those who may suffer due to Change Management and helps to erect walls whereby we do not hear those voices because we are under the illusion that they either do not exist or are unimportant. (p. 5)

The implication is clear: management must learn to relinquish the anachronistic myth of change as a form whose destiny depends upon and lies entirely within their hands. Perhaps as McCabe suggests, there is a danger in such thinking for, ‘it would mean that claims could no longer be made regarding what strategies, technologies, structures or cultures should be adopted to effect change and thereby deliver the often mute goals of control, growth, productivity and profitability’. In the current climate, this argument has profound resonance and seems fitting as we create new templates for post-lockdown management which will necessitate radical change for us all.

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Mark Learmonth and Kevin Morrell, *Critical perspectives on leadership: The language of corporate power*, Routledge: New York, 2020. 163 pp. ISBN: 9781138093980

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Have you ever been asked the following question during a job interview: ‘Can you tell me about your leadership style?’ Have you ever had to redescribe your work experience using the leadership competency framework? It is comic indeed that the jargon regarding ‘leadership’ is so popular currently and taken for granted that so many people doing regular jobs (including those in management) are called leaders. So, leaders are academics taking on administrative roles, salespersons with high performance rates, or middle managers. These individuals are all convinced that they are changing the history of humankind if they do their daily, ordinary jobs. However, what is wrong with taking the role of Alexander the Great when selling hoovers?

As Mark Learmonth and Kevin Morrell indicate in their provocative book, using the language of ‘leadership’ is not innocent – it supports corporate power and reshapes the relationships among people at work. Once achieved, the status of the leader does not guarantee any personal or organizational success but very often reproduces dependency between the leader and his or her followers. Moreover, ‘leadership’ language creates conformist attitudes towards top-management decisions, silencing the critical voices that might criticize managers’ decisions. The ‘leadership’ discourse creates a false belief in ‘working together for organizational success’ and in financial success available for all – both leaders and followers – which triggers the mechanism of portraying elites as inherently virtuous. Consequently, very few people question the need for leadership, not being able to reflect on its impact on increasing power and wealth inequalities. The reviewed book takes deep consideration of this phenomenon.
Critical Perspectives on Leadership has 12 chapters divided into 4 parts. In Part 1, ‘Against leadership’, the authors explain their main idea that words such as ‘leadership’ or ‘leader’ affect social relationships in organizations and the way in which people perceive themselves. Talking about bosses as leaders flatters them and glamourizes their roles, legitimizing the interests of those who represent corporate power. At the same time, the language of leadership flattens workers, masking the inequalities between power holders and ‘followers’ and thus denying the interests of ordinary workers. In ‘leadership’ newspeak, leaders have the same goals as those of their followers, but in reality, leaders are those who set the goals.

The persuasiveness of the ‘leadership’ concept is so strong currently that it seems to be the answer to everything. As the authors have observed, ‘leadership is simply being used almost like an aerosol sprayed over every activity to make it somehow “special”’ (p. 20). A good example is the contemporary university and the description of academic roles and titles. Authors have analysed the extracts from person specifications and job descriptions, showing the dominance of leadership discourse in the roles of lecturers, programme managers or professors. Describing people who have talent in writing, collecting empirics, teaching or administering courses as charismatic and vision-creating leaders sounds grotesque (especially when someone is hired on a 12-month temporary contract), but in academic capitalism, the rhetoric of leadership seems to be useful for strengthening the dependency on the powerful. In fact, the word ‘leader’ is commonly described and understood – not only in academia – as being related to top management and elites. Being described as a ‘leader’ can then increase someone’s self-esteem (and raise his or her expectations for a larger salary) and leverage obedience to his or her decisions. However, as authors have observed, in many cases, when we see ‘leaders’ at work, we can easily replace the word ‘leader’ with ‘manager’, without losing the semantic meaning.

Using leadership vocabulary is not innocent in terms of power relationships in organizations. In recent years, we have observed changes in the language from ‘manager’ to ‘leader’ and from ‘worker’ to ‘follower’, and this change can be described as the depoliticization of the workplace. Based on the example of David Collinson’s (from 1988 and 2014) two articles, the authors of the present study show how this language turns readers’ eyes away from the critical assessment of leaders’ actions, at the same time making the worker’s voices unnecessary. The same can be found for the language used in corporate documents, deconstructed in the reviewed book. The description of leadership as something non-coercive and always positive is in fact a very persuasive camouflage masking the different political interests and power relations in organizations. This creates an image of the organization as ‘Santa’s workshop, where everyone is a happy elf, united behind celebration and glorification of the people in charge’ (p. 46). In reality, claiming that happy people follow excellent leaders and not simply work for them, disguises the fact that everyday relations at work are based on relationships of exchange, which must be constantly negotiated in terms of what is fair and equal.

In Part 2, ‘Leadership’ as Rhetoric’, the authors develop the idea that the language is never innocent, always shaping the social reality, and that studying the rhetoric of leadership can help in understanding how the language of leadership can affect people in organizations. As the authors observe, ‘rhetoric is not principally about the content of arguments used to persuade people, but it is about the way that the content in these arguments is put together’ (p. 65). Since rhetoric always involves the audience’s feelings and construction of meanings, the rhetoric of leadership has the capacity to transform a mere worker into someone who believes he or she is special, charismatic or a deserving authority. This special kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, called the ‘Pygmalion effect’, can increase false beliefs in someone’s power in an organization, giving him or her leadership power regardless of his or her real leading competencies.
Using the language of leadership is a kind of performance that affects the way people make sense of their workplace. The mainstream understanding of leadership is deeply rooted in corporate discourse based on the instrumentalist view of humans (people as selfish profit maximizers). This ‘gloomy vision’ of leadership can free people from any sense of moral responsibility: the only important thing is to follow the leader to realize common interests related to improving the profit maximization of the organization. The potential conflicts or tensions between the leader and the follower are neutralized by the corporate newspeak of ‘problem solving’, ‘team building’ or ‘transformative leader’ ready to find a solution to someone’s fears.

