



Media Review

Organization Studies

1–4

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DOI: 10.1177/01708406211061863

www.egosnet.org/os**David Knights****Leadership, gender and ethics: Embodied reason in challenging masculinities**

New York: Routledge, 2021, pp. 290.

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Leadership Lives!?

Another book on leadership? Perhaps so, but this one genuinely manages to be poles apart from almost all the other myriad titles available, including many works claiming to introduce new directions in the study and practice of leadership. The book is theory-driven in a highly sophisticated and compelling way. At the same time, however, for those faced with what can often feel like the daunting, even frightening responsibilities tied up with wielding authority in organizations, it also offers the possibilities of practical application. However, you won't find any of the trite 'answers' nor any of the mythic, romanticized flights of fancy about heroic (or compassionate, authentic, servant, etc. etc.) leaders so often encountered in the genre. Indeed, those familiar with Knights' earlier work will be unsurprised to hear that a distinctively Foucault-inspired flavour permeates the book. (Foucault gets a name check in the first sentence of the introduction and his influence is most clearly at work in sections like chapter 2 'Genealogies of leadership in practice and theory' or chapter 4 'Power/Resistance'.) But the breadth of the book's intellectual scope means that it is likely to be of widespread interest – well beyond the concerns of card-carrying Foucauldians – though such readers will undoubtedly feel well catered for. I am sure that it will also be of great interest to many who might normally go for more orthodox ways of thinking about leadership – but who remain open to different ideas. What is more, throughout the book, the author displays a gift for capturing complexity and nuance with an engagingly light touch – without ever making the act of reading feel like a chore. From this point of view alone, the book will be a great place to start for people looking for new ways of thinking about leadership.

Knights' central contention is both intriguing and strikingly novel. It invites us to 'abandon humanism in favour of post or neo-humanism where the focus is on "affect" as a way of understanding leadership as the "invisible" space residing in between subject and object, mind and body, and leaders and followers' (p.4). His promotion of post- or neo-humanism represents a genuinely original move in the context of debates about leadership, and he develops it in an engaging, sophisticated and consistent manner throughout the book. The central claim, in other words, is that effective leadership should not be seen primarily as connected in a linear and rational way to certain attributes of individuals (typically expressed as personality traits and characteristics). Rather,

leadership is best seen as part of humanity's inheritance, made up of shared knowledges, languages and emotions. Furthermore, while not denying the importance of rationality, Knights consistently emphasizes the practical experience of leadership as an emotional and bodily exercise. An interesting parallel analysis of affect, albeit in a different context – where people are confronted by images of workplace life in a commercial art gallery – has recently been provided by Pouthier and Sondak (2021). I have little doubt that this perspective will prove novel and challenging for many leadership scholars – as well as to a range of other readers, including many who may not ordinarily think of themselves as leadership scholars at all.

Several of the issues raised to support and illustrate these arguments are unusual and eye-catching in various ways; certainly not the kind of thing one might expect in a book with 'leadership' in the title. Very much in line with the neo-humanism being espoused, I was especially struck by the confessional tone of many of the personal 'embodied narratives' presented. These narratives were offered explicitly as an antidote against much orthodox writing on leadership – not only against its scientific pretensions – but also against its individualistic, psychologistic and reductionist emphases. Among examples of these were stories of how, at certain times in the author's life 'I was energised . . . by masculine norms of competition, conquest and control' (p. 2); while on another occasion 'my masculine identity was existentially threatened on learning of my infertility when my wife was desperate to have children. Because of writing about masculinity, intellectually I had worked through this problem but only at the level of rationality rather than a fully affective and embodied engagement with the experience. Not surprisingly, I then experienced a dramatic mental breakdown of 7 weeks through which, according to the psychiatrist treating me, I was on the verge of being sectioned' (p. 62).

