

## **Towards a Negative Ontology of Leadership**

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### **Abstract**

Drawing on recent critical debates concerning the ontology of leadership, this article outlines a radical rethinking of the concept – not as the study of heroic individuals, skilled practitioners, collaborators, or discursive actors – but as the marker of a fundamental and productive lack; a space of absent presence through which individual and collective desires for leadership are given expression. Where current critical debates tend to oscillate between variants of the *physical* and the *social* in their analyses, this article considers the potential for a *negative ontology* of leadership; one in which absence, ideological practices, and the operation of empty signifiers form the basis for empirical investigation and critical reflection.

### **Keywords**

Critical leadership studies, empty signifier, ideology, myth, negative ontology

“In our world,” said Eustace, “a star is a huge ball of flaming gas.”

Even in your world, my son, that is not what a star is,

but only what it is made of.”

C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, p.159

“If leadership is bright orange, leadership research is slate grey”

(McCall and Lombardo, 1978: 3)

These quotations have two things in common. In different ways they both consider the ontological assumptions that underpin our experience of reality. They also describe objects that illuminate. For leadership researchers McCall and Lombardo, the subject of leadership has the potential to be ‘bright orange’ – the use of *bright* evoking a brilliance normally reserved for similar orange celestial objects like our Sun. According to the authors, it is only through the way in which we choose to study such objects that we rob them of their colour and brilliance. Compare this then to Eustace’s encounter with an object of similar illumination in C.S. Lewis’ novel *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. When faced with an aged (and talking) star, Lewis’ protagonist overlooks what might make this object so special and instead seeks to reduce it to its component parts. Both and McCall and Lombardo’s lament and Eustace’s encounter with Ramandu the talking star is a reminder that even if we think we know how something works, or even what it is made of, it does not necessarily follow that we understand anything about what that object *is*. Where McCall and Lombardo still hold out for the possibility of somehow encountering leadership in all its glorious and colourful totality (if only we knew how and where to look), the words of Ramandu present us with an altogether more ambiguous and ambitious proposition; a proposition that also

provides the starting point for this article: However hard we search and whatever methods, tools and techniques we use to capture and illuminate the substance, inner workings, and complexity of an object, subject, or phenomenon, there might always be something left over or hidden. A surplus of magical stuff that makes that thing what it *is*.

Following this proposition, this article presents an alternative theoretical perspective for situating and researching the phenomenon of leadership. This is a perspective based not on a positive description of what leadership is made of, but on a negative ontological analysis of what attempts at description must always lack.<sup>1</sup> This is leadership as something that resists full presence as an object of knowledge. It is something that cannot be encountered directly through the senses or through language, and which lacks a positive ontological foundation, or *logos*, through which we can discern its inner workings and content. Instead, ‘leadership’ as a term or concept should be understood as an absent presence; one that must always be described and represented by *somebody* or *something* else. It is these ‘proxies’ for leadership that has preoccupied the leadership research community for over a century while other ontological possibilities for understanding our continual fascination with leadership remain under-examined. In making its case for a negative ontology, the article begins by exploring recent concerns with the ontological foundations of leadership (Crevani et al, 2010; Drath et al, 2008; Denise et al, 2010). It asks why such questions of ontology have become of interest to critical leadership researchers and how the continuing and unreflexive search for positive ontological foundations, and the privileging of a metaphysics of presence risks committing what some have described as an unacknowledged ‘fallacy of misplaced concreteness’, or persistent ‘category mistake’ in leadership studies (Kelly, 2008; Wood, 2005). In seeking to avoid such mistakes, the article draws on poststructuralist theory to explore how the status of

leadership might be approached differently through the application of two interrelated theoretical schemas that together form the basis of a negative ontology.

The first is a recognition that leadership as a term or concept has a distinct and unusual status in language as a 'floating' or empty signifier (Laclau, 1996; Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). Unlike other forms of description or expression, 'leadership' does not signify anything specific or fixed, but instead serves to create the conditions of possibility for many competing and complementary definitions, meanings, and interpretations. As such it is suggested that 'leadership' as a term has a distinctly ideological rather than ontological character. The second schema is drawn from Roland Barthes' study of contemporary mythologies and his assertion that mythical speech is both prolific in everyday communication and operates as a 'second order' form of language that relies on the production of floating signifiers for its perpetuation and maintenance (Barthes, 1993). Using Barthes' schema for tracing the parasitic relationship between ordinary language and mythical speech, the article demonstrates how 'leadership' similarly operates as part of this second order sign system. Here again, it is the ideological rather than the ontological that gives the language of leadership its force and influence. Rather than seeking to 'debunk' or dismiss leadership, this article provides a starting point for studying the ideological character of leadership in language, whilst also paying attention to the myriad ways in which subjects and objects of language and action come to 'stand in' for and temporarily fill the empty centre of this seductive and endlessly adaptable signifier. As the article concludes, it is perhaps this mistaking of the *ideological* for the *ontological* that marks the most significant fallacy of contemporary leadership studies, and it is here that a negative rather than positive engagement with leadership might have important and productive theoretical, methodological, and practical implications for doing critical leadership research.

