Un-willing is un-leading: Leadership as beastly desire

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…all three of them, the animal, the criminal, and the sovereign, are outside the law, at a
distance from or above the laws: criminal, beast, and sovereign strangely resemble each
other while seeming to be situated at the antipodes, at each other’s antipodes.

For Jacques Derrida (2011: 17) beasts and leaders are similar in several senses, if one
just leaves transcendental ideals of ethics behind. Looking carefully at the personal
conduct of many so-called charismatic leaders, one cannot help but to note that they
often are ‘beyond good and evil’ (Nietzsche, 2003). Leaders are not only ‘gods’ to their
followers (Gabriel, 1997), but the more elevated their social status is, the more
symbolised, uncontested and taken-for-granted they appear. Thus, the extent of their
detachment from the ethical register increases the appearance of their ‘charisma’.

Leaders are symbols to their followers (and quite often nothing else) – when their seats
are vacated, they have to be filled (Deleuze, 1983: 151):

Why would man have killed God, if not to take his still warm seat? Heidegger remarks,
commenting on Nietzsche, ‘if God...has disappeared from his authoritative position in the
suprasensory world, then this authoritative place itself is still always preserved…the
empty place demands to be occupied anew and to have the god now vanished from it
replaced by something else’.

We could call this need the symbolic imperative, according to which leaders are the
great reference points around which the social organization develops its decision-
making. However, noting this symbolic imperative is not a stop, but a start in
understanding the nature of leadership. Contextual factors of the social organization in structuring leadership (Ladkin, 2011) have to be taken into account. Although several archetypes of leaders have appeared in the literature (see, for instance, Alvesson and Spicer, 2011; Hatch et al., 2005), we fail to fully understand the possible contributing mechanism(s) that create the conditions for a highly symbolised (or charismatic) leadership to occur. Ultimately, we are intrigued by the foundational questions of humanity; is leadership one of the ‘human universals’, among music, sport, sex, language and intoxication? In fact, our treatment of the topic brings us to assess these universals also with respect to each other. Our essay is a theoretical one in which we try to understand the role of desire in the construction of leadership. More precisely, we are intrigued by how desire-fullness is often considered an asset in the leader person, something that escapes the common categories of logical and ethical analysis. Thus, we start from the assumption that desire is something that makes leadership possible; it is not something detrimental that should be avoided, as some critical commentators of charismatic leadership might argue. In the course of this paper, we explore and discuss the popular presentation of two well-known and unconventionally portrayed leaders of our time: the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, and Silvio Berlusconi of Italy.

Methodologically, we adopt the methodology of ‘critical practice’ (Weiskopf and Willmott, 2013) in this essay by understanding symbolism as a critical practice of questioning and problematising meaning orders and semiotic rules-in-use in which
subjects (like our beast-leaders) (re)define their relations to self and others. The understanding of which we use in our analysis is the semantics of the body (Lingis, 1994; Mauss, 2006; Merleau-Ponty, 2002; Rutrof, 1997), emphasising the role of the body in the meaning-making process, viewing it as an integral part of the hermeneutic. We also identify visual representations of leadership and how they are often associated with the leader body. We should note, however, that we do not incorporate a ‘corporealist’ view of the leader – instead, we see it to be an idealised one, working in the contemporary media-sphere. In other words, we are more interested in understanding the becoming of leadership and how it is motivated by leader desire and the desire for desire from the part of the followers of the leader.

_The beastly, desiring leader_

The low notion of ‘beastly desire’ associates well with how unconsciously motivated traits appear at the surface of leaders. So beastly is this desire of leading and staying at the helm that it often requires medical help. Commenting on one of the charismatics of our time, Silvio Berlusconi, Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi notes that in fact these men are old who ‘seek help from bio-techniques, psycho-chemistry, and pharmacology’ (2012: 67). In his analysis, Berardi emphasises the role of energetic strength and how it contributes to the ‘delirium of power’ (2012: 68). What is more, he brings an alternative reading to the question of desire. For him, money buys things – desire creates them (he also agrees
it is not based on lack). Whereas Deleuze and Guattari draw a distinction between interest and desire (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980, 1983), Berardi sees desire as ‘an enhancer of vision, as a creative activity’ (2012: 109). For Deleuze and Guattari, pure desire is at the core of human existence, bringing us to the notion of ‘body without organs’.

The concept of ‘body without organs’ (or, henceafter, BwO), introduced by Gilles Deleuze in his book *Logic of sense* (1990), and developed further in *Anti-Oedipus* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983), refers originally to the writings of the French author Antonin Artaud. Drawing on developmental psychology and the ‘life of intensities-in-motion’ (Smith and Protevi, 2013), BwO refers to the underlying reality of a system made of constituent parts – an undifferentiated realm behind the surface of appearances.