In much of the book, Knights reprises parts of his earlier works using theoretical frameworks that may well appear familiar, even conventional, to those within critical management studies. Indeed, in the opening acknowledgements, Knights lists 12 of his earlier publications drawn upon explicitly in the book and adds: 'others may have seeped subconsciously into the text'. There are chapters for instance on issues like control and resistance, masculinity, identity, and ethics. I wondered if, by reframing some of his earlier work as leadership, Knights might be looking for a new readership for such ideas, beyond critical management studies. If so, the sorts of topics and perspectives on offer in these chapters will be much less familiar (and therefore, I would have thought, engaging) to a wide range of leadership scholars and practitioners. Indeed, for people schooled within many intellectual traditions that focus on leadership, topics like resistance, gender and ethics remain severely under-theorized or marginalized. And Knights' arguments will almost certainly be completely novel to a high proportion of those who have exclusively read leadership titles targeted at a mass audience.

The broad approach, on a conceptual level, was to adapt and build on some of the arguments Knights has made in the past, and then to focus somewhat more directly on their implications for leadership and embodiment. I say *somewhat* more directly – certain elements of his materials struck me as rather loosely connected to leadership as such. Not that this observation is necessarily a criticism. Personally, I enjoyed encountering Knights' persuasive takes on a wide variety of topics, none of which are conventionally topics for leadership books. Such issues ranged, for instance, from Levinas' ethics (see chapter 7) – via, say, the (lack of) impact of MBA education (chapter 8) – to identity and gender (chapter 5). His treatment of much of this material was captured in a delightfully honed presentational style that made for ease of reading. At the same time, it managed to avoid falling into the trap of dumbing down or of refusing to confront the paradoxes involved – the paradoxes inherent in a highly successful male academic arguing against masculine approaches to leadership being perhaps the most prominent. (For more on paradoxes in leadership studies, with

strong echoes of Knights' work, see for example, Collinson, 2020, Picard and Islam, 2020, Sklaveniti, 2020 or Vince and Mazen, 2014.)

I said above that some of these ideas seemed to me to be loosely connected to leadership as such, as if I imagined leadership to be akin to a clearly delineated field, complete with neat hedges around its borders to mark out what is inside and out. But leadership is not like that at all, of course. Today, it has become one of the most fuzzy, flexible and borderless ideas in social science – an example *par excellence* of what Alvesson and Blom (2021, p. 1) refer to as 'hegemonic, ambiguous, big concepts'. The fact that Knights is apparently happy to use leadership almost as a catch-all term is, perhaps, the one area where his approach to the issue might be seen as rather more conventional.

Knights appears to take it for granted that much of what we see happening in organizational life today can straightforwardly be categorized as leadership. As he puts it: 'I prefer a very broad, or what one might say is a fully democratic, definition [of leadership] whereby, in some capacity, everyone is involved in leadership rather than an elite few' (p. 1). In making this move however, I wonder if he might have missed an opportunity to bring Foucault's archaeological arguments (Foucault, 1972) to bear on some of the analyses (i.e. that portion of Foucault's work in which the constitutive discontinuities in different forms of discourse adopted over time are demonstrated). After all, especially over the last 30 years or so, there have been marked discontinuities in the forms of discourse adopted around how power and authority get represented within organizations (Mautner & Learmonth, 2020). It is only relatively recently that the discourse of leadership has come to enjoy such dominance – whether in the scholarly or in the popular imagination (Learmonth & Morrell, 2021). A discussion of these kinds of discontinuities, not least as exemplified in Knights' own work over the years, would have strengthened the book in my view. As it is, its absence might be taken to suggest that Knights' earlier work, including that which exclusively used the rubric of 'management', was *really* about leadership all along – even when, in the original version, the term 'leadership' was never mentioned at all.

That issue aside, the book deserves a wide readership. It provides new ideas that even those who are relatively familiar with Knights' earlier work will often find fresh and original – sometimes exhilaratingly so. He also deals in a scholarly and fair way with a very wide range of material on leadership (broadly defined). Naturally enough, not everyone will agree with everything he says, and some readers may even find some of the perspectives provocative (not just thought-provoking). But everyone interested in leadership – scholars and practitioners alike – will benefit from engaging with the book's ideas.

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