## **Positive ontological foundations of leadership**

Implicit in McCall and Lombardo's statement above is the suggestion that leadership research traditionally limits itself to a particular pallet; a specific set of ontological assumptions regarding the nature of the reality under study. Traditionally to study leadership is to study special individuals who possess some essential qualities that have a unique influence over others. In other words, it is the measurement of the personalities, acts and actions of these specially endowed heroic individuals that come to shape leader-follower relations and which constitute the lived realities of organisations, societies and their members. Whether this is through divine providence, or a position earned through military or political acumen (Carlyle, 1840); the correct balance of traits, context, and action (Fiedler, 1997; Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1991); or individualised charisma and authenticity (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Conger and Kanungo, 1998), it is the person and not the group or collective that determines the force and flow of influence that marks out leadership as a unique phenomenon. It follows then that the source of empirical knowledge about the reality of leadership must exist in some form in the make-up of this special person.

More recently efforts have been made to emphasise the role of other actors in this relationship of influence. Leader-member exchange theory (LMX) in particular has developed a science out of measuring and evaluating the factors that contribute to certain leader-follower dynamics (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Uhl-Bien, 2006), and still others have suggested that it is 'followership' that determines how leaders are perceived, how traits are attributed, and how actions and outcomes are arrived at (Carsten et al, 2010; Gabriel, 1997). For those contributing to the new wave of critical leadership studies<sup>2</sup>, however, the site of study is less well defined and demarcated. Leadership is no longer reducible to a tangible act of influence between stable categorises of 'leader' and 'follower' with 'leadership' standing for a kind of dialectic that emerges from the joining of the two (Collinson, 2005; 2006).

Instead, leadership might involve an array of heterogeneous factors, elements, networks, discourses, subjects and objects. For example, leadership might exist in discursive regimes, metaphor, ordinary language, attributions, unconscious symbolic projections, or even in non-human ‘actants’ that provide the conditions for a complex leaderful relationship or dynamic to emerge (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011; Fairhurst, 2007; Kelly, 2008; Raelin, 2011; Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006). What each of these critical approaches has in common is the notion that leadership does not exist within a person, or even within a relationship between bounded figures called leaders and followers. Instead, leadership represents a kind of epiphenomenon that organises and determines our experience of social reality and our experience of ourselves.

This move ‘outwards’ from individual actors, to a shared socially constructed reality comes at a cost, however. First, the method through which leadership can be researched and data collected has to be reconsidered. As Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien (2012) have recently observed, when leadership exists as a social and relational phenomenon there are many possible discursive routes and methodologies for gaining access to the empirical lived reality of leadership. The second and more significant cost is that as the data begins to accumulate, researchers must find a means of identifying the leadership concept at work in these myriad forms of communication, social relations, and actions. In short, when leadership becomes ‘relational’, the problem of ‘what is leadership?’ is quickly compounded, by ‘which relationships really matter?’ and ‘how do we identify specific forms of leaderful influence?’ It is perhaps no coincidence then that the plurality of relational and critical studies of leadership has been accompanied by a questioning of the very nature and ontology of the leadership concept itself. Among a vibrant and sophisticated emerging literature on this topic there are two overriding ontological themes that characterise this concern: the function of discourse and the role of collective action. In the sections that follow, studies that exemplify

these interrelated themes are introduced and their ontological claims and assumptions explored.

#### *From relational tripods to collective action*

The theme of collective action has recently been explicitly tackled by Drath et al (2008) who suggest that most starting points for any concern with leadership (be it research, development or practice) begins from what Bennis (2007a) terms the ‘tripod’ of leadership. This tripod is made up of relationships between ‘leaders’, ‘followers’ and ‘shared goals’ and underpins a long established understanding of leadership as the sum of actions and causalities between two groups of actors. For Drath et al, this tripod also marks a set of deep ontological commitments that are rarely challenged or acknowledged by academic leadership researchers. As the authors state, it is not that the tripod ontology lacks usefulness – indeed, most insights into leadership very much depend upon and draw from intellectual insight from this model. It is rather that there may be alternative ontological structures and commitments that have equally valuable intellectual insights that researchers might turn to instead.

In this spirit Drath et al offer what they dub a *DAC ontology* in which leadership is not the summative actions of individual leaders exerting power and influence over followers, but an emerging and on-going set of outcomes of collaborative organisational processes of *direction*, *alignment*, and *commitment*. For Drath et al, any group activity, or form of organisation governed by a shared sense of direction, an alignment of purpose and values, and a collaborative spirit of commitment towards said goal, constitutes an act of leadership. This is a radical move that blends well with existing and subsequent perspectives on leadership as a situational and relational phenomenon through which leadership emerges as an outcome of shared collaboration rather than through individual will or authoritative power. This

ontological move has also paved the way for alternative methodological approaches for how leadership as on-going collective action might be studied in the field.

