Is critical leadership studies 'critical'?

Mark Learmonth
Durham University Business School, UK

Kevin Morrell
Warwick Business School, UK

Abstract
'Leader' and 'follower' are increasingly replacing 'manager' and 'worker' to become the routine way to frame hierarchy within organizations; a practice that obfuscates, even denies, structural antagonisms. Furthermore, given that many workers are indifferent to (and others despise) their bosses, assuming workers are 'followers' of organizational elites seems not only managerialist, but blind to other forms of cultural identity. We feel that critical leadership studies should embrace and include a plurality of perspectives on the relationship between workers and their bosses. However, its impact as a critical project may be limited by the way it has generally adopted this mainstream rhetoric of leader/follower. By not being 'critical' enough about its own discursive practices, critical leadership studies risk reproducing the very kind of leaderism it seeks to condemn.

Introduction

The terms 'leader' and 'follower' are increasingly replacing expressions like 'manager' and 'worker' and becoming routine ways to talk about hierarchical groups within organizations. For example, what was once 'management development' has frequently become 'leadership development'; 'senior management teams' have often morphed into 'senior leadership teams' and CEOs typically present themselves, apparently unquestioningly, as their institution's 'leader' (and are generally described as such in the media). We have even come across the

Corresponding author:
Mark Learmonth, Durham University Business School, Mill Hill Lane, Durham DH1 3LB, UK.
Email: mark.learmonth@durham.ac.uk

term 'middle-leader' in an advert for a school teacher. As Alvesson and Spicer (2014: 40; italics in original) argue:

> In many instances, embracing the idea of leadership does not involve any significant change to practice but merely indicates an interest in relabeling managerial work as "leadership" to make it sound more fashionable and impressive. The term *leadership* is seductive, has a strong rhetorical appeal, and is therefore heavily overused.

However, this slippage between manager/leader and worker/follower is more than merely rebranding with a more fashionable label. It relies on a logic of equivalence: on understanding leadership as equivalent to a role or a kind of work. Because it relies on a logic of equivalence, rather than a subtle interpenetration of meanings or gradual porousness in the terms leader/manager and follower/worker, the shift to leadership represents a significant shift in discursive terrain. Basic categories, fundamental to understanding work and the employment relationship, are disappearing. In their place are labels that implicitly depict a unitarist perspective of the labour process. The manager/worker dyad makes a power imbalance explicit and includes the possibility that interests will diverge. Leader/follower by contrast entails a common goal. It glosses fundamental questions about prerogative because a worker can question managerial prerogative, but it does not quite make sense for 'followers' to question their leaders' basic authority in that way.

This shift to discourse about leaders could be attributed partly to a mushrooming literature on leadership (Alvesson and Spicer, 2014; Grint, 2005; O'Reilly and Reed, 2010; Tourish, 2013). However, and paradoxically, calling someone a leader just because they inhabit a role, or carry out a kind of work goes against the prevailing construction of leadership in the literature. Contemporary leadership scholars tend to understand terms like leader and follower as referencing identities that are in some ways chosen and personal (which could be consistent with the leader/manager slippage), but that are also enacted relationally (which is not). According to most thinking about leadership, to be a leader is not merely to inhabit a role, it is to identify as a leader, and for others to orient towards that identity or to sanction it in some way (Grint, 2010). This is significant because at the same time as editing out terms which potentially signal divergent interests (e.g. manager/worker), popular discourse on leader/follower also airbrushes out any sense of consent or relationality. If a senior executive is axiomatically a leader, those below are axiomatically followers – whether they like it or not.

We have been troubled by the practice of habitually calling people leaders and followers, as if they were synonyms for manager and worker, ever since starting to notice it; not least because of the experiences one of us (Mark) had while working as a manager in the UK National Health Service (NHS) in the 1980s and '90s. But even to say NHS 'manager' in the context of the early 1980s NHS is not quite correct. When Mark first started in the NHS no one officially had that title; everyone was an administrator. In 1983, however, after a government inquiry suggested that management should be introduced into the NHS there was overwhelming enthusiasm for the change. Overwhelming enthusiasm, that is, amongst the newly named managers (i.e. former administrators); but it came about only with strong backing from the Thatcher government, in the teeth of opposition from clinicians (Strong and Robinson, 1990). One thing that did unite the newly up-titled managers with the clinicians, however, was a shared intuition: that an apparently simple change in job title – from administrator to manager – represented a shift in power dynamics (Bresnen et al., 2014; Learmonth, 2005), one that would serve the interests of some (e.g. the new managers) over others (e.g. the clinicians).

