: people are  
40 relational beings" (Ospina and Foldy, 2015: 492). Some use the term to include distributed, shared,  
41 and co-leadership, due to an assessment that they all focus more on complex relations between  
42 individuals. "Collective leadership shifts attention from formal leaders and their influence on  
43 followers to the relational processes that produce leadership in a group, organization or system.  
44 Relationality motivates attention to the embeddedness of the leader-follower relationship in a  
45 broader system of relationships and to the meaning-making, communicative and organising  
46 processes that help define and constitute these relationships" (Ospina and Foldy, 2015: 492).  
47 Further than this, various scholars note the potential of more collective forms of leadership as a  
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6 'sustainable' organisational practice, given that it allows for empowerment, reduces alienation, and  
7 increases democracy and participation (Western, 2008; Evans, 2011).  
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10 Framed in this way, collective leadership could be viewed as an agenda that rises to the critiques  
11 from CLS. However, many studies and recommendations described as 'collective leadership' retain a  
12 belief in the salience of special individuals who can be identified as leaders, whether by role or by  
13 act. In addition, some studies of collective leadership efforts in organisations have found that it is  
14 used rhetorically by managers who pursue individual aims within inefficient bureaucracies (Davis  
15 and Jones, 2014). It is the more radical approaches within the collective leadership field, particularly  
16 concerning the non-profit sector, that resonate with the insights of CLS and could therefore be used  
17 in a new conception, theory and practice of sustainable leadership. However, what is equally  
18 important for such a new approach is to have the same critical perspective on sustainable  
19 development as we have offered on leadership.  
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### 26 **Three Paradigms in Sustainability**

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28 In the same way that Critical Discourse Analysis can reveal limiting assumptions in the field of  
29 leadership, it can do that in the field of Sustainable Development. As described at the start of our  
30 paper, Sustainable Development and its related activities became established in the late 1980s. It  
31 was offered as a coherent agenda for governments around the post-Cold War world. It also  
32 coincided with the rise of another idea for public policy, called New Public Management (NPM),  
33 which regarded citizens as users of services and incorporated practices from the private sector  
34 (Schachter, 2014). Looking back, NPM (and its closely related tropes of leadership and  
35 entrepreneurship) can be seen to have colonised the process of learning and change for  
36 sustainability, reducing it to a problem that can be solved by management and technology driven by  
37 leadership in a process dominated by capital (Bessant, et al 2015; Perez-Carmona, 2013; Steurer,  
38 2007). Intentional or not, this colonisation was aided by the growth of voluntary corporate  
39 engagement with sustainability which then influenced the understandings of policy makers, experts  
40 and campaigners on how to approach social and environmental problems (Ball and Bebbington,  
41 2008). A counter process was also occurring with the transfer of concepts of environmentalists and  
42 social justice campaigners into the private sector, thus leading to what Anderson and Mungal (2015)  
43 describe, albeit in a different sector, as the inter-sectoral transfer of discourses.  
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50 Critical Discourse Analysis reminds us that ideological effects work at the level of phrases. It invites  
51 us to question how a phrase can encourage certain perspectives and not others. One way that  
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occurs is by 'collocation'. The term 'Sustainable Development' is a collocation; that is, two-words combined into a single term. It is a risk of collocations that they have the effect of de-problematising their constituent terms - in this case both 'Sustainable' and 'Development' - and replacing them with a new ideologically-loaded term. One risk is that important questions of what is development is displaced by a focus instead on what might be distinctly "sustainable". Thus, when considering sustainability, we should attempt to uncover assumptions about development, including assumptions about 'social' progress. There is a long tradition of this fundamental questioning of progress in the anti-development or post-development fields, which typically argue that the development concept is an extension of colonialist and imperialist power relations in the global economy (Sachs, 1992; 1999: 2015: Rahnama and Bawtree, 1997). Given that readers of this journal are likely to be well-versed in the literature on sustainability, we will not detail the critiques in the same way did with leadership, but instead offer a conceptual framework which draws upon them.

The framework of 'Three Paradigms in Sustainability' that we offer here, makes broad generalisations to invite reflection on worldviews. Different countries, classes, genders, races and professions, amongst other categories one could identify, have different experiences of the diverse dilemmas touched upon by 'sustainability.' Our own generalising is intended to help broaden perspectives on what sustainability could mean, and what various interpretations and assumptions about it may be producing through us.