*From collective outcomes to processes of becoming*

Drath et al's ontological move has recently been taken up and expanded upon by qualitative researchers Crevani et al (2010) by drawing attention to the theoretical weakness of DAC as an outcome oriented perspective. For Crevani et al, leadership as 'outcome' risks undermining the very collaborative and distributed nature of leadership as process. For if outcomes are the measure of leadership then leadership is still treated as a discrete object or entity that acts upon the world in some way rather than an open-ended process of becoming. Crevani et al represent an emerging interest in the qualitative study of leadership and particularly the ontological study of leadership as an everyday moment-by-moment practice. Dissatisfied with both the narrow world of questionnaire items and the stilted questions of structured interviews, authors like Crevani et al extend Drath et al's DAC ontology further by emphasising the open-ended and plural nature of process and the social embeddedness of leadership. Here leadership as an on-going process of becoming can take multiple forms, consist of multiple actors, and serve and disrupt multiple outcomes. As such, it is *process between* rather than discrete *entities either side* that characterises the ontological structure of leadership. 'Process' in this context refers to a particular philosophical movement represented in the writing of Ancient Greek philosophers such as Heraclitus and 20<sup>th</sup> century writers such as Alfred North Whitehead. Here the ontological underpinnings of reality do not conform to either tripods, or the outcomes of DAC, but consist of unceasing and meaningless process; the never ending cycles of movement and change that make up our lived experiences that we as subjects must try to interpret and in so doing 'entify' the world. As Crevani et al (2010: 81) add:



It is the situated, moment by moment, construction of direction that becomes interesting [...] all interactions are potential instances of leadership.

From a process perspective the very treatment of organisation (Chia, 1995; 1996), or leadership (Wood, 2005) as entity is to engage in an act of conceptual violence upon the world in order to wrest an empirical 'object' from a recalcitrant process of becoming. As a result, according to process theory, we tend to engage in acts of reification, inversion and forgetting (Chia, 1995) through our research practice and so produce objects of study such as people, organisations, leaders and followers through a fallacy of misplaced concreteness (Chia, 1995; Wood, 2005). Instead, researchers like Crevani et al seek to circumvent these acts of reification by examining leadership *in process*, as it happens, as a collaborative act that takes place in ordinary taken-for-granted organisational settings like meeting rooms or corridor conversations with colleagues. Here leadership as on-going process emerges – not through the charisma of an individual – but through the shared discursive constructions of 'boundaries', 'positions', 'roles' and 'issues' in which multiple voices arrive at concrete decisions as collaborative work tasks are completed and others begin. To understand leadership is therefore to understand the strategies employed by organisational members to make sense of the complexity and open-endedness of everyday organisational life. More importantly from a process perspective, there is nothing particularly special about leadership.

#### *From process to messy practice*

For other critical scholars the ontological foundation of leadership may be processual, but the manifestation of process is best captured through the study of material practices. Leaving aside the philosophical frameworks of process theory, such studies draw on a range of qualitative tools for capturing the lived experience of doing leadership – the ordinary

everyday actions that individual and collectives must engage in to accomplish work tasks. It is the sometimes messy and partial accomplishment of such ordinary work that comes to be represented as instances of 'leadership'. Drawing on social psychology and empirical sociology, these studies emphasise the importance of complex and heterogeneous work activity rather than the cleaned up or abstracted accounts of leadership represented in questionnaire items. So where on-going 'process' formed the unit of analysis for Crevani et al, discrete patterns of 'work' as a creative activity for shaping the self and the material world is the focal point for the practice scholar (Corradi et al, 2010; Miettinen et al, 2009; Schatzki et al, 2001).

However, both perspectives understand 'leadership' to be a shorthand label for a more sophisticated and complex set of actions. As Denis et al (2010) demonstrate in their analysis of the management of change in healthcare organisations, what we think of as 'leadership' is actually made up of a plurality of discrete and researchable collective work practices each with their own benefits, challenges and unintended consequences. For managers who must oversee programmes of organisational change, their perceived position as a leader-figure is closely tied to their ability to navigate these myriad dynamic, collective, situated and dialectical work practices. It is the 'messy' and material world of *action* and those leadership actors that embody and are shaped by this action that marks out acts of leadership from the backdrop of organisational life (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a; 2003b; Currie et al, 2010). Leadership, therefore, has no ontological foundation of its own, it is always epistemological; a second order construct through which judgements about persons, processes, and outcomes can be arrived at post-hoc. Yet both process and practice approaches beg the question of why it is necessary for researchers and their participants to reduce these complex interactions down to instances of leadership in the first place – especially when such

a reduction seems to have little obvious analytical or practical value for explaining complex forms of organisation?

