‘Leadership’ as a Project: Neoliberalism and the Proliferation of ‘Leaders’

Abstract: It is increasingly common for anyone with formal, hierarchical status at work to be called a ‘leader’. Though widespread, this relatively recent change in day-to-day discourse is largely passing by unnoticed. We argue that using ‘leader’ in this way is not simply fashion or empty rhetoric; rather it can be understood in relation to neoliberalism. We argue that the language of ‘leadership’ represents a particularly subtle but powerful opportunity for the pursuit of individual elite interests to be disguised so that it look as if it is for the benefit of all. This opportunity has arisen because using ‘leader’ has tangible effects that reinforce implied values and assumptions about human relationships at work. In terms of implied values, the label ‘leader’ is celebratory and predisposes us to see elites in overly positive ways. In terms of implied assumptions, referring to executives as ‘leaders’ draws a veil over the structured antagonism at the heart of the employment relationship and wider sources of inequality by celebrating market values. Making ‘leadership’ recognizable as a political project is not intended primarily to suggest intentionality, but to help challenge representational practices that are becoming dominant. ‘Project-ing’ leadership also helps us to emphasize the risks inherent in taking this label for granted; which, we argue, is an important contribution because the language of leadership is increasingly used but is hardly questioned within much contemporary organizational life as well as organization theory.

> **LEADING STARTS HERE**. We're now hiring Customer and Trading Managers. Starting salary of at least £25,000. We'll help you to be the leader you want to be, speak to a member of the instore team today (Sainsbury's, 2018; bold in original).

> The **Leadership Summit** has become a key event for leaders in higher education and participants will leave with the latest thinking on why **wisdom, grit and compassion** are core essentials that underpin all leadership, how the sector is changing, and what it means to be a leader today in a complex environment. Our keynote speaker … will be joined by a great line up of leaders (*The Times Higher Education*, 24th – 30th May 2018: 4; bold in original).

Increasingly, the word 'leader' is being used to refer to those in formal positions of authority at work. Talking and writing about 'leaders' is becoming (if it has not already become) a normal, and normalized way to refer to *anyone* in a top job. All sorts of senior people, whether CEOs, head teachers or police chiefs are routinely referred to as 'leaders', whatever their formal titles happen to be. This applies to jobs as diverse as junior supermarket managers (as we can see from the first excerpt above) and university vice-chancellors and presidents (from the second). The practice is becoming so commonplace, that it seemingly goes virtually unnoticed in many sorts of discourse: whether in corporate reports, job adverts and mundane day-to-day conversations at work; or outside formal organizations in the news and social media. Even some children's TV shows have succumbed to the attraction of the 'leader' (Learmonth and Morrell, 2019).

This paper builds on and develops our earlier work on the 'language of leadership' (Learmonth and Morrell, 2017; 2019) in order to focus more on leadership as a quasi-political project – a project that reflects, whilst also perpetuating and reinforcing, our neoliberal society. Complementing insights into the performative effects of language use (Austin, 1962), we more firmly situate this language use in a wider embedding structure, or milieu. This move broadens out our work from a focus primarily on lexical choice and discourse to take in wider considerations relevant to ideology more explicitly.

In theoretical terms, whilst we continue to draw lightly on performativity to understand 'leadership' as a word that has effects (see Learmonth and Morrell, 2019), the

novel contribution here is that we explain how these effects are reinforced and constituted by a contemporary milieu. In doing so we make stronger and more explicit links between leadership and neoliberalism. For us, neoliberalism finds expression in a cultural 'froth' where the rewards of the market get celebrated as the essence of 'success.' Putative virtues like individualism and meritocracy are therefore unquestioningly valorized, while the fate of the majority who must inevitably fail under market competition is shrouded in euphemism and obfuscation – if their fate is recognized at all. To explain the link we propose between neoliberalism and the popularity of organizational 'leaders', we reflect critically on the recent rise of the language of leadership to show how it has effects that redraw social relations in ways that resemble the trajectory of a political project. Whereas 'project' could connote intentionality, it is not necessary for us to divine or attribute intent here because our focus is to make wider points about an omnipresent yet also largely unrecognised political language that reinforces neoliberalism.

Our paper proceeds as follows. To introduce our arguments, we set out a sketch showing how the figure of the 'leader' is becoming ubiquitous. We then explain how the term 'leader' strongly connotes images of greatness and goodness, and in contrast to 'manager'; a term which has considerably more negative and less prestigious associations. We then link the emergent preference for 'leaders' with the rise of neoliberalism, arguing that as an individual-centred ideology and rhetoric, the neoliberalism milieu neatly aligns with the language of leadership, such that the two have become mutually reinforcing. In the next section, we identify some of the effects of using the discourse of 'leadership' in organizational life in order to demonstrate how, in practice, its widespread use typically serves many of the interests of elites. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of our analysis for organizational scholarship. We suggest many organizational researchers are

implicated (consciously or not) in the growth of this discourse, and put forward a number of proposals designed to minimize our future complicity.

The Ubiquitous 'Leader'

Although the term 'leader' has been used to signify hierarchical seniority by leadership academics in business schools and similar institutions since at least the 1930s (Selznick, 1957; Rost, 1991), it is only relatively recently that people like executives have commonly been called 'leaders' in wider society. Sources as diverse as a 'wide cross section of British English both spoken and written' since the early 1990s (Learmonth and Morrell, 2019, p. 28); *The Wall Street Journal* (Walsh, 2020) and UK government policy documents (O'Reilly and Reed, 2010) all demonstrate the same trend. In a gradual but consistent drift over the last few decades, 'leader' is becoming a generic term widely recognised in day-to-day discourse as a label for senior people within formal hierarchies. In the process, it is gradually displacing other terms once more frequently used, including 'manager'. As Kniffin et al (2020, p. 545) identify:

> When considering the mission statements in 2017 of that year's Top 10 graduate business schools … nine of these ten schools' missions explicitly referred to leadership, with only two mentioning management. In stark contrast, in 1977, only one of the same ten schools used any leader-related words, while nine of ten used manager- or management-related words ... The *Wall Street Journal* shows the same general trend whereby the number of articles per year during the period between 1989 through 2017 including the term "managers" has trended downward from 4,481 (in 1989) to 2,839 (in 2017), whereas the number including the term "leaders" has increased from 3,235 (in 1989) to 4,911 (in 2017).