A generation on, we can see a comparable shift occurring across all sectors and industries. Only now we are calling the managers leaders (Ford and Harding, 2007; Martin and Learmonth, 2012; O'Reilly and Reed, 2011). The shift is occurring gradually and informally, though even some 12 years ago Parker (2004: 175) had already detected that 'management itself [is] beginning to go out of fashion (being discursively articulated as something rather like administration) and leadership [represents] the new panacea'.

Our aim in this paper is to demonstrate the problematic effects that accompany the routine use of a leader/follower rhetoric – what one might call the language of leadership – especially in the context of critical leadership studies (CLS) research. Our intent is not so much to debate what leaders and followers *are*, but to show what the use of these terms *does*; particularly when deployed as apparently routine and more-or-less unnoticed generics for hierarchical groups within organizations. What we call things sanctions certain forms of discourse and knowledge, while disqualifying other possible ways of knowing and being in the world. Yet for all its considerable merits in many other ways, much of CLS appears to use the leader/follower dualism just like the mainstream – taking these terms as merely the building blocks of analysis; in and of themselves necessary, natural and unproblematic. Labels are never innocent though. Social scientists do not simply describe the world, we also constitute it. Calling people leaders and followers potentially has a range of effects, which might encourage us to be cautious in the use of these terms. As Alvesson and Kärreman (2016:142) argue, the terms leadership and followership are predominantly used 'to build and maintain a positive, celebrating, even glamorous view of organizational relations [while] naturalizing and freezing (asymmetrical) social relations'.

The basic point, therefore, is that what we call people matters – and so reflexivity about the effects of our naming practices is necessary. Unfortunately, when it comes to foundational terms like leader and follower, such reflexivity appears to be largely absent in CLS. Collinson (2011: 181) describes how CLS has 'a concern to critique the power relations and identity constructions through which leadership dynamics are reproduced'. We agree; but argue that by routinely adopting the language of leadership, CLS risks being implicated in the very power relations it sets out to critique.

In developing this argument, our article proceeds by providing critical readings of recent leading work in CLS to show that:

(1) In spite of its claims to be distinctive from critical management studies (CMS), often CLS is only definitively about *leadership* because of its preference for the terms leader and follower. It seems as if more traditional terms like manager and worker have simply been crossed-out by CLS researchers and replaced with leader and follower.
(2) Unfortunately, this preference for the language of leadership affects the tone of CLS work – naturalizing the interests of elites while de-radicalizing critique. Indeed, trying to be critical while using the language of leadership can strike some very odd-sounding notes.

Critical Leadership Studies

Almost since the idea of organizational leadership was first introduced, leadership has had its critics. A full review of literature critical of leadership in various ways is beyond the scope of this article (for such a review see Tourish, 2013). However, exemplary work includes for us landmark papers such as Meindl et al.'s (1985: 79) analysis of the romance of leadership,

something which is: 'hinted at in the observations made by a number of social and organizational analysts who have noted the esteem, prestige, charisma, and heroism attached to various conceptions and forms of leadership'. It also includes Smircich and Morgan's (1982: 258) critique of leadership as the management of meaning:

> The leader exists as a formal leader only when he or she achieves a situation in which an obligation, expectation or right to frame experience is presumed, or offered and accepted by others. . . . It involves a complicity or process of negotiation through which certain individuals, implicitly or explicitly, surrender their power to define the nature of their nature of their experience to others. Indeed leadership depends on the existence of individuals willing, as a result of inclination or pressure, to surrender, at least in part, the powers to shape and define their own reality.

Since the 1980s, if not before, we have been able to see that what generally gets referred to as leadership tends to be bound up with insidious forms of power asymmetries, overly romanticized celebration, covert complicities and the surrender of agency. These features all signal leadership *as a problem in itself*, something which is hardly the mainstream view. Such a reading of leadership is rarely, if ever, explicit in the corporate courses that have proliferated in recent years, nor in responses to remotely administered questionnaires that much mainstream work in the field pursues. Indeed, it is only in the last few years that CLS has emerged as a separately recognizable approach to studying and critiquing leadership.