### **From ontological to ideological practice**

The collective, process and practice approaches discussed all make ontological claims about leadership and in different ways seek to look to the underlying realities of leadership and what it is made of. Unlike traditional leadership psychology or its contemporary variants in the form of transformational and authentic leadership, or LMX in which it is individuals (leaders and followers) that make up the reality of leadership, a turn to process and practice redefines the deep ontological foundations of leadership studies as something that is social rather than individual; something that is complex, shared, distributed, involving difficult, messy and open-ended labour. More specifically they draw attention to the importance of language, meaning, interpretation, and action in the production and maintenance of the leadership concept. Turning leadership into a *social* reality rather than a *physical* one also provides researchers with an alternative and fertile ground upon which to conduct empirical research and theoretical development.

As Raelin (2011) has recently observed, this move outward in the literature from the individual to the social might also warrant a change in descriptive category from ‘leadership-as-practice’ to the shared experience of ‘leaderful’ practices. This is a subtle, but important move for Raelin in that decentring the very ontological status of ‘leadership’ as a *thing* in itself (with its own agency) acknowledges its role in organising and providing an interpretive space for collective action and collective responsibility. To be ‘leaderful’ maintains the importance of the leadership concept, but reallocates it as aspirational marker for those virtuous aspects of everyday life that are too multifarious to describe in their entirety. More significantly, leadership is no longer something that is done to others and so opens up new

discourses of participation, collaboration, accountability and liberation; discourses and virtues consistent with a 21<sup>st</sup> century neo-liberal ideology.

Raelin's move from a logic of 'leadership-as-[*fill in the blank*]' to 'leaderful' also draws attention to another common factor that connects each of the ontological perspectives discussed above: they all advocate a strong spirit of *Western* democracy. Implicit within the DAC ontology of Drath et al, the process philosophy of Crevani et al, and the messy shared practices of Denis et al, as well as others who embody these same commitments, is an unquestioning belief in the saving power of Western democratic values. In such studies we are implicitly and explicitly told that participation is preferred over direct instruction; power and authority are shared by the many rather than held by the few; decision making is emergent and consensual rather than imposed from above, and so on. What is important here is not the content or appropriateness of these values, or the distinct ideology they represent, but the unacknowledged *ideological practices* that they embody and promote.

The use of *ideological* rather than ideology is essential here. An ideology is a coherent, narrow – some might say *mis-leading* – set of political beliefs (Abercrombie et al, 1980: 189-190) and the claim has been made that some schools of leadership thought have a likeness to such strong belief systems (see Tourish and Pinnington, 2001), but more often in leadership studies the diversity and plurality of approaches and perspectives makes a coherent ideological position impossible. Instead, leadership as an intellectual discipline produces multiple ideological practices (Smith, 1989); sets of incomplete micro-politics that share a family resemblance, but which lack the necessary organisation and force of a distinct political or social movement. Indeed, it is this fragmentation and incompleteness that arguably gives discourses of leadership their longevity. Where fully formed ideologies can be challenged, overthrown, or become outdated, the ideological practices of leadership can be endlessly recycled, adapted, applied and reworked to fit any purpose. Indeed, as a recent study of the

Arab Spring and Occupy movements demonstrates, far from offering ‘leaderful’ or even ‘leadless’ alternatives, these movements often tend to reproduce and subvert forms of traditional hierarchical leadership. These are temporary, progressive and radical forms, but they still involve recognisable leaders, followers and shared goals (Sutherland et al, 2013). Even their identity as ‘leaderless’ collectives sometimes requires traditional notions of leadership to organise against. This is the power of leadership – not its *ontological* reality as personality, relation, practice or process – but its *ideological* function to organise, direct, deflect, categorise, centralise, marginalise, inspire, control, liberate, improve, stimulate, seduce, transform, stabilise, threaten, protect and reassure. There is no tension or contradiction in leadership’s ability to speak to any and all of these aspirations since it has no content of its own that might cause such antagonism.

Through the adoption of a negative ontology we might say that leadership does not deal in content or substance, but in the organisation, containment and reproduction of desire<sup>3</sup>. If leadership has an ontology it is perhaps to be found in the individual and collective desire for a better future, a saving power or saviour, and the wish to make the world a better place (Gemmell and Oakley, 1992). This may also be why leadership has the potential to burn bright orange for McCall and Lombardo as it has the endless potential to intervene, transform and inspire. In short, leadership (good or bad) *makes a difference*. It is no wonder then that the sometimes dry and methodical quantitative and qualitative tools for generating data *about* leadership are such a disappointment for McCall and Lombardo as they are akin to using a ruler to measure the face of God. However, for the critical and reflexive leadership scholar accepting the ideological function of leadership in all its empty, but luminous brilliance presents a unique problem for managing the relationship between researcher and researched. For example, does an acceptance of the ideological in place of the ontological also turn the

researcher into an ideologue, politician, activist, cultist, or soothsayer, or does it merely reveal the terrain that leadership researchers have always stood upon?

