

Book Review for AMLE of

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Review

(Title) *Critical Perspectives on Leadership: The Language of Corporate Power*, New York:

By Mark Learmonth and Kevin Morrell, New York and London: Routledge, 2019, 163 pages, softback.

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Interestingly, Learmonth and Morrell resisted the temptation to entitle their book *Against Leadership* even though this might have more readily reflected the content. However, after the Introduction, the first of the 4 parts of *Critical Perspectives on Leadership* (CPL) does attract the title *Against Leadership* and contains 4 of the 12 chapters and fewer chapters for each of the other sections of the book, thus leaving the reader with no doubt that this is an attack on the ‘populism’ of leadership. I use the term populism (not actually used by the authors) intentionally since CPL is very much focused on the mass appeal of the language of leadership that has resonances with that used by populist politicians – ‘America first’, ‘secure our borders’, ‘get back control’, and ‘get Brexit done’.

However, the broader title of CLP will attract a larger audience for this book should be read not just by those opposed to the idea of leadership but, more especially, those who treat it as a panacea? It is an extremely well written and readily communicable text whose main thesis is highly critical of the loose and inappropriate use of the term leadership in contemporary society. More specifically, the authors of CPL object to the language of leadership – the way in which the term is attached to almost anyone as a means to elevate her or his importance, significance and value. The language of leadership, they argue, is a smokescreen for concealing the power and inequality between those within the senior hierarchy of most organizations from everyone else. Through what could be described as institutional dissembling, leadership seeks to manipulate subordinates into a false sense of cooperation and consent to shared, common objectives and values whereby support for the leader(s) is presumed as wholly in their own interests. In effect, the organization takes on the semblance of a team wherein collaboration and commitment to pre-existing goals, established by their hierarchical leaders, is to pass *unquestioned*.

From the outset, the narrative of CPL is lightened by illustrations of the hyperbole surrounding the notion of leadership with a neat snippet from George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, where the pig leader, ironically named Napoleon, is given credit for every achievement or stroke of good luck, just as leaders in the contemporary world tend to claim all the credit for success yet blame their subordinates for any failure – no better an example being the football manager José Mourinho in Europe although the more dangerous example is clearly Donald Trump. It is also well illustrated by examples of the historical displacement of the term manager with that

of leader and how leadership has acquired such a laudatory status. Regardless of whether it is an appropriate description, many assume or are attributed with the label leader in order to aggrandize and claim greater importance for what they do at the same time as limiting the status of their subordinate followers. This effect of 'flattering bosses' yet 'flattening workers' (p. 5) establishes the central theme of CPL that can be summarised as, in the first part, setting out the argument *against* leadership, in the second and third, examining its rhetorical and seductive force, and in the fourth suggesting how it can be resisted.

Part I has four chapters, the first of which introduces us to the language of leadership as a laudatory lexicon through which it is celebrated as wholly positive and unchallengeable. Simply by using leadership or associated terms, situations are transformed partly because, as the classical sociologists W. I. and D. S. Thomas (1928) put it, a thing defined as real is real in its consequences and because words tend to create the very thing they claim merely to describe (Latour, 1994). Consequently, it would seem churlish, almost petty to criticise leadership despite its damaging effects in legitimizing, whilst concealing, the power discrepancies and inequalities within organizations. While an exotic and heroic resource for elites, by invoking the idea of being members of a team that is working towards common goals, leadership *masks* any sense of differential, or conflicts of, interests of those lower down the hierarchy.

Chapter two seeks to unravel how the language of leadership is used in different spheres albeit invariably loosely and broadly to mean anything that smacks of success. In the media and among politicians, for example, strong leadership is a convenient, 'readymade phrase' to fill a headline or soundbite in order to attract attention and where things go wrong there is a quick resort to blaming it on a failure of leadership. So while leadership is seen as the solution to everything, paradoxically it is also often the very source of failure. Of course, this is all part of the hyperbole surrounding the language of leadership and how it is ironically, highly *misleading*. The authors provide two examples where they see leadership as being deployed excessively to depict almost everyone in an organization. The first is the case of a UK premiership football team where coaches seem to insist that all 11 players show leadership and the second their own experience of academia where over recent years almost any occupant of a position, as indicated by person specifications and job descriptions, is expected to show leadership. Learmonth and Morrell see these as examples of leadership 'being used almost like an aerosol – sprayed over every activity to make it somehow "special"' (p. 20). They might also have argued that it is highly polluting not necessarily on the climate but certainly on social relations. They also wonder why even critical scholars never seem to question whether 'leadership' is a good or useful way to describe work relations. If leadership is taken for granted even by the critics, then it is not surprising that most people fail to interrogate it. The chapter then continues to examine some of the definitions, the two most prominent of which are: 1) a leader is someone who has followers and, 2) by contrast with management that deals with routine or established situations, leadership involves innovative responses to new, uncertain or recalcitrant problems. The first lacks a definition of followers and the second of how we can establish some absolute agreement as to what is uncertain since it is open to interpretation and it is always possible to define something as uncertain so as to claim a leadership, rather than a management, status.