Within the bounds of this essay, we associate the ‘infant’ used by the developmental psychologists (mostly by Daniel N. Stern) to the follower of a charismatic leader. The infant is the one that makes sense (literally!) of the nonsense that he/she is encountered with from the very first moment after being born into this world. Similarly, those ‘intensities-in-motion’ that constitute the flow of leadership stimuli become made-sense-of through the act of (re)interpretation, manifested in the act of followership. Humans have the innate tendency (or is it desire?) to make sense of their surroundings, in their constant and on-going attempt to connect with his/her parents and physical surroundings. This is also something that makes leadership – in many cases a solely
virtual one (Boje and Rhodes, 2005) – possible.

Taking the matter to the level above the noise generated by individuals, Georges Bataille uses the concepts of economy to describe his theory or model of society. He explains how opposite impulses in an economy require one another not because they are dialectical opposites, but because they only arise as apparent contradictions in the form of one another (Bataille, 1991; Mansfield, 2008: 64). In other words, contradictions arise through the running-on of an impulse to something that is necessarily more than itself. Thus, the need for leadership (De Vries et al., 2002) becomes an underlying driver for the leadership to take place in the first place – it becomes an economic factor. The leader must desire leadership in order to satisfy the need for the followers to consume leadership. In this light, the leader is the external source of stimuli, the provider of sensory experience to the follower, who in his/her part is the body without organs, the infant that tries to make sense of the world and thus communicate with him/herself through the projection of his/her parents. The BwO lives in the realm of the economy of eroticism, the content of which is the representation of the leader body, the mode of which takes place through the act of worship.

For our analysis, as well as for Berardi’s polemic of the state of contemporary financial capitalism, the erotising of the visual is a crucial matter. For him, desire ‘is diverted from physical contact and invested in the abstract field of simulated seduction, in the infinite space of the image’ (2012: 116). This is a crucial point in his analysis, as
it connects desire to the realm of the visual and the leader-beasts. In a sense, it is also a symptom of the end of modernity, as lacking physical contact to our leaders (in the tribal social formations it was otherwise) leads to us becoming unconsciously attached to the visualisations of leadership – in a sense making our leaders virtual (Boje and Rhodes, 2005). Photographs become erotic precisely because we do not know our leaders. This detachment between leaders and their followers create the possibility of tyranny, as mechanisms of social sanctioning cannot be in place for physically and socially non-existing leaders. Tragically enough, leaders do not ‘exist’ in the world of their followers. This leads into a situation in which leaders that are not tightly embedded in any functioning society with transparent and effective means of social sanctioning will inevitably become corrupted, making them, yes, beasts. Thus in a sense, the desire that makes leadership possible is perverted in the age of the image (and the consequent forms of virtual leadership) – and followers end up desiring their own oppression. In short, being outside of a society detaches one also from the register of the ethical – the system according to which social rights and wrongs are intuitively, collectively, on-goingly negotiated.

The body of the leader

The semantic power of the body becomes apparent in the texts of Horst Rutrof (1997):

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1 This strand of meta-ethical discussion is not elaborated further in this paper. It suffices to say that leaders are beasts vis-à-vis the society they are supposed to lead.
Its semantic force is expressed in how ‘...it forges links and makes sense “even in the most adverse circumstances of syntactic dereliction.”’ This view emphasises the role of the body in the meaning-making process, viewing it as an integral part of the hermeneutic. We align closely to this view, and see that the construction of leadership should be understood through a variety of registers, without an exaggerated attribution of meaning to psychological or behavioural characteristics of leader individuals (although, in the confines of this essay, we will limit ourselves to the aspect of the leader body and desire). Starting from the mediaeval monarchs, the body politic and the body natural of the king have been analysed separately and discussed (Kantorowicz, 1957). Insights established by Kantorowicz are classic in the field; according to this dichotomous (and rather transcendental) understanding, the natural body of the king is the one that gets ill, is weakened as time goes by, feels hunger like any other human body, etc. The body politic, however, is the transcendental body of the sovereign, serves as the symbol of his rule, the one with divine authority. This is the construction that is also in the focus of leadership studies.

Unlike, however, analyses that concentrate on creating a unified, harmonious theory that shows something shared about leadership across contexts and time, we focus our theoretical attention towards the body natural of the sovereign. Taking a closer look at the natural urges brings us closer to understanding that leaders are humans after all, despite the appealing and institutionalised epistemic constructs of leadership. By going
to the level of unconscious urges of the leader individual, we see what motivates the emergence of leadership in the first place – in other words – what makes leadership possible. In this light, it is rather odd that understanding leadership through embodiment is not more popular, although some work has started to emerge; see for instance an analysis of the embodied leadership of Theodore Roosevelt (Redekop, 2014) or an anti-Cartesian, embodied analyses of leadership in the military context (Fisher and Robbins, 2014). We explore the leader body, desire and energy through understanding the nature of the media representations (leadership constructs) of two contemporary, charismatic leaders – Vladimir Putin and Silvio Berlusconi. First, however, we have to spend some time discussing the ontology of desire that makes leadership possible.

