Abstract of chapter 7:

Contingency, change and continuity in the truth about leadership

Having earlier examined key scholarly texts on leadership from the Classical Greek, 16th century European and modern periods by way of three in-depth case studies, this chapter addresses the question of ‘what changes and continuities are notable when comparing these discourses?’ in order to gauge what progress has and has not been made. The analytic focus comprises the same matters considered in each individual case study. Consequently, the chapter identifies changes and continuities in the problematizations to which ‘leadership’ emerged as a response in the different cases examined. It considers changes and continuities in how ‘the leader’, ‘the follower’ and their relationship have been understood in these discourses. Changes and continuities in the social function claimed for ‘leadership’ and the epistemological and methodological predilections of leadership scholars are also addressed.

With respect to the problematizations to which leadership has emerged as a response, what is revealed is that time and time again calls for ‘leadership’ have arisen as a response to moral, social, political and economic trends or events which are problematized. The specific factors deemed problematic are variable, however a framing of the ‘problem’ as something conducive to being resolved by ‘leadership’ is repeatedly evident. What is proclaimed as the truth about leadership at these varying points in time draws on existing values, norms, epistemologies and methodologies, rendering what is said relevant and plausible to its intended audience. Thus leadership has repeatedly been invented as the solution to things that trouble us, while its precise formulation is grounded in the specific milieu it which it arises.

Turning to the account given of the true leader, almost without exception from the Classical Greeks through to the contemporary period, the leader has been repeatedly understood as being a person of superior capability to others: think ‘leader’ think ‘superior being’ is the most fundamental, enduring and dominant equation that prevails. Specific personal characteristics and ways of living which have been held at various times to be admirable, exceptional and powerful have been linked to the person of the leader and claimed to be part of their nature. Think ‘leader’ think ‘the good person/good life’ is thus the second key enduring equation. The third is the repeated association of leadership qualities with attributes also commonly associated with masculinity rather than femininity. Think ‘leader’ think ‘male’ is thus the third equation. Maintaining the equation of ‘leaders’ with ‘superior beings’ and ‘the good’, however understood, is critical for ‘leadership’ as an idea to continue to hold its mystique, promise and appeal.

The specific characteristics sought after and admired in leaders has, however, been remarkably changeable. Leaders have been variously constructed as warrior-
philosophers, dignified and masterful practitioners of real-politic, heroic Victorian gentlemen, well-rounded practical men of action and visionary, change-focused CEO’s. This suggests that no stable psychology of ‘the leader’ is likely to found, for no ‘human nature’ exists in respect of leadership, if such a thing is assumed to be timeless and enduring. This further suggests that these truth claims are more usefully and plausibly understood as inventions designed to address different values and problematizations, rather than discoveries about the true nature of leaders.

The role, responsibilities and rights of leaders has also been a recurrent yet changing theme in the discourses examined here. In both the Classical Greek and 16th century European texts leadership discourse was primarily focussed on the head of state. Extensive rights and powers on matters deemed critical to the well-being of the people and the state were warranted to such leaders, as such matters were said to be their primary responsibility. In the modern period the focus has moved to managerial leadership and, as part of that, to a focus on the follower’s psyche.

While the visible formal dimensions of leaders’ rights and powers have been severely constrained by means of formal rules and processes in the modern era, in the domain of the follower’s psyche, the role, responsibilities, rights and powers of leaders have expanded and intensified dramatically, especially in the last quarter century. Today the focus is placed on leader’s powers to change the psyche of followers, this being understood as both a potent and legitimate domain of action. Debate on boundary considerations as to the extent of appropriate leader influence, an issue of concern to both Classical Greek and 16th century scholars, has been marginalised in the modern era. With its conjunction of ‘leadership’ with an assumption of managerial legitimacy, the follower’s self is treated today as terra nullius, open for colonisation.

Followers, meanwhile, appear as the necessary but typically problematic ‘other’ in the leadership discourses examined here. Their existence is repeatedly invoked in justifying the necessity of leadership. The problems which followers are said to cause are a recurring focus of attention. The specific characteristics and expectations placed on followers have varied over time, in the same way that the specific characteristics ascribed to followers have varied. The nature of attention directed to followers has, however, largely been negative: followers are a problem to which leadership is the answer.

Followers have morphed over time from their ancient Greek and 16th century European status as inherently and irremediably flawed beings to their contemporary position as persons-of-unrealised potential. However, despite this, the follower’s enduring position is as a fundamentally deficient being who requires the leader’s intervention. So long as the equation of ‘leader’ with ‘superior being’ prevails in how leadership is understood, it is simultaneously a ‘logical’ necessity that followers be understand as lacking in some way deemed important: the leader cannot be rendered superior by definition unless the follower is also rendered inferior.
The positioning of followers as both problematic and inferior is used to prop up the necessity of leadership, the desirability of leadership and the rights and powers claimed for leaders. This means that the whole intellectual edifice of the dominant understanding of leadership is tenuous: as soon as we take seriously that ‘followers’ possess the capacity to act as rational, reasonable adults, the necessity and desirability of ‘leadership’ as conventionally theorised suddenly seems much less certain, while the authority and scope of influence granted to leaders suddenly seems far too extensive and intrusive.