In this paper, we offer a simple categorisation of paradigms in sustainability thinking: Reformation, Revolution and Restoration; i.e. broad brush strokes on the ways of thinking about and approaching shared dilemmas. In doing so we seek to reveal some of the hidden ideological work that the terms 'sustainable development' and 'sustainability' may have [being been](#) doing in ways counterproductive to people's expressed interests.

### Reformation

Many scholars of the history of sustainable development explain how the concept "was originally devised as a political ideal by conservationists to persuade the governments of developing countries to undertake less environmentally damaging development paths" (Purvis and Grainger, 2004: 31). This led the early discourse on sustainable development to be quite precise about the environmental aspects of what an economy might aspire to, which was summarised well by Herman Daly (1990) in 5 principles (Table 1).

#### The Daly Principles

1. Limit the human scale to a level which, if not optimal, is at least

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6 within the carrying capacity and is therefore, sustainable.  
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8 2. Achieve technological change that increases efficiency and durability  
9 while limiting throughput.  
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11 3. Preserve the harvesting rate of renewable resources at a level below  
12 the regenerative capacity of the environment.  
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14 4. Preserve waste emission rates at a level below the assimilative  
15 capacity of the environment.  
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17 5. Restrict non-renewable resource use to levels equalled by the  
18 creation or accessing of renewable substitutes.

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21 *Table 1: The Daly Principles*

22 The social elements to early views on sustainable development included the eradication of extreme  
23 poverty and malnutrition; the achievement of comprehensive literacy; and increasing average life  
24 expectancies to that of the industrialised [Western](#) nations. Education and employment were seen  
25 as the motors for these social advances. The concept of “development” was accepted as mostly a  
26 material phenomenon, rather than involving other aspects of human improvement, such as  
27 extending democratic rights and justice throughout all organs of society, or outcomes such as  
28 happiness and wellbeing (Sachs, 1999).

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31 Apart from concern about the odious debts of poor governments, the early sustainable development  
32 approach did not look deeply at economic systems. Many people working in charities or  
33 development agencies struggled to say anything about the economic ‘pillar’ of sustainable  
34 development beyond the rule of law, corruption issues or the dangers of dumping subsidised  
35 products in poor markets (Purvis and Grainger, 2004). In most intergovernmental organisation  
36 reports and popular writings on sustainable development in the 80s and 90s, forms of regulated  
37 capitalist market economies were assumed as the norm, where a sustainably-developed economy  
38 would involve a mixture of enterprises, cooperatives, state owned companies, stock markets, private  
39 banks and single fiat currencies (Sachs, 1999). This was not surprising given the hope at the end of  
40 the Cold War that progress could be made without recourse to traditional left-right intellectual  
41 conflicts.  
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47 Despite the absence of ideas on political economy, given the economic-focus of many government,  
48 business and civil society leaders in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the extent of poverty,  
49 pollution and habitat destruction, the social and environmental aims of sustainable development  
50 still represented a substantial reformation of capitalism.  
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6 Over the years this lack of an explicit perspective on economics provided the opportunity for  
7 powerful trends to influence what sustainability came to mean. Economic globalisation proceeded at  
8 pace, where international institutions forced market reforms in return for debt rescheduling, and  
9 international treaties were agreed to bring down barriers to trade and finance. The interests of  
10 multinational corporations and banks were a powerful force shaping the discourse of many  
11 governments and the field of international cooperation (Bendell, 2004). Therefore, sustainable  
12 development increasingly came to mean sustaining economic growth in the medium term (Perez-  
13 Carmona, 2013). This process was effectively crowned when economic growth became central to  
14 some the new SDGs in 2015 (United Nations, 2015). Therefore, the mainstream discourse on  
15 sustainable development today may reflect a moral imagination but a weak Reformation Approach  
16 to our socioeconomic systems.  
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## 22 Revolution

23 Development Studies and Development Cooperation had existed for almost half a century before  
24 the Earth Summit made Sustainable Development more famous in 1992 (Sachs, 1992). Many  
25 scholars of development placed it in the context of centuries of past colonialism and imperialism,  
26 suggesting that “development” was the new face of attempts to dominate and expropriate wealth  
27 (Frank 1969). That tradition of radical critique of global capitalism, its corporations and banks, had  
28 influenced some of the earliest post-colonial independent nations across the global South. By the  
29 1990s the policy influence of anti-imperialist development thinkers had waned.  
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34 Some advocates of sustainable development brought a strong rights-based agenda, with a focus on  
35 social justice, anti-corruption and greater democracy, including workplace democracy (Sachs, 1999).