### **Towards a negative ontology of leadership**

If one is sympathetic to, but also prepared to move past ontologies such as DAC, process and practice theory, the ideological practices that underpin leadership research are not difficult to find and accept once a conceptual shift has been made. In fact, one does not have to look far beyond the discipline of leadership studies itself to find certain figures, texts, phrases and quotations which, by their reiteration, gain a force and authority that highlights and amplifies their ideological character – and perhaps ironically as a consequence perform a peculiar kind of ‘leadership work’ of their own. Take the often cited opening to James MacGregor Burns’ book *Leadership*:

If we know all too much about our leaders, we know far too little about *leadership*.

We fail to grasp the essence of leadership that is relevant to the modern age.

(Burns, 1978: 1)

With this phrase (and its repetition here) we have the ideological nature of leadership laid bare. As with McCall and Lombardo, this is a rallying call to all those who study leadership to try harder, do more, be relevant, and eventually try to *know* and *say* more about what leadership is. But this is not the search for some kind of final objective truth as to the existence of leadership. This is a contingent truth that must fit with the needs and demands of the modern age; a truth that is *relevant*. Presumably then, when the historical circumstances change along with the criteria for this relevance, a new truth will have to be found that captures the new essence of leadership. This is the ideological at work – the replacement of

truth and fact with the need for beliefs that fit with the socio-political and economic demands of the day. This is perhaps why leadership studies of the 1930s and 40s were concerned with the efficient selection of peoples with the traits and skills necessary to occupy officer-class positions or operate complex and expensive military equipment (Gould, 1981; Hollway, 1991; Richards, 2002). It may be why the leadership studies of the 1980s reflected the need to confront the twin threats of unionisation and Japanese competition resulting in the invention of the U.S. and European manager-as-transformational-leader (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). This would also account for why the current interest in authenticity, ethics, corporate social responsibility and sustainability reflects today's need to tackle the global economic crisis and the challenges of a changing natural environment. In other words, it is the ideological that drives and shapes leadership theory and practice rather than a search for positive ontologies. The question then becomes one of how to approach leadership if it lacks any ontological foundation? The answer to this may lie in radically rethinking the relationship between leadership and ontology.

### *Accentuating the negative*

Working through a negative ontology of leadership requires a fundamental shift away from treating the phenomenon of leadership as a discrete object of analysis. As we have seen in the discussion above, studies that examine people, questionnaire items, processes, practices and so on are engaging in leadership research, but it is often difficult in these studies to point out that discrete subject, object, or moment that *is* the leadership. Instead, 'leadership' always seems to exist elsewhere, out of sight and out of language. In fact it would make a fascinating research methodology to walk into a large organisation and ask its members 'where is the leadership?' After some initial blank looks, a curious (and brave) researcher would most likely find that organisational members have a variety of competing and complementary

views, opinions and judgements about where and what the leadership is (see for example Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a; Bresnen, 1995). By their very nature these views, opinions and judgements once again take us into ideological rather than ontological territory as it is very unlikely, for instance, that organisational members will direct the researcher to a building, office, or cupboard and upon opening a door reveal ‘the leadership’ waiting inside. It is of course an absurd suggestion that leadership might somehow exist independently in a particular location that can be visited. Yet this is an absurdity that we do seem to tolerate in language. As a linguistic term ‘leadership’ occupies a curious position in everyday talk in that it is a signifier that has multiple possible signifieds. Likewise the term can slip and slide along a sign system to also become either signifier or signified – to exist as both means and end; cause and effect. The only thing that stops leadership as a term from losing meaning altogether is the context in which the language of leadership is used (see Calder, 1978; Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012; Kelly, 2008). This provides some temporary fixity and closure, and it is also here that the ideological work of leadership takes place. For example, let’s return to this imaginary large organisation for a moment. Having been asked this unusual question ‘where is the leadership?’ by our curious researcher, organisational members may eventually agree (if only to get rid of this strange visitor) that the leadership in their organisation exists in the body of the CEO – they may even point upwards to the office where this body is usually located. When the researcher returns to their university and shares these findings with academic colleagues, they may disagree and say that the leadership in this organisation actually exists in a relationship, a collective, a process, a practice, or a discursive regime. They may even cite published studies that support this argument. How then does the leadership researcher know how to proceed?