The emergence of CLS is closely related to the growth of the more established tradition of CMS. Briefly, CMS is a diverse set of ideas which, rather than being concerned primarily with increasing organizational efficiency, seeks to reveal, challenge and overturn the power relations within organizational life (King and Learmonth, 2015). This is a valuable undertaking because, in contemporary industrial societies, it is through such structures that many people are often constrained and dominated. CLS, as Collinson (2011: 182) argues, broadly shares CMS's political aims and intellectual traditions, but it attempts to broaden CMS's range, in that it:

> Explicitly recognizes that, for good and/or ill, leaders and leadership dynamics (defined . . . as the shifting, asymmetrical interrelations between leaders, followers and contexts) also exercise significant power and influence over contemporary organizational and societal processes [whereas] many CMS writers ignore the study of leadership, focusing more narrowly on management and organization.

Fairhurst and Grant (2010: 188) support Collinson's reading of CMS's limits in relation to leadership studies. For them also:

> CMS scholars tend to be less enamored of leadership per se . . . If CMS scholars mention leadership at all, they cast it as a mechanism of domination . . . view it with suspicion for being overly reductionist . . . or proclaim a need for agnosticism.

Furthermore, many in CLS remain alive to the dangers of essentializing leadership as something categorically distinct from management. As Collinson and Tourish (2015: 577) argue:

> [I]t makes sense to see management as somewhat more concerned with day-to-day operational activities than leadership [nevertheless] the term leadership [as opposed to management] has heuristic value in that it captures the approach, perceptions, and interactional dynamics of varied organizational actors when they encounter uncertain environments, powerful others,

and complex strategic dilemmas, and in which the salience of leadership issues is therefore heightened. However, attempts to establish absolutist distinctions between them [leadership and management] can be viewed as another example of the "dichotomizing tendency" in leadership studies.

Another feature of CLS, according to Collinson, is its emphasis on how 'leadership dynamics can emerge informally in more subordinated and dispersed relationships...as well as in oppositional forms of organization such as trade unions...and revolutionary movements' (2011: 182). The prominence attached to this feature of CLS certainly reflects a critical point of view because rather than reproducing officially sanctioned corporate hierarchies it challenges and subverts them. Indeed, work like Zoller and Fairhurst's (2007: 1332) study of resistance leadership – which highlights 'the role of leadership in resisting and potentially transforming structures of domination' provides an illustration of the critical potential in such work. They provide extended examples of the leadership of dissent, focusing 'on the role of perceived unfairness and injustice as a key resource of dissent mobilization' (2007: 1340). Take this excerpt, which uses the accounts of a participant ethnography by Laurie Graham (1995) who worked in an American automobile factory. It was in this setting that Graham:

> [U]sed discourses around Japanese concepts of self-management and extant organizational policy to fight the [recently introduced and unpopular] overtime requirement. However, her refusal gains traction from other employees as it articulates simmering employee anger around this issue. Before this incident, she [Graham] describes angry reactions when the team leader asked employees to stay after shift to put away their tools because the line would no longer stop five minutes early. Employees privately complained, saying things like 'this is the kind of bullshit that brings in a union', and 'this place is getting too Japanese around here'. She says, 'From that day on, whenever the line ran up to quitting time, all of us on the team dropped whatever we were doing and immediately walked out, leaving the team leader to lock up the tools and clean the area'...That same month, after resentment grew about the mandatory overtime, when the line kept moving after shift, 'nearly everyone on the car side put on a coat and walked out', although leaving a moving line is a cause for firing 'and everybody knew it'. (Zoller and Fairhurst, 2007: 1350)

According to Zoller and Fairhurst, activists and trade unionists – among other oppositional groups – appropriate some of the influencing tools of leadership to advance causes that go against the interests of elites. It is unsurprising then, that Zoller and Fairhurst (2007: 1354) conclude by urging 'more dialogue between leadership and critical researchers in order to understand resistance leadership'.

We welcome all the above aspirations, and unlike authors such as Gemmill and Oakley (1992), we are not arguing for a blanket ban on using the term leadership in organizational scholarship. For us, the term can sometimes be a valuable category to deploy, especially when used reflexively and judiciously to challenge and subvert its received usage in mainstream research. After all, foundational critical thinkers like Weber and Gramsci include discussions of leadership and its dynamics in their work. What we are against, however, is the a priori use of leader and follower to represent different hierarchical groups – as a kind of master category for representing and understanding social and organizational dynamics. As we show in the next section, this is common practice in CLS – in spite of CLS's many other virtues –something which effectively sets CLS against some of its own aspirations.