36 These interests are paralleled by ~~those of scholars in~~ Critical Leadership Studies (CLS) ~~scholars~~ who  
37 do not explicitly frame their work as concerning the social dimensions of sustainable development.  
38 But their focus on workplace practices and the role of management reminds us that social  
39 sustainability is not an abstract end-goal, but something that can be recursively built into practice on  
40 a day-to-day basis. This draws parallels with the notion of ‘prefigurative politics’ (Maackelbergh,  
41 2009), where means are seen to be *as important* as the ends; where they are inextricably linked and  
42 blurred, which rejects a focus on either means or ends at the expense of the other. Many of these  
43 analysts don’t call for a revolution in capitalism to achieve workplace rights and democracy, but in  
44 comparison to those that ignore or misunderstand the human rights agenda within sustainable  
45 development, their views seem quite revolutionary.  
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51 The environmental aspect of the critique of international development (Jordan and O’Riordan 2000)  
52 has not appeared to influence many newly independent nations, with a modernist notion of social  
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6 progress through industrialisation and consumer society being widely embraced (Bendell, 2004). Yet  
7 their fundamental question to those who believed it was possible to reform dominant  
8 socioeconomic systems has not gone away: How can economic growth be reconciled with  
9 environmental constraints, or meeting basic needs be prioritised over the endless potential desires  
10 of humankind?  
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14 Many grassroots movements around the world, including agricultural workers, unionists and  
15 representatives of indigenous groups, have kept the critique going. At times, the critique has gained  
16 international notoriety (Utting, 2015). The “Anti-Globalisation Movement”, came to world notice in  
17 1999 due to protests at the Seattle meeting of the World Trade Organisation, and then the ‘Occupy  
18 Movement’ again in 2011, beginning in Wall Street, New York. Neither of those movements clearly  
19 advocated a focused set of proposals for the rules of a different socioeconomic system or a strategy  
20 for how to implement it, instead, focusing on pluralising discussion beyond neo-liberal economics.  
21 That is not to say there are not a range of specific proposals made by people who engage in such  
22 activism, ranging from reforming laws on trade, corporations, taxation and monetary systems  
23 (Bendell, 2004).  
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28 In summary, despite efforts like the World Social Forum, a Revolutionary AApproach to sSsustainable  
29 dDdevelopment has largely been restricted to critique and segmented in separate realms of concern  
30 such as environmental conservation or social development. Examples of government efforts to  
31 implement what some would call a ‘left wing’ approach to achieving sustainability, by transforming  
32 socioeconomic systems, are therefore difficult to find (Utting, 2015). Nevertheless, some still hope  
33 that a Revolutionary AApproach is possible, perhaps inevitable. Crucially, they believe there is  
34 enough time, and that we can and should ‘progress.’  
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### 38 Restoration

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40 In the past decade, a view has emerged in the West that suggests neither a Reformation or  
41 Revolution of our socioeconomic systems is a sensible aspiration when faced with our current  
42 predicament. That analysis is based, in particular, on the latest climate science and the absence of  
43 significant global emissions reductions. Some consider that a ‘near term collapse’ in socioeconomic  
44 systems is inevitable and possible in the lifetime of today’s children (Mulgan, 2011; Jamieson, 2014;  
45 Foster, 2015). Others go further in questioning the survival of the species itself beyond this century.  
46 Parallel to this debate is the rise to prominence of the ‘anthropocene’ concept with its defining  
47 acceptance that human beings have set in motion a mass extinction as major as any produced by  
48 Earth-system changes over geological time (Hamilton et al, 2015).  
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6 From these perspectives 'sustainable development' is seen as a concept that has already failed, and  
7 was destined to fail as it ignored the inherent contradictions between our form of economic  
8 development and the achievement of environmental sustainability or social equity. Sustainable  
9 Development is therefore argued by Foster (2015) as the concoction of a delusional ~~mindset~~  
10 ~~mind-~~  
11 ~~set~~ which assumed that progress, in particular technological progress, is inevitable and always  
12 desirable. Some argue this progressivist ~~mindset~~~~mind-set~~ comes from a subconscious attachment to  
13 having something important to contribute to that outlives ~~ones~~, given a decline in the experience  
14 of a cosmic sense to life (e.g. God) or of nature as sacred. Advocates of this view also critique the  
15 assumption that humans can control their destiny on planet Earth ~~-(or beyond-it)~~.