Through a negative ontology it is possible to say that all of these answers are correct and incorrect in equal measure. Leadership can mean the body of the CEO for this group, but it



can also mean a collective, process, or practice to academic researchers. This does not mean that we descend into relativism, but instead that we recognise that leadership as a term is an empty signifier, the very purpose of which is not to provide a single meaning, but to create a space through which possible meanings can be negotiated and navigated. In this imaginary scenario, the empty signifier 'leadership' provides the space for an exercise of power in the form of deciding whose interpretation matters most. For our researcher caught within this context, the only way to navigate this empty signifier is to consider the following:

- 1) Which interpretation provides the most acceptable and relevant response in this context?
- 2) Who or what holds the power to decide, enforce, or prohibit this interpretation?
- 3) What purpose is being served by allowing one interpretation to hold over another?
- 4) What substitutes or 'proxies' for leadership have been introduced and mobilised to allow the dominant interpretation to hold?

Our researcher will now have to decide whose interpretation is most valid, the practitioner discourse of the organisational members, the scholarly discourse of academic colleagues, or another. They may even have to consider whether their chosen interpretation may enhance or potentially harm their academic reputation and professional esteem, as well as considering the reasons for visiting that particular organisation and asking questions in the first place. Finally, the researcher may have to decide which substitute for leadership will provide the more suitable means of representing the negative space left by the empty signifier. Is it the body of the CEO sitting in his or her office, the observable language and practices of organisational members, or is it the theoretical frameworks, categories and labels listed in the stack of highly regarded academic publications sitting on the researcher's desk?

For Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001) this imaginary scenario is not unusual as working within and around empty signifiers is an essential and unavoidable part of everyday life. Unfortunately encountering empty signifiers can also be highly political and divisive as the above example demonstrates. Indeed, it is this heady mixture of the quotidian and the political that deserves special analytical attention and as Laclau and Mouffe argue, we need empty signifiers to make sense of a world that is often beyond comprehension and expression in language. To ease our anxieties we need empty place holders that can cover over these limits of our language and provide an illusory means of discursively taming the world. Laclau's famous example of an empty signifier is 'society' (Laclau, 1991; 1996). Like 'leadership', the term 'society' can signify and so contain almost anything provided that it equates to what the empty signifier might need to represent. For Laclau these substitutes form 'chains of equivalences'; those things that contribute to, stand in for, or somehow embody part of what 'society' might be. Chains of equivalences might include the problems of crime (including how we measure it, prevent it, live with it) or the decline in social values, the challenges of the economy, the environment, education, welfare, and so on. They can all then be attributed to, blamed on, or contained by the signifier 'society'. We can even build entire social science disciplines around how to study and quantify 'society'. Problems arise, however, when an empty signifier like 'society' or 'leadership' is treated as having a positive ontological foundation; as something that has its own unique essence and characteristics that can and must be studied, measured, predicted and put to work. As Gemmill and Oakley (1992) have observed, this growing dependency on the possibility of leadership and its saving power can resemble a modern day ghost dance in which any organisation (or indeed any enterprising individual) that cannot locate and foster its leadership is thought to be doomed to failure. What is required then is not just an acknowledgement of empty signifiers, but a

means of identifying the work and politics that are performed in their name. It is here that a turn to myth might provide a useful addition to a negative ontological analysis of leadership.

### *Becoming a reader of myth*

Leadership is arguably an empty signifier *par excellence* in that it has evaded attempts to confront its emptiness for hundreds of years. The 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century development of the science of leadership studies has further disguised this emptiness through many interconnected chains of equivalences in the form of complex questionnaire designs, theoretical models, statistical formulae, case studies, and new and ever more complex research methodologies. Yet from Stogdill's dissatisfaction with the ever expanding set of leadership traits, to the rallying calls of Burns, McCall and Lombardo and many others, there is a regular return to the basic problem of what leadership is and why the leadership research community cannot seem to find a suitable answer to this question. As demonstrated in the previous section, the answer to this question is that leadership as a term is empty, but this emptiness is not without effect or consequence. As an empty signifier, leadership provides the possibility for filling the gap that exists between language and our experience of reality and in so doing provides a space of productive fantasy through which hopes for a better future or a better world can be expressed, but perhaps never realised.

Stating that leadership is an empty signifier may provide a useful explanation for why leadership resists definition and why leadership scholars occasionally lament the gap between the essence of leadership and the results of academic research, but beyond this it perhaps does not add much. The previous section outlined an imaginary scenario facing a leadership researcher and demonstrated the ideological practices that may have to be participated in to reconcile practice, process, language and empty signifiers. This involved working with those available equivalences that stand in for leadership such as bodies, discourses, symbols, texts,

and spaces, but what of the ontology of the empty signifier 'leadership' itself? Are we to simply ignore the production of this strange term and only study those subjects and objects it produces to represent it? That is certainly one option and if carried out in a reflexive manner can reveal much about the work that is done to preserve and perpetuate leadership in various forms of social life, but this is only half the story. If we want to understand the nature of an empty signifier, as well as its function, we must turn to a different set of theoretical resources and become a reader of myths.