In order to explore the issues that arise, we now examine three prominent pieces of recent CLS writing in more detail. We should emphasize that we regard all three of them as highly successful – and critical – in many ways. However, all three share an important blind spot: an apparently unreflexive use of leader and follower. The first is Harding (2014), a paper we use to explore our claim that Critical *Leadership* Studies seems to be different from Critical *Management* Studies only because of its preference to use leader and follower – and that manager and worker would do just as well – at least in terms of semantics. The second is Collinson (2014) – an article we juxtapose with some of Collinson's earlier work (from 1988) – to show both how new this drift from manager to leader is; *and* why it matters. Finally, we examine the work of Collinson and Tourish (2015) to demonstrate the dangers of the universalization of leadership that an unreflexive use of leader and follower can imply – even in an article that is otherwise highly successful in critiquing mainstream leadership studies.

Semantic swap: Crossing-out managers and workers

Let us turn first to Harding (2014). To demonstrate how synonymous leader and manager, follower and worker are, at least in Harding's usage, below is the article's abstract in full. Each reference to leadership/leader is replaced with *management/manager*; and each reference to follower is replaced with *worker*:

> This paper develops a theory of the subjectivity of the ~~leader~~ *manager* through the philosophical lens of Hegel's master/slave dialectic and its recent interpretation by the philosopher Judith Butler. This is used to analyse the working life history of a man who rose from poverty to a ~~leadership~~ *management* position in a large company and eventually to running his own successful business. Hegel's dialectic is foundational to much Western thought, but in this paper, I rashly update it by inserting a ~~leader~~ *manager* in between the master, whose approval the ~~leader~~ *manager* needs if s/he is to sustain self-hood, and the ~~follower~~ *worker*, who becomes a tool that the ~~leader~~ *manager* uses when trying to gain that elusive approval. The analysis follows the structure of Butler's reading of the Dialectic and develops understanding of the norms that govern how ~~leaders~~ *managers* should act and the persons they should be. Hard work has become for ~~leaders~~ *managers* an ethical endeavour, but they grieve the sacrifice of leisure. They enjoy a frisson of erotic pleasure at their power over others but feel guilt as a result. They must prove their ~~leadership~~ *management* skills by ensuring their ~~followers~~ *workers* are perfect employees but at the same time must prove their ~~followers~~ *workers* are poor workers who need their continued ~~leadership~~ *management*. This leads to the conclusion that the ~~leader~~ *manager* is someone who is both powerful and powerless. This analysis is intended not to demonize ~~leaders~~ *managers*, but to show the harm that follows the emphasis on ~~leadership~~ *management* as a desirable and necessary organizational function.

There is no loss in meaning or resolution with these changes – showing how manager and worker here are direct synonyms for leader and follower. Also, the preference for leader/follower has nothing to do with the paper's central problematic. Judith Butler's reading of Hegel's master/slave would work with either leader/follower or manager/worker as the dialectic.

That these terms are interchangeable would probably be true of many articles in *Leadership* – especially those that focus on leadership as a positional and/or personal attribute; but a reason for focusing on Harding's paper is that in the body of the text she explicitly makes leader equivalent to manager. She also signals that the identity of the leader/manager is intimately linked with capitalism: 'it is on the body of "the leader",

''boss'' or ''manager'' that capitalism is inscribed, and it is through the leader/boss/manager that capitalism speaks' (2014: 392). She also writes of 'follower–bondsman–worker' (Harding, 2014: 399) as synonyms. One is left to wonder, therefore, whether the article is about leadership merely because it uses the terms leader and follower.

It clearly could have used manager and worker as its dominant terms; if it had done so though, even with no other changes, Harding's work would presumably have been regarded as a contribution to CMS. However, if manager had been its preferred term, the article would doubtless not have been published in *Leadership*. Indeed, one factor fuelling the growth in the language of leadership in organizational scholarship over the last few years may well simply be the rise of journals like *Leadership*, which effectively require authors to represent their work in the language of leadership (*The Leadership Quarterly*, published from 1990, was the first major journal of this type). Nevertheless, Harding's article is already being commended as a model of writing in CLS (Collinson and Tourish, 2015; Tourish, 2015).