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19 From this standpoint, climate change is viewed as a tragedy, not just a problem to be solved. The  
20 focus of these analysts and activists becomes one of adaptation to the coming catastrophes,  
21 including cultural and psychological adaptation. One of the leading academic commentators on this  
22 approach calls for "a therapeutic politics of retrieval, renewing kinds of deep resilience which these  
23 communities have progressively lost, along with a recovered sense of realistic human possibility and  
24 an acknowledgement of the tragedy in which we have involved ourselves and the planet" (Foster,  
25 2015: 1).

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29 This paradigm resonates with and extends a century and more of critical sociology, including  
30 Ferdinand Tonnies (1887) on the commodification of life and Jurgen Habermas (1984) on how both  
31 bureaucratic and market systems colonise the 'lifeworld' of communities. The paradigm also reflects  
32 a depth of critiques of economic development, and therefore sustainable development, that have  
33 been made previously by representatives of indigenous peoples who challenged the processes that  
34 are destroying their traditional ways of life, such as in tropical rainforests. For instance, the  
35 Pachamama Alliance involve Ecuadorean forest peoples who call for people with modern lifestyles  
36 to "change the dream" by which they live by.

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41 The Restoration Approach to collective dilemmas can involve at least four elements: the restoration  
42 of humility, ~~wildness~~, of wholeness ~~and~~ of resilience, ~~and of wildness~~. First, the restoration of  
43 humility, recognising the hubris that humans could control nature or each-other comprehensively  
44 and indefinitely. Connected to this is an emphasis on the restoration of 'wildness'. In the  
45 environmental sphere that involves greater emphasis on working with natural processes, such as the  
46 rewilding of landscapes. In the social sphere this concept is being used to invite us to consider how a  
47 less domesticated approach to our own lives might look as well as suggesting we need to become  
48 more awake to our interdependence with nature (Foster, 2015).

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6 This awareness connects to a third element, which is the restoration of our wholeness: the assumed  
7 separation of nature and humans is challenged as causal in our malaise, and thus transcended. There  
8 are variants on this theme, with differing emphases on how we understand and talk about nature  
9 and humans within that (Perez de Vega, 2015). Some draw upon both ancient wisdom traditions and  
10 new sciences to explain the limits of viewing humans as separate from and manipulating of 'other'  
11 life (Eisenstein, 2011).  
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15 These three elements culminate in the socio-economic arena with the restoration of resilience. That  
16 has been defined as "the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganise while  
17 undergoing change, so as still to retain essentially the same function, structure, identity and  
18 feedbacks" (Hopkins, 2008: 54). For instance, a town can be regarded as a system that can grow  
19 resilience as changes to its supplies of energy and sustenance change. Others draw inspiration for  
20 human communities from how some living systems bounce back from disruptions with a stronger  
21 system, such as organisms that overcome some infections (Taleb, 2012).  
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25 Some use the term 'retrieval' for describing what this approach to our predicament implies,  
26 returning to aspects of what we have progressively lost since the start of the European  
27 Enlightenment (Foster, 2015). The argument is not that everything pre-modern is positive or needs  
28 to be restored, but that much is to be retrieved from past cultures, philosophies, and technologies.  
29 We adopt the term 'Restoration' to describe this approach, as it foretells this as a major social  
30 movement and potentially a new era. We have explained this approach - or antithesis - to  
31 Sustainable Development, in more detail than either Reformation or Revolution as it is more recent  
32 and marginal in discourses on policy and organisations.  
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37 The youth of the Restoration Approach is one reason why its social dimensions have not been widely  
38 discussed. What will human rights, fairness, justice, power and governance look like in societies that  
39 take this approach? Given how some efforts to revive past approaches to life and culture can involve  
40 a brutal rejection of compassion-based values in the exuberance of fundamentalism, the social  
41 dimension of the Restoration Approach will be important to engage.  
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### 45 Working Across Paradigms

46 | Given that the Sun will explode one day in the future, infinite "sustainable development" of human  
47 society on Planet Earth is unachievable and so the term is a linguistic device to provide a meeting  
48 place for different people and ideas to work on the shared dilemmas of our time. Sustainable  
49 | development may have been attractive at helping us to cooperate on diverse dilemmas while  
50 suspending controversies over religion and political economy. Existing theories of exploitation of  
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poorer countries by imperial powers could be side-lined, along with critiques of capitalism at a time of hope after the Cold War. Differing religious motivations for caring about the other could be silenced with emphasis on the shared values and targets that delegates could state agreement on. If keeping people talking was the aim, sustainable development has been successful.

Many involved in intergovernmental processes today argue that it is pragmatic to maintain this approach in order to arrive at agreement on such initiatives as the SDGs. However, as such limited progress is made on critical issues like climate change, the avoidance of deeper questions of political economy and of belief may not have been so pragmatic after all.