This trend is more than simply 'up-titling' of the kind that encourages a three-person start-up to have two 'junior vice-presidents' and a 'chair'; or that motivates immodest LinkedIn users to describe themselves as 'visionary imagineers'. Our social imagination is partly constituted by our dominant language, and a strong case can surely be made for today's organizational life being dominated by the language of 'leadership' (Davies, 2017). This

being so, the use of ‘leader’ aggrandizes or glorifies an individual, implying that those given the label are somehow infused with special qualities. At the same time, the language of leadership implies that these ‘leaders’ merit their title, and so, if we try hard enough we too might become leaders one day. The corollary of this implication, of course, is that the majority – those ‘ordinary’ organizational members who will inevitably fail to make it to ‘leadership’ – lack such merit; though this corollary is conveniently forgotten in many portrayals of leadership. Use of ‘leader’ also redraws relations within an organization: ‘Leaders’ implies ‘followers’. It is because so many of us are now using ‘leaders’ commonly and routinely to talk about executives and other people at the top of organizations that it is important to understand the effects this apparently mundane practice is having. It is also important to understand the wider context that legitimises the proliferation of this language of leadership.

Thus the omnipresent use of ‘leader’ is not mere fashion or empty rhetoric, nor is it simply the latest in a long line of corporate weasel words (Watson, 2005). Rather, we argue that it can be understood as a project supporting and promoting the neoliberal milieu. Using ‘leader’ has effects that undergird and reinforce implied values and assumptions about human relationships at work. In terms of implied values, ‘leader’ is a celebratory label and therefore it predisposes us to see elites in ways that are positive. In terms of implied assumptions, calling those who were more traditionally known as managers ‘leaders’ glosses over basic conflicts that lie at the heart of the employment relationship.

Words are never innocent after all, and as Mautner and Learmonth (2020, p.277) argue ‘“labels” for social actors, whether leader [or any other]… are not merely labels, but … typically convey (or gloss over) identities and power asymmetries, as well as legitimize certain constructions of roles and functions’. Indeed, it is because we are starting to use the words in such a normalized, unnoticed manner that ‘leader’ and ‘leadership’ are becoming

foundational in our thinking. The terms are starting to frame certain fundamental, if relatively newly taken-for-granted beliefs within organizations – especially about the nature of power and authority. Understanding this change as a project helps us to see that while this practice has often gone unnoticed, it reflects and reinforces wider societal trends and processes associated with neoliberalism. Consequently, 'project-ing' 'leadership' ties these concerns to phenomena that are of great potential significance to us all. Our aim in this article therefore, is to highlight and analyze the practices enabled as well as the interests served by 'leader'; a term which is becoming routinely deployed for naming elites, especially in day-to-day organizational life.

The Semantic Aura of 'Leader'

Certain ideas connected to 'leadership' have been immensely influential in shaping Western thought and culture for thousands of years. The broad ideas we have in mind can be traced back to the writings of Plato (especially his idea of philosopher kings), to Aristotle's account of the great-souled man, through nineteenth century work, famously including Thomas Carlyle's series of lectures *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History* – and even perhaps Nietzsche's Übermensch. Similar ideas about 'leaders' were also promulgated by those still regarded as major direct influences on contemporary social theory today, including figures like Gramsci, Freud and Weber.

'Leaders', for these writers, can be characterized very broadly in two ways. First, they were understood to be 'great' in the sense that the term 'leader' would typically only be assigned to individuals considered to have changed history in a significant way, or otherwise been highly influential in religious or intellectual life. Carlyle, for instance, included people like Napoleon, Luther and Muhammad among those he considered to be heroic. Second, 'leaders' were understood to be 'good'; not necessarily in the sense that they were always

morally perfect, but in the sense that their moral authority was ultimately derived from other people's willingness to follow them. Contemporary exemplar 'leaders' (i.e. people widely considered to be 'great' and 'good') might therefore include figures like Martin Luther King Jr or Nelson Mandela.

In drawing attention to what is (intentionally) a very broad sketching of classic works (for more detailed recent accounts see Spoelstra, 2018 and Wilson, 2015), we are not suggesting such ideas about leadership are unproblematic. Far from it; as is well known, ideas of the leader as a 'great man' have long been criticized in the organizational leadership literature and beyond. Our central point is that certain historical residues within language, as Ives (2004, p.88) following Gramsci argues, are 'fundamental in operations of power prestige and hegemony'. By seeping in to what Miendel, Ehrlich and Dukerich (1985, p.78) call our 'collective consciousness' the historical residues of 'leadership' continue to shape widely taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of power and prestige in society. Anyone who has asked a group of undergraduates for the names of people they consider to be 'leaders' doubtless can testify to the continuing power of the term.

The same sorts of assumptions about 'leaders' can also appear in academic work published in management journals. Here is a recent example of such an article, taken from the opening few sentences of the article:

> History is replete with examples of leaders who are renowned for their positions of moral authority – for their status as paragons of virtue and goodness and for their ability to motivate their followers to do good deeds. Martin Luther King, Jr., worked for equal rights and inspired his followers to fight for justice, while Mahatma Gandhi emphasized compassion for the less fortunate. Winston Churchill is widely renowned for demonstrating and inspiring loyalty to the British Crown, while Mother Theresa (*sic*) is particularly well-known for her emphasis on the sanctity of body and spirit. (Fehr, Yam and Dang, 2015, p.182).

Although some readers might flinch in the face of such gauche ahistoricism, none (presumably) would object to figures like King, Gandhi, Churchill and Mother Teresa being

called ‘leaders’. It would be odd to suggest otherwise because, axiomatically, this is how the term has been understood for thousands of years. However, what makes this paper a revealing article to consider is the way it continues; the consecutive sentences are:

> Many CEOs, such as James Burke of Johnson & Johnson are admired for their care and compassion, while others, such as Whole Foods CEO John Mackey, are admired for their focus on purity. Regardless of the actions for which these leaders are most renowned (e.g., actions that reflect justice, compassion, loyalty, or purity), all of them have demonstrated an ability to leverage morality as a means of garnering commitment to a cause, tapping in to their followers’ moral beliefs and conveying what it takes to be moral in a given place and at a given point in time.