Leader-follower relations have undergone significant changes, with a shift in focus from the control of the follower's body and soul to a focus on the enablement of their psyche to become more intensely aligned with the leader’s vision. While the desirability of distance between leader and follower and an overt mistrust in followers is evident in Classical Greek and 16th century European discourse, from Carlyle onwards the modern discourse has largely been encouraging of contact between leader and follower as something that will have positive effects. Regular, friendly and even intellectually-intimate relations between leaders and followers are now encouraged as a key mechanism by which leadership is enacted. In ‘new leadership’ discourse, followers are encouraged to engage in a process of continuous revelation of their self to the leader, in order that the process of transformation can occur. However in the modern discourse less emphasis is given to the leader's duty and responsibility toward followers than in earlier discourses.

In respect of the social function of leadership, three recurrent features of leadership discourse are evident. The first is that ‘leadership’ is associated with the upholding of order as a vital social good. The second is that the leadership discourse typically offers a justification for the unequal distribution of rights, power and authority between leaders and followers, mostly arising from the positioning of followers as deficient while leaders are rendered superior. The third recurrent social function of leadership discourse is its promotion of leadership as something extraordinary, even supernatural. The direct link made between a fear of chaos, direct access to the extraordinary and leadership likely accounts for its enduring appeal.

The epistemological and methodological standpoints used by leadership scholars to generate their truth claims have undergone dramatic change. However these changes reflect wider intellectual trends in the Western tradition from Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy to medieval philosophy to modern social science. As part of this transition, however, what has been lost is the profoundly multi-dimensional accounts of leadership offered by Classical Greek and 16th century European scholars for whom the leader's whole life experience was of critical concern and interest. Childhood experiences as well as what we today regard as the leader’s private life were important aspects of leadership knowledge in times past which are mostly ignored today.
As part of this epistemological and methodological shift, questions of philosophy and politics are now placed into separate domains of knowledge from leadership knowledge in most instances. Consequently important political and contestable choices and consequences are ignored when what leadership scholars offer up is a recipe for changing others without any assessment as to who actually benefits from that changes. What is thus produced today is knowledge whose political effects are hidden, in which leadership is portrayed as a matter of technique whose aim is enhancing human potential.

Despite these profound changes in the foundation, nature and scope of leadership knowledge, what has remained constant is the optimistic tenor of the discourse vis a vis the positive effects of leadership. Always the belief that a person of outstanding ability can have a positive impact on others lies at the core of the discourse. At every point the aim has been to articulate an account of leadership that will achieve beneficial results for followers. The specific results that are sought varies, but always the desired outcome is to benefit followers. Consistently, what we see in the archive is the production of a disciplinary regime which seeks to govern and inform the actions of leaders, ensuring their conduct and decisions are conducive to what is said to be in the best interests of followers. Consistently, leadership as a topic of inquiry creates for scholars the sense of labouring for the betterment of all, a worthy aim without doubt. However, insofar as the discourse remains reliant on the belittling of the follower its effects likely remain problematic.

What this chapter shows, then is that our present understanding of leadership is just the latest variant in a long process of both change and continuity, but one where the overall distance travelled is much shorter than we might have expected. Plato might not recognise our contemporary methods of searching for the truth, but he would likely applaud the attention now being given over to the transformational visionary to whom all others should defer judgement. Where this leaves us is alarmingly close in our supposedly scientific, modern and progressive thinking to Plato’s defence of totalitarian rule.

Positioning leadership as the answer to every question as we have done (yet again) over the last quarter century is not only destined to result in disappointment as actual, real human beings fail to meet such grandiose and naïve expectations. It also encourages a dangerous passivity from the great majority of people. As ‘followers’, they are positioned as limited creatures who are to rely on leaders, in most case managers, let us not forget, for guidance and motivation on who to be, how to act and what to think. To position leaders as we now do as ideal persons without fault is both to ask the impossible of them and to incite them to developing a distorted, narcissistic sense of their own capabilities. To position followers as we now do as merely latent, unrealised potential is to absolve the majority of adults from self-responsibility. With this the motivation (and freedom!) to be had from pursuing one’s own goals, thoughts and dreams along with the requirement
to grow up are removed, rendering followers perpetual adolescents. In the ideal world as implied by ‘new leadership’ theory, the important decisions and the constant monitoring needed to keep these immature followers on track is to be left in the hands of a small, non-elected group of manager-leaders: Plato’s Republic is just down the road from here.

The basic facts and chronology of the developments documented in the foregoing case studies are readily accessible in the archive for those who care to look. The interpretation I have placed on those basic facts and chronology is, of course, my own and open to challenge. However, for most of the last 150 years leadership scholars have shown remarkably little interest in this history. Lacking the broader perspective an appreciation of our history can bring, the field has assumed it possesses a modern worldview and is producing new knowledge. Yet in many ways it is reworking old ground. Absent a concern with the problematic of power it has also naively assumed its outputs will have progressive political effects.

What my incursions into past truths demonstrate is that leadership theory can readily be entwined with substantive knowledge of a diverse range of matters. The effect of this has, in other times, been to produce leadership knowledge that is not merely processual in orientation, but is also concerned with both substantive issues and with questions about the ends and not simply the means of leadership. If we were today to turn our minds to these matters, leadership studies could be radically reinvented. If we were to focus attention onto the actual challenges facing leaders and followers, on the outcomes being sought and the ends we seek as well as the means deployed to achieve them, then we could seek to build a new approach to theorising leadership. I offer ideas for how this opportunity might be pursued in my concluding chapter.

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