In combination with Laclau's notion of empty signifier, Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis of contemporary mythologies provides a powerful tool for examining how leadership gains and holds on to its status as empty signifier in language. For Barthes, myth is not an illusory or fictional form of knowledge. Individual myths may take the form of stories or narratives, but myth also has a very special function as a type of speech. That is, myth is not set aside from ordinary language, but is part of it and supports it. Like Laclau's empty signifier, according to Barthes (1993) 'myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form'. Instead, and as an empty form of speech, myth must feed off other existing sign systems in order to transform them into mythical speech through the production of a second order sign system or meta-language. This process elevates ordinary language to give it an ideological force, but in the process impoverishes any first order meaning that this first sign system might have had.

One of the examples that Barthes offers to illustrate myth as a form of speech is through his analysis of the image on the cover of a French magazine depicting a young male soldier of African-French descent wearing a French military uniform and saluting an unseen flag. When read through Barthes' semiotic analysis, this image becomes a sign system in which signifier and signified are produced through the apparent age and gender of the young man, the colour of his skin, his uniform, and his bodily position. Together they form a 'sign' (young African-

French soldier saluting an unseen flag). For Barthes, however, this 'sign' is merely the beginning of a more powerful mythical second order system in which the young soldier saluting signifies something greater than himself. Elevated from sign to mythical signifier, it no longer matters who this young man is, his family background and life history. It doesn't even matter that the flag being saluted is out of shot for it is presumed that the viewer of this image will know and understand the political context of this mythical signifier (i.e. the Algerian war of independence) and that its central figure signifies the scope and influence of French imperialism. As such, the myth of French military might and geo-political status requires this young man for its foundation, but only in so far as he is now used to represent a necessary signification of national pride and military dominance. Of course, this final signification is never settled and so provides an opportunity for many other possible ideological agendas and interpretations – particularly as time passes. However, for Barthes what this image illustrates is how mythical signification is produced and how it gains its force and authority through its parasitic reliance on and subsequent manipulation of the ordinary.

Where this example provides a vivid instance of how the mythical can be used to serve the explicit ideology of a nation state, a more subtle production of mythical speech can also be traced out using Barthes' sign system to analyse the production of almost taken for granted discourses of leadership in mainstream contemporary business literature. Take the following example of an often cited phrase that has almost become a mantra for advocates of leadership over management:

The distinction is crucial. *Managers are people who do things right and leaders are people who do the right thing.* [emphasis in original]

Versions of this phrase are attributed to several leadership texts (and even authors), but the above is taken from the original Bennis and Nanus (1985: 21). In its simple formulation it creates a powerful and enduring popular and implicit mythical sign system based on the concern that many organisations 'tend to be overmanaged and underled' (ibid). To support this claim the couplet above plays off the limitations of management against the possibilities of leadership using a system similar to that described by Barthes.

This particular mythical chain of signification begins with the first order sign system of, 'a manager' (*signifier*) > 'managing' (*signified*) = 'doing things right' (*sign*). Existing as it does as the raw material for the rest of the couplet to feed off and so providing the foundation over which the mythical speech of leadership can then be overlaid. With some minor adjustments 'doing things right' can then be transformed from a tired sign for unimaginative 'management' and into a new and vibrant signifier for dynamic 'leadership'. 'Doing the *right* thing' now provides a powerful and leaderful moral imperative rather than simply a practical managerial task. Like the erased personal history of the young soldier described by Barthes, the status of 'manager' is necessary only as linguistic raw material to be downgraded and then sacrificed in order to produce the mythical connection between morality and leadership; a connection based on the production of an empty signifier that gains force and authority as mythical speech with every reiteration of this famous phrase.

It is this interplay between empty signifier and mythical speech that underpins the ideological practices of leadership by giving the appearance of an ontological reality. Indeed, phrases like Bennis and Nanus' have almost become leadership folklore and clearly demonstrate the ideological power of mythical speech for shaping the apparent ontological reality of leadership and management. What this adapted form of Barthes' semiotic analysis also provides is an appreciation of the paradoxical status of leadership when it is analysed as part of a sign system. When paired with management, it appears at first that it is leadership that is

the more dominant and powerful term. After all, it is leadership that we supposedly need in an overmanaged organisational world. However, upon closer inspection it is possible to glimpse the cracks and weaknesses in this empty signifier, for without the idea of management to provide this initial (and supposedly inferior) first order system, it would be impossible to extoll the virtues of leadership. Without its proxy, leadership as a term struggles to find any meaning of its own and its emptiness is revealed. This is not a problem for a popular couplet like ‘managers are people who do things right and leaders are people who do the right thing’, since this is itself a form of mythical speech - an ideological practice designed to inspire some and shame others. But this form of signification *is* a problem when one seeks to approach leadership as a thing in itself; as having its own unique and independent ontological status as collective action, practice, or process as discussed at the beginning of this article. At this point it becomes increasingly difficult to find any essential meaning in the term leadership at all.