What approach to sustainability is most relevant today? Reformation, Revolution or Restoration? In this paper, we have not discussed the latest data on a range of shared dilemmas or the scale and rate of effective response. We think ~~there that there~~ is much cause for concern. But we also recognise that each approach can frame and inform helpful action, while each approach can marginalise important considerations or justify poor action. So rather than assessing which paradigm is the most accurate starting point, after all they are all just social constructions, what is important is to help people consider what each might imply if pursued with rigour and creativity. From this perspective, sustainability leadership must begin with helping people to think about their thinking about sustainability.

### Implications for Sustainable Leadership

Combining our critique of prevalent approaches to both leadership and sustainability, seven main 'unsustainabilities' in mainstream leadership can now be proposed (Table 2). This prepares the conceptual ground for the development of new approaches to sustainable leadership research, practice and education.

*Table 2: The Seven Unsustainabilities of Leadership*

1. Ignoring purpose, or assuming the primary purpose to be the benefit of an employer;
2. Assuming or believing a senior role holder to be most salient to organisational or social change;
3. Ignoring the political and moral aspects of an exclusive focus on enhancing the agency of senior role holders;
4. Assuming that 'leader' is a continuing quality of a person rather than a label;
5. Assuming that the value of an individual lies mostly in their confidence in their distinctiveness;
6. Assuming that leadership development is about learning more rather than about unlearning;

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7 7. *Believing that material progress is always possible and best.*  
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10 Clearly critique in itself is not a sufficient contribution. Western (2008: 21), for example, suggests  
11 that “critical theorists must go beyond identifying ‘bad leadership practice’ and aim to create and  
12 support successful ethical frameworks for leadership”, and Sutherland et al (2014) argue that  
13 attention should be paid to understanding “how organisational alternatives to mainstream  
14 understandings of leadership might be constituted” (Sutherland et al, 2013: 16). Therefore, we can  
15 flip the seven criticisms into the following seven recommendations for more sustainable leadership:  
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19 1. Explore purpose and meaning as central to personal and professional action. By doing so,  
20 enable individuals to clarify their provisional understanding of personal aims and how they may, or  
21 may not, relate to existing organisational aims, to support a more holistic assessment of personal  
22 and organisational performance.  
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25 2. Recognise that organisational or social change is affected by people at all levels and through  
26 social processes, so knowledge about collective action is key. By doing so, encourage people to learn  
27 more about how groups can function more effectively through enhanced collaboration.  
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30 3. Consider the political and moral aspects of authority and bases for legitimacy of leadership  
31 acts. By doing so, encourage a focus on how one’s potential actions relate to the needs of the  
32 collective, stakeholders and wider society.  
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35 4. Recognise that ‘leader’ is a label and people can take acts of leadership without it meaning  
36 they are [permanent and stable](#) henceforth ‘leaders’. Understanding this provides a valuable  
37 opportunity for developing overall leadership capacity within organisations, rather than mistakenly  
38 seeing it as the domain of a chosen, or emergent, few.  
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41 5. Appreciate the value of an individual is as much through their similarities and connectedness  
42 to others and all life, as through their distinctiveness. Doing so allows a move away from seeing  
43 organisations as natural hierarchies, towards pluralistic sites characterised by ongoing debate,  
44 discussion and deliberation.  
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47 6. Understand that leadership development is about both learning new ideas and unlearning  
48 existing ones. In this regard, practitioners can be encouraged to let [go](#) of limiting assumptions as  
49 they develop critical consciousness, and therefore simultaneously oppose practices as well as  
50 propose new approaches.  
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6 7. Realise that personal purpose and meaning can ultimately transcend notions of material  
7 progress in any form or the associated means of control. Doing so challenges the consequentialist,  
8 means-end philosophies of contemporary business and organisation, and instead promotes an  
9 ideology centred on compassion and creating a new world in the shell of the old (Gordon, 2010)  
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12 Although these recommendations are about leadership, they indicate we must go beyond a narrow  
13 focus on individual leader's abilities, skills, attributes and behaviours (Bendell and Little, 2015), and  
14 toward developing all organisational actors' critical thinking skills (Brookfield, 1987; ~~Mezirow, 2000~~),  
15 and creating spaces in which to discuss future possibilities for sustainability (Evans, 2011). Although  
16 the recommendations are about 'sustainability,' the seventh is important for allowing a new  
17 perspective to emerge, considering what we have described as a 'Restoration Approach,' currently  
18 being triggered by the latest environmental science. As we described above, such a paradigm  
19 challenges the progressivist and modernist assumptions in both the prevalent ideas of leadership  
20 and sustainability that are unlikely to help us consider coping with severe disturbance, rather than  
21 more 'progress' through greater control (Foster, 2015).  
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27 In social studies, we appreciate how theoretical development can take many forms and does not  
28 require making predictions based on a theory (Abend, 2009). Instead, our main theoretical  
29 contribution is to provide a framework for interpretation of claims about leadership for  
30 sustainability. Affecting people by revealing limiting assumptions embedded in, and reproduced by,  
31 leadership discourse has been documented in areas beyond sustainability (Alvesson and Spicer,  
32 2012). Therefore, our work has practical implication in that synthesising critiques and making them  
33 available to people and scholars engaged in sustainability may reduce the influence of limiting  
34 concepts. Therefore, we limit our predictions to this process of consciousness-raising. We contend  
35 that professionals who avoid the seven unsustainabilities of leadership will enable more positive (or  
36 less negative) change; that organisations which promote avoidance of the seven unsustainabilities of  
37 leadership will witness more positive (or less negative) change, and; if designers or commissioners of  
38 leadership development avoid the seven unsustainabilities of leadership then they will encourage  
39 more effective change-enabling capabilities from their participants.  
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45 At this point we can offer a tentative definition:

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47 *Sustainable leadership is any ethical behaviour that has the intention and effect of helping groups of*  
48 *people address shared dilemmas in significant ways not otherwise achieved.*  
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51 We regard the concept of sustainable leadership to include seven necessary conditions (Podsakoff,  
52 et al, 2016). First, that leadership involves a behaviour, or act, which can also include an intentional  
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6 non-action. Second, that the act is ethical, according to a framework held by the person and capable  
7 of being understood by observers. Third that the behaviour helps groups of people achieve  
8 something. Fourth, that the achievement relates to addressing shared dilemmas, such as economic,  
9 social, environmental or cultural problems that affect many people. Fifth, that the change is  
10 significant, according to both the group affected and the observers, including people who wish to  
11 describe leadership, like ourselves. This recognises the subjective nature of ascribing leadership.  
12 Sixth, that the behaviour created an effect that was additional, whereby if it had not occurred then  
13 the outcome would not likely have been achieved. We recognise this element is based on our  
14 theories of change and is a difficult element to assess. Seventh that the person exhibiting the  
15 behaviour intended to pursue positive change on the dilemma. We hope that the definition of  
16 sustainable leadership serves to remind us that leadership is about change involving acts rather than  
17 positional power, sustainability is about dilemmas which might not be solved, that both intention  
18 and effect are important to consider, and that the significance of acts will be attributed by observers  
19 based on their own values and assumptions.  
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26 For the reasons explained in the introduction, our paper does not provide a systematic review of the  
27 prior use of the term 'sustainable leadership' in either academic publications or contemporary public  
28 discourse. However, some brief comments on how our concept relates to other interpretations will  
29 help clarify what we mean and what we do not. First, we note that the term "sustainable leadership"  
30 has been used to refer to leadership whose positive effects are sustained, or whose effectiveness  
31 does not fade over the tenure of the individual concerned (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2004). Although  
32 the longevity of an impact of an action is an interesting consideration, by not questioning aims and  
33 outcomes, nor the salience of the individual compared to other factors, this conception of  
34 sustainable leadership falls short of our purposes in encouraging a spectrum of action on social and  
35 environmental dilemmas.  
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40 Second, there have been magazine articles and blogs that interpret sustainable leadership as  
41 involving the quality of personal resilience and openness in dealing with complex challenges (Glaser  
42 and Entine, 2014). In academia, variants of this approach include those that argue that heightened  
43 complexity and interconnectedness of economy and society today means that senior managers need  
44 to cultivate [mindsets/mind-sets](#) to be better able to interpret their organisational environment  
45 (Tideman et al, 2013). While it is important to consider personal wellbeing and [mindsets/mind-sets](#) in  
46 any analysis of leadership, we do not consider the resilience and open mindedness of a senior  
47 manager to be sufficient elements in a construct that would be relevant to significant action on  
48 social and environmental dilemmas.  
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6 Third, there is a conception of sustainable leadership which defines it as the opposite of exploitative  
7 leadership, where the former involves a person, with earned authority, helping groups of people  
8 achieve the progress they desire on sustainability issues (Evans, 2011). Our proposed concept of  
9 sustainable leadership shares much in common with this perspective but we do not think it helpful  
10 to imply leadership is a quality cohering in one person, instead seeing it as more emergent, episodic  
11 and distributed. We aim to avoid reification, and regard leadership as simply a word, not an actual  
12 quality of one person.  
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17 A fourth approach also seeks to make a connection between environmental consciousness and an  
18 approach to leadership. Western (2008) regards human society as an element within our ecology,  
19 and thus views organisations and communities as complex living systems. Therefore, sustainable  
20 leadership can be viewed as a systems-conscious approach, as the Cambridge Centre for  
21 Sustainability Leadership (CISL) has advocated (Bendell and Little, 2015). Given the complex and  
22 dynamic interdependence found in the natural environment, it is a stimulating metaphor for  
23 reflection on organisations and societies. However, to argue that we can read off from nature  
24 insights for a better form of leadership might distract us from how such views remain our  
25 interpretations of nature and thus are socially constructed and could embody and exert power  
26 relations in themselves.  
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31 Fifth, there is a literature which regards sustainable leadership as an approach by senior managers  
32 to the design of organisational change processes to address sustainability issues profitably (Avery,  
33 and Bergsteiner, 2011; Galpin and Whittington, 2012). This is an important area of work, but could  
34 reinforce limiting assumptions about the locus of change, that even a focus on organisational culture  
35 for inspiring staff initiative may be unable to counteract.  
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39 In future, further work could be done to develop hypotheses about sustainable leadership and even  
40 how to measure it. That would involve the development of a 'nomological network' of terms related  
41 to conditions within the definition we propose. However, in line with the interest in promoting  
42 change for sustainability through research, we think our research can be built upon by considering  
43 the following five broad knowledge needs:  
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- 46 - The extent and form of limiting assumptions within prevalent approaches to both leadership  
47 and sustainability, in both scholarship and practice, including within the emerging fields of  
48 'sustainability leadership' or 'sustainable leadership'.
- 49 - Inter-disciplinary insights on organisational and social change processes that address shared  
50 dilemmas and relate to individual practices. In particular, drawing on ideas from social  
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movements and other change processes often overlooked by prevalent-mainstream approaches to leadership.