The juxtaposition of ‘leaders’ from history with CEOs of large corporations would have struck Carlyle as strange in the extreme. Carlyle was aristocratic in his assumptions (Wilson, 2015) and would have ruled out anyone ‘in trade’ as a hero. Nevertheless, what using the term ‘leader’ now seems able to do is not only to make such flattering juxtapositions plausible; but in effect, to put CEOs in the same bracket as figures who have changed history and been venerated by thousands if not millions of people.

There is an interesting consequence here. While ‘leader’ is becoming a new way to signify hierarchical superiority, at the same time, using the term ‘leader’ foregrounds the person; this kind of foregrounding tends to take attention away from hierarchy and formal power as such. This effect seems to be due to the fact that heroism, greatness and goodness are ideas that have been so long associated with traditional assumptions about ‘leaders’ in Western thought, that they tend to drown out relatively humdrum (and modern) concerns, such as what is actually involved in running a business, and the structures of power within corporations. The term ‘leader’ sacralizes the self; a feat that as we will argue below reinforces the neoliberal milieu by celebrating the individual and by staying silent about the problematic nature of wider structural forces.

Whatever else it might represent though, using the term ‘leader’ for anyone who happens to be relatively senior in an organizational hierarchy is a very significant break from

the way the term has generally been put to work throughout most of the history of Western thought. Even as late as the 1970s, classic work on leadership such as Burns' (1978/2010) *Leadership* (the book that introduced 'transformational leadership' to the world) focused almost exclusively on political life – the arena where, conventionally, we are most likely to find those who change history – and hardly mentioned formal work organizations. (1) Nevertheless, in examining what 'leader' does in its relatively new (i.e. specifically organizational) context, the cultural legacy of 'leadership' – and in particular its overwhelming historical associations with the greatness and goodness of the 'leader' – remains important. Miendel et al (1985, p. 79) remind us of how 'as observers of and as participants in organizations, we … have developed highly romanticized, heroic views of leadership – what leaders do, what they are able to accomplish, and the general effects they have on our lives'.

Great 'Leader' or Great 'Manager'?

One of the reasons the term is so important for organization theory is that, despite its ubiquity, 'leader' does very different things when compared to terms more traditionally used for individuals wielding organizational authority, such as 'manager'. Of course, when it comes to the function of a role, 'manager' and 'leader' can be used, apparently, as casual synonyms (Martin and Learmonth, 2012). For instance, adjectives such as 'senior' and 'strategic' are commonly juxtaposed with both 'manager' and 'leader' in everyday contemporary English usage (Learmonth and Morrell, 2019). In this context, it is far from obvious how a 'senior leader' might be different from a 'senior manager'. In many other contexts however, using 'leader' does things that have very different effects compared to the effects of using 'manager' in the same context. This is because the connotations associated with 'manager' now tend to conjure up a range of rather unheroic images linked to things like

careerism, industrialism, authoritarianism, conflict, routine, and bureaucracy (Brocklehurst, Grey, and Sturdy, 2010; Ford and Harding, 2007). 'Leader', on the other hand, has few, if any, negative connotations.

As examples of their different effects, let us examine what 'leader' does in the excerpts from actual organizational discourse included at the start of this article (above). Take the phrase, being 'the leader you want to be' in the first of the excerpts – the job advert for junior supermarket managers. Had it read 'be the *manager* you want to be' then it would merely have been about doing a good job and having a successful career (in fact, the excerpt does include the term 'manager' when dealing with the more formal career possibilities of the role). In contrast, being 'the *leader* you want to be' starts to suggest alluring fantasies about the future self – on a journey to something perhaps akin to greatness. This appeal to self-authorship is what Foucault (2008, p. 226) identifies as the bedrock of neoliberalism: '[T]he stake in all neoliberal analysis is the replacement every time of homo oeconomicus as a partner of exchange with homo oeconomicus as entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer'.

The phrase from the advertisement for the 'Leadership Summit' in the second excerpt (above) – on how 'wisdom, grit and compassion are core essentials that underpin all leadership' – gives more clues about the nature of 'leadership's' appeal. This excerpt makes explicit the links with the goodness of the leader inherent in traditional ideas, but it also does rather more. Especially when allied to other ancient ideas with cultural valences similarly linked to goodness – here, 'wisdom' and 'compassion' – 'leadership' conjures up a set of images that are closer to being seductive than merely attractive. While remaining (perhaps usefully) vague in terms of what they might mean for someone's actual day-to-day practice, being a wise and compassionate 'leader' is an almost irresistible appeal to self-image: the reflection that snared Narcissus. Indeed, such framings speak directly to the sorts of images,

aspirations and ideals many would choose for themselves. They also bring out a persona that is socially preferable. In keeping with the neoliberalism milieu, this construction of the leader celebrates the self and glosses over structural antagonisms. Importantly, a phrase like 'wisdom, grit and compassion are core essentials that underpin all *management*' would not have suggested an aspirational identity. Rather, the phrase would be bordering on incoherence, because 'management' is so rarely linked with terms like 'wisdom' or 'compassion'.

Since the 1990s, other attractive adjectives strongly related to goodness – such as 'authentic', 'inspirational', 'servant', etc. – have become popularly linked to the term 'leader'. While it makes very little cultural sense to call someone a 'servant *manager*', or an 'authentic *manager*' – these juxtapositions simply do not work (Mautner, 2007) – 'servant' and 'authentic *leader*' have become standard compounds. So much so, that they often seem to be taken for granted in much organizational research and practice (Lemoine, Hartnall, and Leroy, 2019).

Commentators like Kotter (1990; 1999) and Zaleznik (1977) were amongst the most influential in first popularizing the notion that there are distinct sets of behaviours that empirically distinguish 'leaders' from 'managers' within organizations. Especially in the light of 'leader' now being a term routinely used to describe *anyone* who holds a position of seniority, we suggest this view is becoming increasingly implausible. In the context of day-to-day work environments, 'leader' and 'manager' are evidently alternatives for talking about people with institutionalized authority. The choice between them is not so much empirical as it is ideological – in the sense that calling someone a 'leader' implies much more status and prestige than referring to them as a 'manager'.