## **Conclusion**

This article began with two quotations that described an encounter with objects that illuminate. One possible response to McCall and Lombardo’s lament is that empty signifiers may appear colourful, but they do not illuminate. Instead they only provide an opportunity to ‘gloss over’ the gaps in our occasionally slate grey language to enable conversations about topics too complex to be temporarily tamed, and to allow other work to be done. It is the accommodation of this surplus that Ramandu cautioned Eustace to consider as it provides a marker for (and reminder of) the inevitable lack in our understanding of the world. Similarly, it is these linguistic and conceptual knots described in this article that demand a negative ontological analysis of leadership. As an empty signifier, ‘leadership’ can contain and express any number of possible definitions, characteristics, ontologies, epistemologies, subjects,

objects, discourses and so on. The problem is that when something either signifies or is signified in relation to leadership this does not really provide any insight into the essence or reality of that thing. Following recent discussions concerning ontologies of leadership, this article has suggested an alternative perspective in which researchers should allow for the possibility that leadership has no ontological foundation at all. Instead, like other empty signifiers such as 'society', 'the public', 'excellence' and 'entrepreneurship' (Laclau, 1991; 1996; Jones and Spicer, 2005; Readings, 1996) the purpose of leadership is to offer up ideological spaces and practices through which to express that which cannot be captured in language. It is perhaps for this reason that Grint's (2005) mythical association with leadership and the hydra of ancient Greece is particularly apposite. As an empty signifier, 'leadership' will always produce a surplus of meaning in the same way that the hydra produces heads. There will always be the possibility of a better definition, research design, methodology, theoretical framework and so forth. Every attempt to sever a head will merely result in the growth of two more. Perhaps then this is a sign that we should put down our intellectual weapons and attend to the nature of this mythical creature that we feel compelled to combat. Until this happens Stogdill's famous statement that 'there are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept' (Stogdill, 1974: 7) will continue to stand as an uncomfortable truth. However, in replacing questions of ontology with those of ideology we might find that the both ontological proxies and ideological practices of leadership have always been available for study if we know where and how to look for them. Through this it may then be possible to question the wider ethical and practical value of certain appeals to 'leadership' and to consider the value of alternative interpretations, forms of speech and action, and spaces of resistance that might challenge or even replace the leadership concept.



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## Notes

1. The theoretical vocabulary used to articulate the notion of a negative ontology owes a considerable debt to those in working the related fields of critical management studies and psychoanalytic studies of work and organisation. Whilst not directly a Lacanian formulation, the notion of a negative ontology presented here draws on Lacanian motifs and principles such as the empty and master signifier, lack, surplus, desire and the sublime object. These concepts and principles have already been explored in recent applications of Lacanian psychoanalysis to the study of organisational learning (Driver, 2010), work and employment (Cederström and Heodemakers, 2010), entrepreneurship (Jones and Spicer, 2005) and managerial identity (Harding, 2007). However, leadership studies as a discipline has yet to receive an explicit Lacanian analysis and it is here that this article seeks to demonstrate the possible points of departure for such an investigation.
2. The term ‘critical leadership studies’ is used here as an umbrella for a range of theoretical and methodological approaches that share a common interest in challenging traditional assumptions about *leaders* and moving towards the study of *leadership* as a collective and shared accomplishment rather than one based on individualism. For a review of approaches that make up this emerging field see Collinson (2011) and Alvesson and Spicer (2011; 2012).

3. This formulation of leadership as lacking and its associated impossible surplus of meaning echoes and builds upon a similar study of 'entrepreneurship' by Jones and Spicer (2005). Here the authors explicitly apply Lacanian principles and concepts to understand the impossible space of 'the entrepreneur' and the inevitable failure of the discourse of entrepreneurship. Like leadership, entrepreneurship resists a universal definition and yet seems to have endless explanatory power. As Jones and Spicer argue, 'the entrepreneur' is not a person, but a marker of a fundamental lack; a category of fantasy that cannot be fixed and placed but through its empty centre provides a powerful means of organising and directing desire. Where Jones and Spicer explore questions of subjectivity and resistance through the phantasmatic figure of the entrepreneur, this article eschews subjectivity in favour of the ideological and the ontological as they are produced in both mainstream and critical leadership studies. Leadership research has a long and rich history of producing subjects of leadership discourse and so before engaging with questions of subjectivity this article advocates a more foundational starting point in which notions of the ontological are explored and interrogated. By revealing the ideological underpinnings of supposed leadership ontologies it is then possible to reconsider questions of subject formation, subjectivity and resistance. However, such a thoroughgoing analysis requires additional intellectual labour and space that is beyond the scope of the current article.

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