Drift over time: From shop-floor worker to follower, from 'the management' to leaders

As an illustration of why it matters whether we talk about leaders and followers or managers and workers consider Table 1. It is a short extract from the recent writings of David Collinson, juxtaposed with work he published some 26 years earlier.

The first thing that strikes us from this juxtaposition is just how radically Collinson has chosen to re-present his earlier work in the language of the leader/follower. We say *re*-present, because throughout the whole of the 1988 paper he used neither term (leader nor follower) at all. What this change does, however, is markedly to alter the tone of the two extracts. Whereas the 1988 piece has the feel of a radical critique of (the) management voiced in the language of the shop-floor, the leader/follower dualism (though the word employee is used once) gives the 2014 extract a rather more conciliatory, manager-orientated (or rather we should say leader-orientated) tone. It is as if the 2014 version were addressed primarily to and written for so-called leaders – leaders who seem to be equated, a priori, with elites. It is still critical in the sense that it says uncomfortable things to those elites, i.e. that they can be out of touch, unaware or unsympathetic. But all the Marxian-inflected rhetoric we find in the 1988 extract (e.g. 'obscure conflict'; 'hierarchical structure of status and power'; 'the polarization between management and shop-floor' etc.) seems to have disappeared – along with the terms manager and shop-floor worker. To our ears, these changes have the effect of significantly depoliticizing the 2014 account. They make the critique less challenging to the powerful, with no sense of workers' voices coming through.

Our other main observation about the above table concerns the practice of calling people like shop-floor workers followers. Follower seems so unlikely to be part of what Collinson (1988: 185) himself calls the 'cultural identities' of most ordinary workers across the world. Can you imagine people like '''Fat Rat'', ''Bastard Jack'', ''Big Lemon'' and ''The Snake''' (nicknames for some of the people Collinson (1988: 185) encountered during his shop-floor ethnography) thinking of their identity via the term follower? Surely not! Take the opening scene of the1960 British film *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (available at the time of writing on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zJAeb0wiQjA). The camera pans across a busy factory before alighting on the protagonist, Arthur Seaton, played by Albert Finney, at his workbench. Speaking directly to the camera, Arthur says of his bosses: 'Don't let the bastards grind you down!' Or what about Sergeant Milton Warden, played by Burt

Table 1. From shop-floor worker to follower; from 'the management' to leaders.

Collinson (2014: 44)	Collinson (1988: 186/7)
My own research in organizations over the past 30 years has found a recurrent ... pattern. This is for organizational leaders to be either unaware of organizational tensions and paradoxes or, if they are informed of them, to try to deny or downplay their nature, extent, and consequences. This is especially the case with regard to leaders' relations with followers/employees. Leaders' hierarchical position "at the top" of organizations can result in them being distant and detached from "the front line" where many of the organization's tensions are often most acutely experienced ... Equally, followers may face considerable difficulties and barriers in seeking to voice their "critical upward communication" to those in senior positions ... Consequently, leaders can be largely unaware of fundamental tensions and contradictions embedded within routine organizational practices.	Shop-floor humour directed at managers was usually concerned to negate and distance them ... By contrast, management repeatedly sought to engage shop stewards in humorous interaction. Yet, the stewards were aware that this managerial humour was intended to obscure conflict behind personalized relations, which tried to deny the hierarchical structure of status and power ... Six years earlier the company had been taken over by an American multi-national ... As part of the American's campaign to win the trust of the workforce, a company in-house magazine was introduced. The paper was dismissed widely as a 'Let's be pals act' and nicknamed ... 'Goebbel's Gazette.' ... The intention of managerial humour [included in the Gazette], to reduce conflict and emphasize organizational harmony, had the opposite effect of merely reinforcing the polarization between management and shop-floor.

Lancaster, in the 1953 Hollywood film *From Here to Eternity*. Though the figure of the military officer is often taken as the consummate, archetypal leader, Warden memorably declares 'I hate officers – I always hated officers!' and starts an affair with his own officer's wife, perhaps in part to prove the point.