For example, while calling one's boss a 'great manager' may be a compliment, it is only ever going to be a compliment about how they do a good job in a work setting. For

intimations of innate transcendence, it hardly compares with calling the same boss a 'great leader'. This is a form of flattery which conjures up ideas suggesting characteristics that might be traced back, not entirely unreasonably, to ancient thought (Morrell, 2012). From the point of view of those in senior positions then – many of whom are able, in effect, to decide how they will be known – 'leader' is surely always going to be, overwhelmingly, their title of choice. Furthermore, people with high status in organizations will prefer to be known as 'leaders', regardless of the extent to which what they actually do might (or might not) conform empirically to the characteristics of a 'leader' as suggested by writers like Kotter and Zaleznik.

The Language of 'Leadership' Exemplifying Neoliberalism

The apparently widespread ideological preference for 'leadership' is something of a puzzle, however, in the sense that it seems so far from many ordinary people's experience of, and views about, working life. That is why we think that the drift towards 'leadership' is not primarily about making the practicalities of life in organizations better for everyone. Instead, it can be understood as intimately tied up with a parallel rise in certain ideological preferences spreading throughout Western society and beyond. We argue that the celebration of 'leaders' is closely associated with the march of an ideology that has come to be known as *neoliberalism*: that is, the naturalization, indeed, the glorification of 'individual self-interest, economic efficiency and unbridled competition' (Steger and Roy, 2010: x). As we have suggested already in terms of a sacralization of the self, the language of leadership aligns with neoliberalism, an individual-centred ideology and rhetoric, such that the two have become mutually reinforcing. We argue therefore that the language of leadership in the context of organizational life has become, to use Mirowski's (2013, p.117) memorable phrase, part of the 'creeping linguistic neoliberalism' we see today in wider society. In order

to develop these ideas, let us now dive a little deeper into work that examines language changes under neoliberalism.

Over the last 20 years or so there has been growing critical concern around what might be called the marketization of language (Cameron, 2005; Fairclough, 2000; Hasan, 2003; Holborrow, 2015; Kelly-Holmes and Mautner, 2010; Massey, 2013; Mautner, 2010). This literature problematizes the increasing 'transfer of business discourse to other domains' (Mautner, 2010, p.1). In particular it questions the use of 'the market' (understood in its orthodox economics sense) as a fundamental, taken-for-granted metaphor which has come to frame, apparently unproblematically, much of the received common sense around our quotidian life. For instance, as a deliberately mundane but telling example, Massey (2013, p.9) points out how on

> trains and buses, and sometimes in hospitals and universities too, we have become customers, not passengers, readers, patients or students. In all these cases a specific activity and relationship is erased by a general relationship of buying and selling that is given precedence over it.

Parallel shifts witnessed specifically in organization theory over the last generation or so and that have been linked to neoliberalism include the change from personnel to Human Resources (Legge, 1995; Keenoy, 1997); the invention of New Public Management (Hood, 1991; Clarke and Newman, 1997) and the rise of the discourse of the entrepreneur (Perren and Dannreuther, 2012). As Massey (2013, p.10) argues:

> The so-called truth underpinning this change of descriptions – which has been brought about in everyday life through managerial instruction and the thoroughgoing renaming of institutional practices in their allowed forms of writing, address and speech – is that, in the end, individual interests are the only reality that matters; that those interests are purely monetary; and that so-called values are only a means of pursuing selfish ends by other means. And behind this in turn, the theoretical justification of this now nearly-dominant system is the idea of a world of independent agents whose choices, made for their own advantage, paradoxically benefit all. (p.10)

In other words, these changes in the sorts of terms we routinely use to represent organizational phenomena should not be dismissed as mundane and trivial, or as merely cosmetic. They can be understood to have provided new normative frameworks (Barley and Kunda, 1991) through which central issues in organizational life have come to be reframed and reconstituted. Terms like public management, human resources, entrepreneurialism – and we would add, leadership – are now embedded in routine talk as the scaffolding supporting what is hegemonic; i.e. what is widely taken for granted as common sense (see Gramsci, 2011). Furthermore, and partly as a result of them having passed into common sense parlance, these terms have also enabled and moulded new personal identities, while establishing novel ways in which we can characterize social relationships. For example, the rise of human resources means that what used to be known as '"people issues" have transmuted into "labour-resourcing issues"' (Keenoy, 1997, p.834). In the same sort of way, as Clarke and Newman (1997, p. 92) observe, the discursive changes associated with the New Public Management, were 'part of the process through which "administrators", "public servants" and "practitioners" … [came] to see themselves as "business managers" … "strategists" … and "leaders"'.

Other discursive practices have been subjected to similar critique – that an apparently benevolent discourse has been put to work in the service of promoting a misleading harmony in employment relations. As Cullinane and Dundon (2006, p.113) argue, the psychological contract can also be understood to 'symbolize[s] an ideologically biased formula designed for a particular managerialist interpretation of contemporary work and employment'. However, we suggest that 'leadership' is more than one of a wider suite of discursive resources that bosses can call on to disguise power. This is the case, not least because its effects are more fundamental than terms like the psychological contract or human resources. 'Leader' describes a person; it speaks to someone's identity in a fundamental way – and is usually

aspirational or celebratory. Furthermore, the term has been a powerful signifier in general discourse for hundreds (if not thousands) of years. Today however, its associations and popularity are shifting such that it is now used widely in popular culture in ways that are significantly different from its historic usage. None of these things applies to ideas like the psychological contract or human resources. One of the other things that is different about the drift to 'leadership' is that it is not so obviously driven by elite interests but is cast as a natural, progressive and commonplace description of working life. Perhaps both these factors make it more insidious and harder to resist. Indeed, the language of leadership – with its implications that the so-called leader is both great and good – represents a particularly subtle but powerful opportunity, we argue, for the pursuit of individual elite interests to be disguised and made to look as if it is in the benefit of all.