- Insights on effective collective leadership to address shared dilemmas in society. In particular, knowledge on group dynamics for democratic deliberation and decision makingdecision-making.
- The content and effectiveness of alternative pedagogies for leadership development, which draw on at least some of the seven recommendations for sustainable leadership described above. Including non-classroom based approaches.
- The cultural specificities versus commonalities of approaches to leadership and sustainability, especially in non-Western contexts.

## **The Papers in this Issue**

One of the implications of Critical Leadership Studies is the likely benefit to scholarship, practice, and education of drawing upon theories and experiences from outside the corporate sphere. We respond to that view in this special issue on sustainability leadership, with papers that explore such leadership from different academic disciplines and in non-corporate settings. Each paper draws upon the field of leadership studies, but incorporates it with another discipline. One paper draws on psychology, focusing on environmental activists. The other papers draw on education studies and focus on those who work with children. With both their subject matter and the theories mobilised, we hope the field for future research on sustainability leadership is usefully broadened.

In the following paper, Nadine Andrews' explores the "Psychosocial factors influencing the experience of sustainability professionals" as they try to lead change towards pro-environmental decision-making in their organisations. Her method of "Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis" offers us an up-close look at the mental frames and motivations of sustainability leaders. The findings help us see how psychological theories and research are useful to understanding how the contemporary sustainability professional copes with the challenges and tragedies of our environmental situation. It points to an area that will require more focus in sustainability management as people gravitate towards a 'Restoration Approach' to sustainability that includes recognition of forthcoming loss and tragedy.

An element of Andrews paper is the wellbeing of the professional engaged in sustainability leadership. Professional wellbeing is also a theme in Kaz Stuart's paper which researches the practice of people who work with children. "It may be obvious from the word itself that 'sustainability' is about the future. Therefore, as a policy paradigm, it invites attention to children alive today, as well as more abstract notions of future generations," notes Stuart. Moreover,

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7 “despite their centrality to sustainability policy, children and young people have not had a  
8 comprehensive place in corporate sustainability practice or research.” With the last two papers in  
9 this special issue we seek to address that, as both include case studies on working with young  
10 people. Stuart uses concepts of distributed leadership (Woods et al, 2004) and system leadership  
11 (Senge et al, 2015) to structure an exploration of how people managing children’s centres in the UK  
12 are addressing difficult challenges brought on by austerity.