We can see that a case might perhaps be made for calling such people followers built on notions like multiple subjectivities or identities. Still, why does anyone need to use it, especially as the routine term for people in lower hierarchical positions? To us, the thought of people like Arthur Seaton or Sergeant Warden representing themselves as followers (of any kind of organizational elite) is more than simply misleading – it is risible – indeed, insulting to the many people today who share similarly dismissive views of the people in power over them. How many academics would refer to themselves as 'followers'? Yet many of us are ready to label others with these terms, such that contemporary Arthur Seatons and Sergeant Wardens are regularly being represented as followers in CLS research. Indeed, we find it hard to see *any* organizational context where the term 'follower' might be appropriate (cf. Blom and Alvesson, 2015; Ford and Harding 2015). Its use seems as insulting and demeaning to workers as it is flattering to the managerial ego: a toxic combination!

Framing the field: Alternatives to leadership, leadership?

It is important to emphasize that CLS writers who nowadays prefer to talk about leaders and followers leave no doubt that they propose a critical reading of organizational life. Indeed, Collinson and Tourish (2015) have recently provided radical criticisms of mainstream

leadership research and teaching. They advance, 'the idea that leadership is socially constructed and interpreted and that "it" could mean very different things to different actors in different situations' (578). They also remind readers of 'the twin perils of hype and hubris' (580) in teaching students to be leaders, along with the need for 'the teaching of leadership . . . to go beyond a "rotten apple" theory of dysfunctionality and corruption to examine the barrel within which the apples have soured' (586). While welcoming these sorts of statements, we think the authors foreclose an even more radical critical analysis. Simply by the ways in which they use the terms, they imply that leadership and followership are neutral, natural and necessary categories of analysis. In other words, they fail to signal any reflexivity about their representational practices.

This is important because many of their above critiques might be absorbed or otherwise appropriated by the mainstream (see e.g. Dinh et al., 2014; Schyns and Schilling, 2013 for mainstream work to have done so). However, the mainstream can deal much less readily with the idea that its fundamental categories – leader and follower – may be interest serving *in themselves*. Unfortunately, this possibility is not – as far as we can see – even raised by Collinson and Tourish. Yet using the leader/follower dyad provides Collinson and Tourish with numerous problems. For example, they are right to be troubled that those involved in mainstream leadership research and teaching 'tend to assume that the interests of leaders and followers automatically coalesce, that leadership is an uncontested form of top-down influence, follower consent is its relatively unproblematic outcome and resistance is abnormal or irrational' (2015: 577). However, they appear to overlook the possibility that at the root of the problem may lie the very terms themselves: that leader and follower semantically entail coalescence. Part of the general understanding of leadership in our culture includes something like 'an uncontested form of top-down influence' just as, if someone is referred to as a follower, s/he would generally be thought of as someone for whom 'any resistance is abnormal or irrational'.

Their own formulation, 'follower dissent and resistance' (2015: 576) crystallizes the discursive problem they have set for themselves. In what sense can a person intelligibly remain a follower while simultaneously displaying dissent and resistance? Someone who dissents and resists is surely (according to received English meanings) *not* a follower. The reader is left to resolve the contradiction within their formulation – presumably by concluding that at the level of *identity* the person is a follower – and that their dissenting and resistant *behaviours* must merely be temporary aberrations. Such a conclusion is the opposite of a critical stance on the identities of workers because the leader/follower formulation implies that ultimately both leader and follower share the same goal. To avoid this problem – which one could say Collinson and Tourish have set for themselves – would be simple if they merely argued about *worker* dissent and resistance!

By using this language of leadership, Collinson and Tourish also fall into the trap Alvesson and Kärreman (2016: 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.

Collinson and Tourish's work reinforces an understanding that 'the alternative to leadership is leadership' by, for instance, encouraging students 'to draw on their own experiences of leadership and followership dynamics in schools, workplaces and families' (2015: 581). To encourage such practices seems to be endorsing the use of the problematic discourse in new areas – young people's relations with one another in schools and in families – where, as far as we know, even the most enthusiastic of mainstream leadership commentators have yet to venture (though see Harms and Spain (2016) for something close). In other words, Collinson and Tourish end up encouraging students to see leadership and followership almost everywhere.