To demonstrate how the language of leadership is so well suited for this purpose, let us take as an illustration one of the most recent publications in the very common 'positive' genre of work on leadership (Gardner et al, 2021); a book by Frei and Morriss (2020) *Unleashed: The unapologetic leader's guide to empowering everyone around you*. According to Frei's university website:

> *Unleashed* provides radical advice for the practice of leadership today. Showing how the boldest, most effective leaders use a special combination of trust, love, and belonging to create spaces where other people can excel, Frances and Anne offer practical, battle-tested tools—based on their work in companies such as Uber, Riot Games, and others (Harvard Business School, 2021)

The links we pointed to earlier – between leadership and greatness and goodness – could hardly be more explicit or obvious than they are in this excerpt. What is perhaps less noticeable at first glance however, is how these discourses can still be read to be intimately tied up (albeit more implicitly) with the instrumental pursuit of commercial success. Hence, it is not leaders in general – but the '*most effective* leaders' (our italics) – who are the focus for the book. What counts as most effective may not be spelled out – but the competitive,

commercial context made salient by the mention of corporations like 'Uber, Riot Games and others' along with the semantic aura of the term *effective* in this context – both strongly imply that effectiveness should be seen in market terms.

Such neoliberal suggestions are further reinforced by the verb which the authors assign to the 'most effective leaders'. Effective leaders do not, for instance, show or encourage or demonstrate 'trust, love, and belonging' (even though showing, encouraging and demonstrating are the kinds of verbs most likely to be used in talk about such attributes in their usual context – personal relationships). Rather, a very unusual verb is chosen: effective leaders *use* 'trust, love, and belonging'. Use them, presumably, in order to further their own and their company's effectiveness. It is hardly surprising then that the opening page of the book is full of glowing recommendations from an impressive array of corporate elites.

This kind of language of leadership – with its apparent emphasis on trusting and loving others – might seem from a superficial glance to be talking about something highly progressive, perhaps even revolutionary. Indeed, the following quote from Toni Morrison (the only African American novelist to win the Nobel Prize for literature) is juxtaposed with the enthusiastic supporting statements of business executives mentioned above: 'Just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free someone else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower someone else.'

The link between progressive social ideas and the sort of writing about leadership we are now discussing is a theme taken up by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005, p.97). For them, the qualities valued by this broad genre of leadership writing are

> autonomy, spontaneity … conviviality, openness to others and novelty, availability, creativity, visionary intuition, sensitivity to differences, listening to lived experience and receptiveness to a whole range of experiences, being attracted to informality and the search for interpersonal contacts.

These characteristics are, as they put it, ‘taken directly from the repertoire of May 1968’; May 1968 being, of course, the date emblematic of the social revolution that occurred around that time in France and across the globe. In France, it marked the start of months of social unrest, beginning with student protests against capitalism, consumerism and other traditional elite values. Sadly though, as Boltanski and Chiapello go on to argue, this repertoire very rarely, if ever, is revolutionary in the context of today’s leadership discourses. Although some of the aesthetic qualities of revolutionary-sounding language have been retained by many of leadership’s advocates, the ideological content of the 1960s student uprising – of which the language of leadership might remind us – has been almost entirely filleted and eviscerated.

May 1968 was, at heart, about radical critique. It was concerned with trying to remove capitalism and its exploitation of ordinary workers by direct action. It failed to achieve these objectives, as we now know. What has happened instead, as Boltanski and Chiapello argue (2005, p.97), is that its defeat has been compounded by some of its revolutionary language being placed ‘in the service of forces whose destruction they were intended to hasten’. What we are left with, in other words, are ‘leaders’ who may well judiciously use a selection of terms from the emancipatory language that echoes the aspirations of May 1968. These ‘leaders’ however, remain firmly as the servants of capitalism and profits.

Nevertheless, the incorporation of what sounds like the language of emancipation into the language of leadership has become important to the neoliberal project. It has meant that more radical ideas might appear to be accommodated and satisfied, thereby potentially blunting further critique. In other words, while it might seem obvious for radical groups to criticize and oppose ‘managers’, it might appear churlish, even perverse to criticize ‘leaders’; especially ‘leaders’ who are said by leading academics to be loving and trusting, or authentic and inspirational, or servants and purpose-driven, etc. etc.

This is not to claim that the language of 'leadership' has been effective in totally dismantling all resistance, of course. But because 'leader' has such strong connotations of rightful supremacy – across the political spectrum – it can provide justification and cover for the 'tough decisions' in which the deterioration of worker's rights and conditions is simultaneously evidence of supposedly strong and visionary leadership. Another, perhaps more subtle effect of the title 'leader' is that many people who would never have considered doing a 'management' job will much more happily take on a 'leadership' role. As we have seen, it can feel good to be called a leader, and to be able to think of oneself in that way. The real trouble is that the people called 'leaders' make exactly the same cuts (or 'efficiency savings') that the people who used to be called 'managers' would have made. This means that the growing trend to call people like senior doctors and nurses, teachers and university academics 'leaders' has had problematic effects. It has meant that the very people who could have traditionally been relied upon to resist commercialization – and would never have been comfortable being called a 'manager' – are nowadays more easily incorporated into the neoliberal world of competition and markets; simply by being called a 'leader' (Berghout, et al, 2018).

At the level of societal change however, we are not suggesting there has been a deliberate conspiracy somehow to inject the language of leadership into corporate life. Apart from anything else, the drift towards talking about 'leaders' over the last 30 years has been too informal, too evolutionary for such possibilities. A more likely explanation is that there is an emerging consensus about language use as it relates to organizational leadership. This is supported by and becoming embedded in the neoliberal milieu, and gaining new traction in the popular imagination. In other words, the fact 'leader' has now become so widely acceptable as an apparent synonym for boss is largely down to the favourable ideological environment that neoliberalism has created for 'leadership'; an environment that has

increased the everyday power of bosses, valorized self-interest and bracketed off any implication of structural sources for inequality and conflict. This everyday power seems both to have shifted (and been enabled by the shift towards) public discourse which has framed organizational phenomena in increasingly positive terms. In this context, a semantic drift towards a preference for 'leaders' can be seen as part of wider trends that depict organizational life in ways that suggest positive cultural valences (Mautner and Learmonth, 2020).

Our analysis resonates with the sorts of critiques of managerial discourse that started to emerge in the 1990s. For instance, Keenoy (1997, p.835) speaks of the

> symbolic, emboldening and evangelical language that characterizes … contemporary managerial discourses … Such descriptive-projections … have spawned 'the pursuit' of various 'missions', 'crusades' and 'competitive edges' … [which] appear[s] to have had a dramatic impact on managerial (re-) constructions of social reality and on the actions managers are induced/traduced to take in order to bring those realities into existence'.