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15 Stuart finds that the model is helpful for leaders of children’s centres. In such contexts, it is normal  
16 for managers to be motivated by values, which provides a suitable context for increasing delegation  
17 of decisions and collaboration on improving professional practice at large. The relevance of these  
18 findings for management and leadership in other organisations and sectors may therefore depend  
19 on the sense of purpose that staff hold.

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23 Readers may note some similarities between ‘system leadership’ and the idea of collective  
24 leadership that we described earlier in this paper. The emphasis within ‘system leadership’  
25 narratives is on creating broader changes in contexts by focusing on root causes and wider relations.  
26 The concept appears, therefore, to hold potential for sustainability management in general. While it  
27 focuses on relatedness and collectives, time will show whether it involves some of the problems  
28 with mainstream refrains of leadership, such as an assumption of the special salience of an  
29 individual for organisational and social change. Perhaps a paradox will emerge in system leadership,  
30 given the emphasis on both system and individual. Going forward, we see opportunities for more  
31 research on the use of systems methods of organisational change, such as soft systems methodology  
32 (Checkland, 2001), within the system leadership field.

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37 As we have criticised current orthodoxies in leadership studies, we wish to avoid any new  
38 orthodoxies in our critical field. One benefit from Critical Leadership Studies is that it may encourage  
39 a new synthesis, as mainstream ideas are adapted. Criticism of “heroic” approaches to leadership is  
40 one area where this dialectic may be possible. In “Heroic ecologies: embodied heroic leadership and  
41 sustainable futures”, Olivia Efthimiou moves beyond contemporary notions of heroes as  
42 exceptionally brave saviours, so as to revive and reapply the cultural notion of a “hero’s journey”  
43 that is open to us all. That is, a journey of challenge, trauma, triumph and transcendence that  
44 contributes to a community. Efthimiou explores connections between that idea of heroism,  
45 sustainability, embodied leadership and wellbeing. She makes the case for how a revised  
46 understanding of heroism may be considered as an embodied system of sustainable leadership. She  
47 synthesises the claims made by practitioners who use the hero’s journey with young people, to  
48 suggest that a whole model of heroic sustainable leadership development could be deployed.  
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6 Efthimiou's paper reminds us of the usefulness of personal orientations towards truth-seeking,  
7 collective consciousness, meaning-making, courage to uphold principles, courage to unlearn and,  
8 ultimately, to allow one's reinvention. A critical discourse lens would encourage future analysis of  
9 what is gained and lost through using the term and concept "hero" to describe and promote these  
10 orientations in people, as well the labelling of these as qualities especially for "leaders". A question  
11 must remain whether dominant contemporary ideas on heroism could encourage people on heroic  
12 leadership training to aspire to be recognised for moments of special bravery and potency, with  
13 problematic consequences.

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18 All three papers explore personal issues and wellbeing, reflecting how discussions of  
19 sustainable leadership invite us to consider how the professional challenges we all work on  
20 ultimately involve very personal processes. They remind us of the enduring relevance and power of a  
21 focus on leadership and its development, despite the various pitfalls we have discussed in our paper.  
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## 26 Conclusions

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28 From drawing upon sociologically-informed critiques of both 'leadership' and 'sustainability', we  
29 have argued that prevalent notions of these concepts are unhelpful to either practitioner or  
30 researcher engagement with the shared dilemmas of our time. We have explained how the idea of  
31 leadership, as a myth of potent individual action, has been deployed in the service of unsustainable  
32 growth and exploitation. Those who suggest that the world needs bigger and bolder leadership in  
33 the transition to a just and sustainable world must ask whether or not the leadership they imagine is  
34 the product of wishful thinking fed by an infantilising managerial dispositif (Gemmill and Oakley,  
35 1992). Instead, we have argued that the idea of leadership must be disentangled in its discursal  
36 function in the service of oppression before it can be reconfigured as a modality of democracy and  
37 placed in the service of justice and sustainability.

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42 By applying the same critical stance to the mainstream discourse on sustainable development, we  
43 outlined three major paradigms, which we argued are key to be aware of to locate one's own efforts  
44 or scholarship on this topic. We integrated and summarised these critiques by stating Seven  
45 Unsustainabilities of Leadership and therefore made seven recommendations for more sustainable  
46 leadership. We choose the term sustainable leadership due to it emphasising that dominant notions  
47 of leadership are unsustainable as well as our current planetary predicament.  
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6 Given the urgency and scale of contemporary shared dilemmas, new research and education on  
7 such sustainable leadership is required in at least the five areas we identified. That future knowledge  
8 may help people who operate from within any of the paradigms of sustainability.  
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