Discussion

These critical readings of CLS's representational practices are reinforced when we observe that the exponential growth in leadership's appeal since the 1980s has occurred during a period which also witnessed the rise of neoliberalism and the consequent widespread defeat of trade union power (Brown, 2015). Indeed, given the extent to which they share strikingly similar unitary and individualizing impulses, the current popularity of the language of leadership might be read as a direct analogue for today's neoliberal consensus. An a priori use of formulations like leader and follower is as useful to those at the top of big business – and as congruent with their interests – as other forms of neoliberal rhetoric; say, the redefinition of job insecurity as free agency 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 cast as followers) is appealing as one potential avenue towards such control, not least because it tends to hollow out classical notions of organizational politics, reducing debate about alienation and exploitation to problem solving and team building (Lears, 2015).

In other words, the leader/follower dualism is hard to read as anything other than a denial of the central tenet of Marxian-inflected organizations analyses – the structured antagonism between capital and labour. *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels, 1848/1967: 79) famously begins with a series of dualisms that emphasize class struggle and conflict: 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word oppressor and oppressed stood in constant opposition to one another'. The leader/follower dualism does not fit Marx and Engel's list of oppositions – both leader and follower stop being merely nicer- or more fashionable-sounding synonyms for manager and worker in certain important contexts. This is because the cultural valences associated with the language of leadership imply neither struggle between leader and follower nor anything else that might be particularly oppressive or oppositional. Rather, they suggest that the norm is friendly relations, and that a person's (i.e. a so-called follower's) primary allegiance is (or should be) to her leader – not solidarity with other workers. In contrast, one of the classical terms in organizational analysis – worker – is still, for many, within the trade union movement and beyond, emblematic of class solidarity; it certainly seems unlikely to naturalize asymmetrical social relations in the same way as follower might. Thus, traditional analytical dualisms like manager/ worker or capital/labour (as opposed to leader/follower) leave rhetorical space for solidarity and *radical* resistance; whereas those starting to be constructed as followers might well assume that they can legitimately offer no more than (what their so-called leaders would see as) 'constructive resistance' (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014: 93).

In sum, any 'critical' work on leadership that uses leader and follower as a priori, universal categories will lack a certain potential for critique. This framing forecloses radical resistance and is more easily assimilated with dominant albeit unexamined ideals in the leadership literature. For instance, if we begin by thinking in terms of leader/follower, it takes us closer to a pro-hegemonic ideal: that a core part of what leaders do is to frame reality for their 'followers'. It also lends independent authority to the pro-hegemonic ideal that 'followers' willingly surrender their powers to shape their own realities. So, rather than, as Collinson and Tourish (2015: 577) believe, being 'fundamentally about the effective or ineffective exercise of power, authority, and influence' we suggest that the terms leadership and followership are at root performative (Gond et al., 2015). By which we mean, in a nutshell, that if someone is called a leader or a follower often enough the very act itself tends to bring about what it says; typically to the bosses' benefit and to workers' disadvantage.

Nevertheless, the language of leadership is undoubtedly an important phenomenon in today's society. Indeed, the rhetoric is becoming so widespread in many organizational contexts that as Morrell and Hewison (2013: 70) show 'it becomes impossible to see an alternative to "leadership"...leadership is, seemingly, anything and everything'. Brocklehurst et al. (2010: 10) are therefore surely correct in claiming that 'leadership is both congruent with, and emblematic of, dominant contemporary understandings of what is valuable in organizations'. As such, it needs critical analsis; and for this reason alone we need CLS. But as many feminists, post-colonial and queer theorists (among others) have argued (see for example Hughes, 2002; Seidman S., 1997; Smith 1999), it is very difficult, perhaps often impossible, to construct radical critique in the language of the powerful.

We suggest, therefore, that CLS stops trying. Let us continually question the effects of the language of leadership – and use alternatives – rather than routinely deploying it ourselves. We have already cited some possible alternatives from Alvesson and Kärreman (2016: 142): 'peer relations, professionalism, autonomy, co-workership, organizing processes, or mutual adjustment'. We might also suggest that instead of follower terms like dissenter or radical could be used. But to keep things simple, while the pairing is hardly entirely unproblematic in itself, simply going back to the language of manager and worker seems to us to be one step in the right direction.