Interestingly, in the 25 years or so since Keenoy was writing, the very term he used to represent those people wishing to reconstruct social reality (i.e. the people Keenoy calls 'managers' in 1997) has itself largely been changed to 'leader' by today. Arguably, this change makes the 'emboldening and evangelical language' intended 'to bring those realities into existence' even harder to perceive as such – and therefore ever harder to resist. As Miendel et al (1985, p.99) argue:

> The greater significance of leadership lies not in the direct impact on substantive matters but in the ability to exert control over the meanings and interpretations important constituencies give to whatever events and occurrences are considered relevant for the organization's functioning ... The manipulation of language and other organizationally relevant symbols allows leaders to manage the political and social processes that maintain organized activity in the face of potentially disruptive forces.

These, then, are the sorts of factors underpinning our claim that the language of 'leadership' has become as helpful to those at the top of big business – and as congruent with

their interests – as other forms of neoliberal rhetoric. Such rhetoric might include the redefinition of job insecurity as 'free agency' or the 'gig economy', the celebration of 'flexibility' (which means flexibility that suits organizational interests), or the portrayal of billionaire tycoons as 'regular guys'. When workers can be controlled through their freedoms the defenders of capitalism no longer have to crush labour resistance. Redefining themselves – the defenders of capitalism – as 'leaders' (with workers now able to be cast as 'followers') is appealing as one potential avenue towards everyday control. This is because it tends to hollow out classical notions of organizational politics. The language of 'leader' and 'follower' erases any debate about alienation or exploitation and remakes 'conflict' into an exercise of 'problem-solving' and 'team-building'. In other words, the neoliberal discursive environment we face today is such that the default position is one in which people like CEOs are increasingly being celebrated as if they were heroic figures – universally respected and admired. Why not call them leaders?

While Miendl et al (above) might imply that leadership has little 'direct impact on substantive matters' we extend our analysis in the next section to consider leadership's more substantive effects – noting how routinely calling elites 'leaders' actually *does* things that are tangible and significant in organizational life. These are 'power effects'. Unfortunately, we find that the kinds of things that 'leader' does at work are predominantly negative. Indeed, we show how 'leader' can also be deployed on a more macro level across organizations as 'a political resource that reinforces privileged power relations and secures the acquiescence and enthusiasm of others' (Currie and Brown, 2003, p.566).

The Power Effects of 'Leader' at Work

One of the huge ironies of the growth in the popularity of the term 'leader' over the last thirty years or so, especially considering how frequently it is associated with ostensibly

'positive' ideas about organizational life (Einola and Alvesson, 2021), is that it has occurred at a time when there has been a massive deterioration in pay, job security and working conditions for many ordinary workers. During the same period, furthermore, the pay of senior executives (i.e. the people we now call 'leaders', including many of those who claim to be 'servant' or 'compassionate' etc. leaders) has risen exponentially.

It would be unreasonable, of course, to pin the blame entirely on 'leadership' for all the seismic shifts in society we have witnessed under neoliberalism. Still, many of these changes hardly imply happy relations between 'leaders' and their supposed 'followers'. So much so that all the evidence on the deterioration of corporate life for ordinary staff and the vast improvements in the pay and conditions of people like CEOs, strongly suggests that the rise in the popularity of 'leader' is more likely to be camouflage for bad behaviour than a motive for doing good.

We argue that the discourse of leadership at a more macro level naturalizes a certain version of meritocracy. Business elites being known as 'business leaders' might suggest that they have worked hard to be in the positions they hold; and indeed it might imply (as opposed to a term like 'elite') that *anyone* could similarly become a 'leader' if only they worked hard enough to get there. But as has been shown empirically time and time again, people from non-privileged backgrounds very rarely get the best-paid business jobs. Nevertheless, the language of leadership naturalizes inequalities by reinforcing the hidden continuities of advantage: the fact, for instance, that overwhelmingly those who have been privately educated continue to get the lion's share of the most highly rewarded jobs. At the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, the language of leadership might also be taken to imply that business leaders are *not* ordinary people; rather as we have seen, they are somehow especially great people. This specialness means their advantages might seem to be perhaps their natural reward. In a third paradox however, the language of leadership also implies elites are good –

a goodness that suggests their priorities should be everyone's priorities – thereby obfuscating and ignoring power relations.

Naturalizing Inequalities

In the UK between 2009 and 2014, while the economy grew by 10%, real wages fell by 6%; similarly in the US, the incomes of 95% of households were lower in 2016 than they had been in 2007 (Edgar, 2018). In other words, most people in Western countries are getting paid *less* in real terms than ten years ago –in spite of overall economic growth – and in spite of the claim to servanthood or compassionate leadership made by a significant number of CEOs. Indeed, a further puzzle about leadership's current popularity lies on the other side of the pay equation: the huge growth in the salaries of people like CEOs. As Hargreaves (2019, p.110) has shown:

> In the US in 1965, the ratio [of top pay to average pay] was – on average – 20 to 1, but from that period, chief executive pay rose by almost 1,000 per cent while workforce wages went up only 11 per cent and the ratio today is 347 to 1. The UK has been on a similar trajectory with the average ratio for the FTSE 100 now at 129 to 1.

What we suggest has happened is that the language of leadership has started to be appropriated in the service of elite interests. Today's CEOs are now able to represent themselves as 'leaders' and are joined in doing so by many others – including colleagues, journalists, many members of the public – not to mention business school academics. Unfortunately, what we know about macro trends in employment relations strongly suggests that few have embraced the more radical ideas about workplace emancipation that the terms associated with 'leadership' might *seem* to imply. Even when we give them the benefit of the doubt and assume CEOs actually are genuine in their intent, terms like servanthood, compassion and empathy are usually dead-ends. They are just too seductive and easy to signal, but in reality very, very hard to do, especially in light of the commercial and other pressures CEOs are under. As Alvesson (2020, p.2) argues, 'social reality and popular

leadership theories move in different directions. LS [leadership studies] delivers ideology and comfort through upbeat leadership talk in a world exhibiting constraining and, for many, frustrating managerialist practices'.