In Part III, ‘The Seductions of ‘Leadership’’, the authors analyse the features of leadership discourse, for example, its positive connotations. Leadership is usually presented as something positive and good, whereas as the authors observe, ‘the good’ can, in practice, mean radically different things to different people and groups’ (p. 85). For example, for Paulo Freire, a good leader is someone ready to liberate oppressed groups; for Field Marshal Sir William Slim, a good leader is someone who has a reputation of being lucky and who must possess the minds and hearts of soldiers. Unfortunately, the holiness of leadership language makes it decontextualized, universally valid and objective, thus emanating epistemological fundamentalism in the content layer and not being open to critical negotiation. Gibson Burrell called this type of unreflective approach ‘Heathrow Organization Theory’ (Burrell, 1997: 27): a pointless theory based on bare pragmatism and philosophical emptiness. The leadership guidebook language and uncompromising statements aimed at suggesting the real truth and what to do to be successful leaders, not supported by critical reflection on the social context, making mainstream leadership discourse as simple and empty as airports. However, that is the great advantage for people who make their living in the ‘leadership industry’ – consultants, researchers or academic teachers, who “sell” the golden rules of leadership to their audience. A perfect example of the leadership industry (built on millions of bestsellers sold at airport bookstores and motivational speeches for future excellent leaders) is the concept of “hippie leaders”, spreading a new-age perspective of leadership, based mostly on inspirational thoughts about self-discovery.

The hegemony of leadership discourse pushes people to advertise themselves as leaders on social media and to invite others to celebrate and follow their success. This phenomenon of ‘celebritization’ based on the realization of personal branding projects – as the authors show in their deconstruction of several posts – is deeply rooted in neoliberal rationality. ‘Look at me!’ posts on LinkedIn, Twitter or Facebook are an exemplification of individualistic and selfish actions, very often based on the belief of networking as a response to perpetual job insecurity. In reality, and in contrast to the virtual world, people are not simply followers, and very often they are obeying or resisting, rather than following, someone’s actions and decisions. In this sense, as the authors observe, ‘the use of “follower” is an attempt to make workers’ whole identities dependent upon their (so-called) leaders’ (p. 114) since a follower is perceived as someone for whom resistance towards the leader is abnormal and irrational.

In the last Part (IV), the authors reflect on what can be done to reduce the negative impact of leadership language. In academic research, one of the possibilities is the contribution of critical leadership studies (as a part of the broader stream of critical management studies) aimed at providing alternative views and ideas on leadership (such as resistance leadership), mainly related to the analysis of power relations and structures of domination within organizational life. However, as authors observe, many academics who claim to be critical reproduce the newspeak of ‘leader’ and ‘follower’ in their writings. The other interesting alternative is the idea of collective leadership, emphasizing leadership as a cooperative, rather than individual, practice and leadership as practice, escaping the hegemony of the ‘leader–follower’ dyad. In terms of practical responses, the authors propose the attitude of positive cynicism, or micro-resistance related to avoiding using leadership
language in organizations; calling people managers or administrators, but not leaders, might be a good starting point. The book finishes with valuable recommendations for further reading.

This book allows the reader to develop the critical perspective to teaching leadership, including practice-based and caring leadership, and should be used as course material in management classrooms. Learning leading from art, as authors suggest, might be a good way for demystifying leadership from ethically false dyad ‘leader–follower’ towards understanding leadership as collective responsibility for Others. This publication is also a great source of knowledge for researchers studying leadership in different organizational contexts. Following the ideas presented by authors, we should differentiate critical studies on leadership discourse as an emancipatory field of uprooting leadership from neoliberal values.

There are at least two ways to develop upon the reviewed book. First, it might be interesting to broaden the knowledge about reproducing the neoliberal language of leadership in contemporary business schools. In fact, business schools take advantage of the leadership idea, marketizing leadership programmes and courses through the persuasive rhetoric of becoming a successful leader as an employable skill. Academics take the role of consultants who sell their services to students based on n-step guides about excellent leadership. Consequently, academic leadership courses involving more reflective inquiries are very often defined as providing a low quality of teaching, presenting ideas that are too abstract, instead of providing quick and ready solutions. In this sense, the neoliberal discourse on leadership seems to be a demonstration of what Martin Parker describes as ‘triumphalism about management and market’ (Parker, 2018: XIII) in the management classroom. Unrealistic expectations of leadership success, based on magical thinking derived from leadership discourse (handbooks, guidebooks and business school teaching), have a real impact on students’ disappointments (not only in the classroom but also mostly when facing the complex organizational reality in the workplace) and can affect students’ as well as teachers’ self-confidence in a negative way.

Second, the unethical consequences of patronizing relationships between followers and leaders might be highlighted. The uncritical belief in leadership as something that is only positive might prevent ‘followers’ from moral reflection on their actions since such actions are authorized by leaders. Creating such a space of adiaphorization (Bauman, 1989), in which leadership is free from moral evaluation, might prevent people from contesting the actions realized by leaders. Patronizing relations between leaders and followers can normalize the subordination of disadvantaged groups to those in power, strengthening their ‘obedience to authority’ (Milgram, 1974[2005]). This might foster the unethical practices realized by the leaders, including bullying.

In this interesting book, Learmonth and Morrell aim to become guards against the hegemony of ‘leadership’ language, willing to improve the critical and cynical instincts among readers. They improved mine for sure. When someone holding a leadership role at my university asks me if I want anything, I will respond as follows: ‘Yes, stand a little out of my sun, manager’.

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