Conclusion

Admittedly, to stop talking about leaders might be easier said than done. One of the reasons for this difficulty is that the language of leadership is becoming so institutionalized. For example, as the holder of the office of Deputy Dean at his Business School, one of us (Mark) does not officially have an administrative job, nor even a management role; rather, according to the university's designation he holds a 'leadership position'. In these contexts it is especially difficult to oppose the language of leadership, not least because the practice is caught up in a new kind of common sense; what Brown (2015) calls (in the title of her book) 'neo-liberalism's stealth revolution'. What is more, any opposition is made even harder when many critical colleagues seem happy simply to go along with such changes.

One possibility, if we must talk about leadership in our scholarship, is to do so outside conventional organizational contexts where consent and personal relationships are clearly predominant. To focus, in other words, on those instances where leadership is developed freely and collaboratively between people – and not on those circumstances when

'leadership' is imposed – as is common in corporate settings. Alternatively, we might confine our use of leadership to obviously subversive contexts. An example of the former approach is provided by Humphreys et al.'s (2012) examination of leadership in jazz bands. In discussing how musicians such as Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, Art Blakey and Winton Marsalis might be thought of as 'leaders' the authors move decisively away from any sort of corporate setting and into an arena where leaders generally emerge with the consent and enthusiasm of their musical peers. As they put it: 'jazz [is] the focus of our research because equivocality is central to its very essence' (2012: 42). Nevertheless, perhaps in part because the corporate resonances of leadership are so strong, some of the reactions to their article from people outside academia appear to assume that they were simply providing lessons for business from jazz (Arnot, 2012). Dangers of similar misunderstandings, or even deliberate appropriation, mean that we prefer the second option, and try to use leadership in ways that are as unambiguously subversive as possible. While misunderstanding or appropriation by elites is always a lurking threat for *any* work that talks about leadership, with colleagues one of us has, for example, explored leadership using queer theory (Ford et al., 2008; Harding et al., 2011).

On a final note, earlier, we mentioned the classic movies *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning* and *From Here to Eternity* because their characters contradict some of the assumptions of the discourses of followership. Well, what about the 2010 British film (and subsequent successful London West End musical) *Made in Dagenham*? For us, this movie subverts the mainstream notions of both leader and follower in interesting ways – while also linking notions of leadership with ideas about capitalism and patriarchy. The film is based on historical events of worker resistance in Britain in the 1960s (see http://www.traileraddict.com/made-in-dagenham/trailer), and like the other two films its central character is a working-class hero; only this time she is a woman, Rita O'Grady, played by Sally Hawkins.

Rita takes the initiative amongst her female colleagues to encourage them to stand up against an oppressive Dagenham Ford factory management who refuse to pay fair wages to women. On behalf of the other women, Rita subsequently finds herself taking on a male-dominated trade union movement ambivalent about equal pay for women, and eventually, the UK government's Employment Secretary, Barbara Castle. Rita and her colleagues ultimately win their dispute, and in the process are instrumental in bringing about a change in the law: the Equal Pay Act of 1970. Rita can be understood, in other words, as a superb exemplar of Zoller and Fairhurst's (2007) resistance leadership. Indeed, in the film, Rita's local shop steward calls her a leader 'who inspires the other girls'. It seems likely that no shop steward (or anyone else) would have called Rita a leader back in the 1960s. This particular line is probably a reflection of the preoccupations and cultural scripts of the early 21st century when the screenplay was written (although men referring to adult women as 'girls' is no doubt, rather more characteristic of the 1960s). Nevertheless, if Rita can usefully be thought of as a leader then she was only a leader because of the explicit and enthusiastic consent and support of her colleagues. As opposed to a leader in a corporate setting, Rita was not a boss in any sense. She certainly never got more pay than the others, nor got any sort of other reward. In fact, she took on her responsibilities with great reluctance and paid a high price for doing so in terms of the pressure they brought to bear on her family and personal life.

However, no one would ever have called Rita a follower, surely – please, no! Just as Arthur Seaton and Sergeant Warden did, she clearly despised those, like Mr Clarke (one of

the Ford bosses) who were supposed to be in charge of her. In fact, the following words are included in the trailer to the movie: 'I call Mr Clarke a complete cock!'

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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Author biographies

Mark Learmonth is Professor of Organization Studies and Deputy Dean (Research) at Durham University Business School, Durham, UK. He has published in a number of journals and is currently working on a series of projects related to the influence of popular culture on management practice.

Kevin Morrell is a Professor of Strategy at Warwick Business School and a British Academy Mid-Career Fellow. Kevin's empirical work focuses on understanding the public sector.