Predisposing us to see elites as great and good

All the positive valences surrounding the term 'leaders' often appear to predispose us to see people like CEOs in a similar way to how we might see the 'great' figures from history. It is interesting to note in this context that the paper cited earlier which juxtaposes figures like Churchill and Ghandi with business executives (Fehr et al, 2015) mentions Whole Foods CEO, John Mackey as an exemplary 'leader' known for encouraging purity. A quick Google search however, reveals that Mackey has been embroiled in controversy over his attitude to health care reforms in the US and because of his strong free market and anti-union views; views which he has used in his position as a CEO to express publicly. According to *The Guardian* in 2009, Mackey compared the trade union movement to herpes saying that 'it doesn't kill you, but it's very unpleasant and will make a lot of people not want to be your lover'. This statement even led to calls for a boycott of Whole Foods. However, we get no hint whatsoever of this controversy in Fehr et al's (2015) paper, which remains resolutely upbeat about the unimpeachable moral integrity of the (corporate) 'leaders' examined. Indeed, as we have already seen, elite members of organizations known as 'leaders' can narrate who they are in the particularly flattering terms that the language of leadership supplies them, and use it to enact new and functionally valuable workplace performances (such as claiming to be 'servant leaders'). They can do neither of these things, or at least less effectively, when they are known as 'managers.'

Ignoring Power

Fundamentally then, referring to anyone with some kind of formal hierarchical status as a 'leader' does things. One of the things it tends to do is that it attempts to draw a veil over the structured antagonism that is at the heart of the employment relationship. With 'leader', this relationship is no longer framed as primarily about exchange, or as striking a bargain between wages and profits. Instead, there is the pretence of the common cause – the common cause which people called 'leaders' and 'followers' must by definition have. In other words, the language of leadership is not being used merely to *describe* relations at work, but to *reshape* them. It suits the interests of those who have the most power and who reap the most rewards if we all routinely use language which suggests that ordinary employees' interests are the same as elite interests – and that these elites are doing the best they can for everyone. The language of leadership is very useful in perpetuating these fictions because 'leader' implies that others in the organization have the same goal and the same values.

The pro-elite stance implied by using 'leadership' might be more evident if we contrast it with some of the other terms for corporate elites. How about the term used in the title of a 1956 book by the sociologist C. Wright Mills: *The Power Elite*? Or more recently, the title of a 2014 book by the journalist Owen Jones: *The Establishment*? Either term – 'power elite' or 'the establishment' (or even the mundane term 'manager') – juxtaposed against 'business leader' starts to suggest the inherent partiality and pro-elite nature of the term 'leaders'. Indeed, we believe it is a symptom of how unquestioned market capitalism is becoming in our society that the normalization of 'leader' as a synonym for something like 'boss' is becoming not just popular and widely accepted, but has perpetuated and legitimized a neo-liberal ethos as a result. As Wilson (2015 pp. 183–184) comments:

> Whether leadership discourse has functioned to support or reform the existing social system ... it has repeatedly offered an account which serves elite, anti-democratic interests. The combination of a positioning of order as a critical social good with followers rendered deficient and leaders as superior beings constitutes the three key enduring elements of the Western tradition.

Discussion and Conclusion

We hope that it is clear from our arguments how even the apparently simple and routine act of naming organizational elites, whether calling them 'leaders', 'managers', 'elites' – or anything else – is *in itself* a political act. Indeed, everyone's titles within organizational life potentially intervene in organizational power dynamics in some way or other. Consequently, the encouragement of the use of 'leader' can be understood as a project (whether intentional or not) that reinforces the implied values and assumptions of neoliberalism: a celebration of the market and a valorization of the individual figure of the leader. Clearly, there is never going to be an uncontestably straightforward cause-and-effect relationship between what we call things on the one hand and what we take to be organizational reality on the other. However, following many other discursively-oriented writers, Watson (1995, p.9) puts this part of our argument well:

> The words ones chooses, the tropes one adopts, the terms one utilizes significantly influence how that research enters into broader discourses and how, potentially at least, they influence human action. It is almost as if one is choosing a reality when one writes, rather than giving an account of one.

Watson was writing in the context of the 'personnel' versus 'HRM' debate to which we briefly alluded earlier; and indeed the imposition of HRM can similarly be seen as a project (Mueller and Carter, 2005). It is interesting to note how, in the late 1980s, there was significant public debate – well beyond those directly affected professionally – about whether it was appropriate to refer to human beings routinely as 'human resources'. Many influential voices signalled significant concerns about the implications of doing so (see Legge, 1995, pp.328-340). Nevertheless, this debate has now been almost completely forgotten. Today, 'HRM' or 'HR' is simply (and necessarily) how the function is referred to and by everyone. Arguably, neoliberal values triumphed in this case, and their influence has come to be taken for granted in the sense that we now have little choice but to routinely refer to employees as

human resources because the phrase has become so institutionalized. Even by the mid-1990s Watson (1995, p15) was able to reflect that:

> Perhaps its [HRM's] most significant role is as a discursive resource which has been deployed by academics employed in business schools. It appears to have had tremendous utility as it has grown into whole language games which have made possible the career advancement of professors of HRM, the establishment of academic journals of HRM and the holding of conferences on the alleged activity of HRM.

Some twenty five years on, very similar points might now be made about 'leadership' as a discursive resource. However, more important than the career opportunities that 'leadership' now provides for business academics (including us, as its critics, incidentally) are the effects 'leadership' is having on the wider world. Thinking of individual human beings as 'human resources' arguably contributed to the decline of trade unionism and the rise of precarious working conditions (Fleming, 2017). In the same sort of way, routinely thinking of elites as 'leaders' is starting to have effects on the way we think about these elites. Indeed, some of the worst symptoms of neoliberalism – such as the deterioration in working conditions for ordinary workers – can be seen as part of what 'leadership' as a discursive resource actively facilitates. If you are a 'leader' (rather than a mere 'manager') then your status as a leader suggests that you should expect to be admired, that you believe that you should merit a larger salary, that you deserve to be made to feel special – and so on. All these things rely, at least in part, on ensuring others have less of what is deemed desirable, relatively speaking.

