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## 20 - Critical Practices of Leadership - Let's Do It!

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At my last ISLC I asked “What can the literature on place leadership offer a new city leader?”. Between COVID and ill-health, I haven't been back to ISLC since then. This year, I would like to offer some reflections aided by the literature on what has been a tumultuous time in local government and my life and some reflections as an activist and practitioner to the literature (Contu 2020).

Pieces like those by Contu, Delmestri illustrate an important shift within critical leadership scholars. When I started my PhD journey back in 2012, I'd come to answer a “practice puzzle” (Herr and Anderson 2005, p72) but it wasn't clear that the field broadly thought there could be “critical practices of leadership?”. But as a practitioner and activist I was confident there was. I'd seen it and I very much felt that my research was part of a feminist tradition intended “to contribute to women's liberation and emancipation” (Maguire 1987, p121).

There were also glimmers in more standard texts. Zald and Berger writing all the way back in 1978 about the work of social movements in organisations. Then again in 2007, Zoller and Fairhurst arguing that in the way that leadership and management are often twinned in leadership studies there was an overlooked potential for critical organisation scholars to work with leadership studies, and the flurry of articles prompted by discussions of critical performativity (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012, Spicer et al., 2009, 2016).

COVID: COVID was a big disruptor and a tragedy for many. It also saw neighbourhood and street organising re-emerged in many villages, towns and cities (Coutts et al. 2020). In Lancaster, the city council had already begun to reintroduce the foundations of good old-fashioned asset-based community development, and the mapping, one-on-ones and network building we had been doing helped us deliver food within days of the first lockdown being announced. My history as a community activist, feminist and participatory researcher taking inspiration from projects like Leadership for a Changing World (Ospina & Foldy 2010).

The state of the health and care system was an issue of concern for many before COVID, but it became briefly something everyone cared about during COVID, and it is now returning to the place it often is. As a nation, we love the NHS but worry about its capacity, and most of us only think about social care if we have friends or family reliant on the system. But in case you've missed the memo. These systems are creaking at the seams. On any given day, people aren't getting the care they need to live with safety and dignity. Let alone fulfil their potential.

Power: The OECD describes the UK as one of the most politically centralised countries in the world (Martin & Gardiner 2018, p6). Interestingly, the OECD frames it like this because while financial and legislative control is centralised, responsibility is widely devolved, which lowers the temperature and need for adaptive change for the central

government (Heifetz 1994). Leaving the people delivering health and care services acutely aware of the need for system change but without many of the usual tools. Unlike a charity, they can't decline a contract. Unlike an outsourcing company, they don't get paid far more than they need. Once it is made a statutory service, local government can't refuse to deliver these services on the national government's behalf or even negotiate for better funding, as might be seen in countries with a more federated structure.

So, what does local government do? The classic management response that most of us would resist is to lift the entry barrier, make decisions it knows it will lose on appeal, and pocket the savings until then.

However, there is some sign that these responses are becoming publicly and politically unacceptable. At Lancashire County Council, public health has been moved into the economic development portfolio in recognition of how closely entwined health, work, and well-being are.

Hopefully, there is space to consider how the government might work differently and better as part of new devolution agreements. Still, we need people to be part of the thinking about that and part of the thinking from the community — not necessarily from businesses, councils, or the corporate positions of universities.

Putting your skills to work: But we need people to step forward and participate in this work nationwide. There are many ways to do this, but I will pitch you one—one where business school academics might be particularly useful—local government!

Perhaps we are all activists now (Delmestri 2023)?