Chapter 3 is interesting in providing a word sketch historical comparison of the use of leader and manager, finding that the term leader was used primarily to describe senior politicians in the early 1990s but more frequently outside of politics by 2015, gradually replacing the term manager both in business and in popular culture. Chapter 4 and 5 provide evidence of academics and businesses that seem to have shifted their use of language from manager to leaders and followers over time, arguing that this simply has the effect of camouflaging conflicting interests. It also legitimizes the increasing inequalities between bosses and their employees through sustaining the fiction that common interests override conflict and dissent in organizations.

In part II and III, the chapters elaborate on the argument that was made in part I about how language *constructs* the world that it claims merely to describe and, therefore, is never innocent or politically neutral. As Foucault argued, discourse always has power effects not least in transforming individuals into particular kinds of ‘subjects that secure their sense of meaning, identity and reality’ through participating in the ‘practices that power invokes’ (Clarke and Knights, 2015: 1868). In this sense, then, language can be self-fulfilling or, as the authors claim, has a Pygmalion effect where individuals are inspired to live up to or even exceed unwarranted expectations about them, and then really begin to believe that they are special, imposing on the population their delusions of grandeur. Leaders can then readily become messianic as has been evident in the history of political leadership. Of course, leadership has to be performed and the authors argue that this has to be convincing to followers since the two are part of a definitional identity – there is no leadership without followers and vice versa. Leaders draw on established norms and values as a way of seducing their followers and this seduction is made easier for those who, because of class background, wealth, or competitive success, have some celebratory status that then can be marketed as a brand image, as has been done by Trump as a ‘street talker’ and by Johnson as a ‘bumbling but loveable rogue’. However, this simply intensifies its celebratory status and undermines the possibilities of criticising leadership, rather than simply taking it for granted as fundamental and necessary to our way of life. By contrast, Learmonth and Morrell are critical of the way that the language of leadership and followership is subscribed to even by critical researchers who surprisingly do not seem to object to the term follower despite its condescending and patronising character and the way it downplays the contributions of workers as well as ignoring their historic conflict with bosses. Consequently, they turn in the final section of the book to consider what can be done to resist the invidious effects of leadership.

While acknowledging that much of the critical leadership studies (CLS) research seeks to ‘reinvent leadership’ to render it ‘more politically progressive’ (p. 120), Learmonth and Morrell remain critical of CLS because it tends to endorse rather than dismiss the language of leadership and followers. It is these very terms and their treatment as indispensable categories that diverts, if not precludes, analysis from examining contested workplace relations as the very resistance the CLS claims it wants to study. The authors are rather less critical of the leadership as practice approach largely because it refuses to ‘take as its starting point a critique of the ultimate hegemonic relation – the leader-follower diad’ (Raelin, 2016: 9 quoted p. 127). However, despite many of the contributors of this edited volume seemingly uncomfortable with retaining the language of leadership, it remains central within the book presumably because of its ‘naturalization and normalization’ within the contemporary

corporate economy (p.128). Moreover, there is an absence in the various contributions of any appropriation of leadership to turn it against itself and thus undermine, rather than reinforce, corporate power. CPL then turns to the women in leadership literature and rightly argues that although welcoming having more women in senior positions, it can serve to further legitimize leadership and its capacity to maintain hegemonic power and privilege.

Whether or not one is for or against leadership, CPL should be essential reading because it demonstrates how leadership has become sheer rhetoric through a misuse of phenomenological perspectives on the social construction of reality that obliterates any sense of truth based on evidence. The book's strength is to highlight how language obscures the power that underlies the proliferation of discourses and practices of leadership. This resonates dramatically with contemporary populist politics where truth becomes little more than the outcome of repetitive claims made by powerful leaders wherein any opposition is dismissed as fake news. One slight limitation with the book's thesis could be a tendency to treat leadership as a property of persons even though occasionally acknowledging how it is applied to groups, organizations, and institutions. Another is to subscribe to a conventional conception of leadership in insisting that it is not just about occupying powerful position in an organizational hierarchy but also one of unquestioned authority. In this sense, the term leader is seen as only applicable insofar as there are followers otherwise what can it be seen to be leading? This results in the polemic against leadership perhaps exceeding what, for the most part, is highly plausible. It also means that the book is short on recommendations of how to combat the deeply damaging language of leadership other than to suggest returning to the language of management. While it is clear that this would remove the automatic assumption of a consensus to follow the leader, historical experience does not suggest that a reversion to the language of management has any tendency to limit the social organization of inequality or hegemonic control within corporations.

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