In any event, the language of leadership is clearly becoming institutionalized. One of us had an experience that illustrates particularly well how inescapable 'leadership' is becoming, even when writing research which never mentions the word. As part of the publicity for an article coming out in a journal published by the Academy of Management (AOM), the AOM's PR agency wrote a press release about the article, and sent a draft to the authors for approval before it went live (see https://aom.org/blog-

detail/releases/2018/03/01/release-post-on-data). As there was no mention of the term 'leaders' anywhere in the whole article, we asked the agency to remove the word from the press release. It was not removed in the final version however, and the agency explained why as follows:

> AOM [i.e. officials working for the AOM] followed up with a comment and recommended 'I would recommend leaving in the word "leaders" since this release has a broad audience appeal, and sometimes "managers" alone is misperceived or is jargon (Personal communication).

The use of 'leaders' was apparently seen simply as an aesthetic choice about branding, over which the authors should have no influence. It strikes us as particularly ironic, and especially telling in terms of what we are saying about the institutionalization of the language of leadership, that it was an official at the AOM (i.e. the Academy of *Management*) who made this comment.

All that being said, it is still possible to find examples of resistance to the language of leadership in contemporary day-to-day discourse. The sorts of examples we have in mind are easiest to find in contexts where asymmetrical power relations are particularly salient. It is noticeable that when writing articles supportive of workers during industrial disputes for instance, journalists are much more likely to prefer terms like 'managers', 'bosses' or even explicitly derogatory terms like 'fat cats' than to write (implicitly flatteringly and sympathetically) about the 'leaders' on the other side of the dispute they are supporting. Furthermore, we have never seen writing in this sort of context refer to 'workers' as 'followers'. We suggest that this absence is due to an understanding that the term 'worker' is evidently emblematic of class solidarity, whereas 'follower' might imply a submissive alignment and ultimate acceptance of the interests of 'leaders' (see Learmonth and Morrell, 2019, pp. 108-115). These kinds of discursive preferences show that many of us are aware –

if not always fully consciously – that words do not just 'describe' things, they also 'do' things (Austin, 1962).

In terms of the implications of these issues for organizational theorists, as Cascio (2020, p.604) has observed, '[e]ven if the struggle to counter the unbounded language of leadership is an uphill one because it has become so institutionalized, it is one that academics are particularly well suited to embrace'. In principle at least, the academic freedom that many of us still enjoy (at least relative to many in corporate life) means that we usually retain *some* ability to choose the terms we use; a freedom we can potentially use as part of a wider project to resist the encroachment of neoliberalism (cf. Mould, 2018). Though the explicit requirements of many research funding bodies, corporate clients, module outlines, and even some academic journals, increasingly specify the use of the language of leadership, it remains important to find ways to challenge and resist it nevertheless. Most business academics still do not *have to* refer to elites as 'leaders' in their teaching and research. We believe it is important not to do so, and especially to avoid the sorts of routine, apparently unthinking manner in which the term is now used. As Massey (2013, p.10) reminds us, 'attempts to mould our identities through language and naming take political work, and may be contested.'

It is likely that each of us will have to find ways of mounting challenges to the language of leadership that work for us; doubtless making compromises within whatever constraints our practical circumstances demand. Alternative critical stances are of course available; ironizing the discourse of leadership might perhaps be one (Harding et al, 2011; Knights, 2021), or explicitly associating leadership just with non-organizational phenomena (Humphreys et al, 2012) might be another. But for us, identifying 'leadership' as a project, and using this identification as the basis from which to criticize and contest the attendant discourse is key to our approach. This 'project-ing' is a necessary first step that avoids the

initial concession that comes if we simply accept the terms of the debate as unproblematic. Otherwise, the term 'leader' appears to be a neutral, natural and empirical category. If we want to criticize people whom we unhesitatingly and without revealed irony call 'leaders', we shrink the space for more radical analysis. Indeed, we are likely to fall into the trap that Alvesson and Kärreman (2016, p. 142) identify:

> Many researchers find a market for work using the popular signifier "leadership" because … mainstream approaches have made leadership fashionable. Many efforts to develop "alternative" views thus at the same time partly break with and reinforce the domination of "leadership" … Nuances involved in the efforts to revise "leadership" are easily lost as the major framing reinforces a dominating "mega-discourse," weakening others. For example, this reinforces an understanding that the alternative to leadership is leadership, not peer relations, professionalism, autonomy, co-workership, organizing processes, or mutual adjustment offering alternative framings and understanding than what the leadership vocabulary invites.

To be pessimistic for a moment, it may be that the 'leadership' project has already become too entrenched to question effectively. It may have proven so useful to elites that resistance is now futile. In which case, we now find ourselves consigned to going along with the discourse of leadership as we now have to do in the case of HRM. More optimistically though, if enough people are prepared to explicitly resist the term 'leadership' it may well not be too late. We believe it is important to resist the institutionalization and normalization of 'leadership'; not least because there is surely something just too obviously self-serving about all those pronouncements on 'leadership' made by so many highly-paid executives. We hope that in the long run, analyses like this one may well turn out to be useful in legitimating a more organized resistance to elite power and the rise of neoliberalism.

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Notes

1. It is important to make explicit that formal hierarchies were rarely ever considered by most traditional thinkers about leadership. Where they were considered, they were viewed either as irrelevant, or more commonly as actively undermining the moral authority of the leader. Take the example of Max Weber’s work. For Weber, charismatic authority (an authority Weber also characterizes as leadership) is the opposite of bureaucratic authority. It is this bureaucratic authority, and specifically *not* leadership, that Weber argued is the distinctive mark of the authority people have in ordinary jobs – however senior, important or complex these jobs might be:

> In contrast to any kind of bureaucratic organization of offices, the charismatic structure knows nothing of a form or of an ordered procedure of appointment of dismissal. It knows no regulated ‘career,’ ‘advancement,’ ‘salary,’ or regulated and expert training of the holder of charisma or his aids … nor does it embrace permanent institutions like our bureaucratic ‘departments’ …[rather] Charisma knows only inner determination and inner restraint. The holder of charisma seizes the task that is adequate for him and demands obedience and a following by virtue of his mission. His success determines whether he finds them. His charismatic claim breaks down if his mission is not recognized by those to whom he feels he has been sent. If they recognize him, he is their master – so long as he knows how to maintain recognition through ‘proving’ himself.’ (Weber, 1948: 246/7).

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