*Rhizomatic ontology and leadership*

**Rhizome and desire**

In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1983) attempted to formulate a purely immanent theory of desire. In a sense, this concept of desire is based on dramatization. This drama serves the purpose of a leader’s existence, nevertheless remaining the in background of the leader’s unconscious motivational system. This view of *Realpolitik* aligns well with Nietzsche’s view of perspectivism: ‘it is precisely facts that do not exist, only interpretations…’ (1976: 458). Ultimately, by the term ‘desire,’ Deleuze refers to ‘the state of the unconscious drives’. ‘Drives’, on their part, are the desiring-machines –
ones that are always regimented by the societies in which they are embedded. The typologies of such systems into which we are embedded into are for Deleuze and Guattari those of ‘primitive territorial societies’, ‘States’, ‘capitalism’ and ‘nomadic war machines’ (Smith, 2007: 71, 74).

We draw one more distinction from the work of Deleuze and Guattari, the one between desire and interest. An interest is something that one may pursue in highly rational manner, such as education, career and matters of social status. It remains, however, always within the bounds of the current social formation. In such a situation, one’s desire is positively aligned with the social formation; one has invested in it (Smith, 2007: 74). This is in contrast to a common notion of desire that defines itself through lack (such as in popular notions of Buddhist faith). For Deleuze, lack always appears at the level of interest, not that of desire, because the very social formation has created the lack one has invested one’s desire in. And for our part, we see desire as one of the great motivators to the ‘will to lead’, manifested in all human societies.

**Possibilities of totalitarianism**

The possibility of authoritarianism created by desire could be exemplified by innumerable examples. According to Arendt (2009), the efficiency of an organization depends on its ability to simultaneously prepare missions of the opposite ends. Theoretically, a totalitarian model requires pseudo-organizations as it destroys competing ones. The new, ostensible organizations eventually consume the incumbent
long-standing and legitimate ones. With its strategic agility and manoeuvrability enabled by the capacity to outsource functions, a grey organization does not become rooted and is ready to execute missions similar to those of criminal organizations, in which power is achieved by instilling fear. At the core of the model are the mysterious leaders who cannot be exposed and who are incomprehensively superior in relation to anything or anyone else. One of the most important characteristics of a leader is the skill to plot and switch power positions within the organization. The leader of a totalitarian organization thus manages inter-organizational struggle for power. As the singular leader person at the top of the hierarchy carries all responsibility, the lay members of the organization are never responsible for their possible wrongdoings in the eyes of the external world. The utter responsibility of the leader makes others irresponsible. This is the way of – not only infamous totalitarian political regimes – but also the norm for the conduct of multinational corporations operating in the Western liberal capitalist economies.

If we agree that at least one of the defining characteristics of totalitarianism is that the grassroots participants of the system feel that ‘they are simply following orders’, it becomes established that in this kind of a system, all responsibility would lie at the top of the hierarchy – not only in practice, but also at the level of ideology. The ideological level is prone to becoming institutionalised, mythologised and in the end, taken for granted. This brings us to the view that the symbolic, uncontested body of the king is, in
fact, an enabler of totalitarianism. In other words, the very nature of the totalitarian system would then have the potential of rendering everyone else in the organization completely free from responsibility. In this light, it becomes clear that in some situations, leadership can legitimately be viewed as an ‘alienating social myth’ that strips people of their will and critical reflection, leaving them the role of a child (Gemmill and Oakley, 1992). Providing mythological reference points is not only feeding the followers’ need for consuming leadership (De Vries et al., 2002), but also creating the space for a very primal leadership to take place and flourish (Kuronen and Virtaharju, 2013).

Discussion

Most leaders that break the threshold of being in the radar of global public interest tend to be hungry for power and followers. Moreover, most people desire to be led, which makes the space for desire reciprocal. From this perspective, it is the communities that generate their leaders (or lift them to the leading position from within) – it is not as the tradition has seen it – as if the destinies of societies would be end-products of the characters and actions of their ‘great men’ leader (Carlyle, 1841). In practice, however, we suspect that this process is co-evolutional; individuals with desires of power are attracted to leading positions, and their desires are catered for by their societies. Beyond the desires of leading and following, we view that the followers of our study desire a
Desiring leader – or even desire to desire to be desired! It is not enough for the leader to desire power and followers. Followers want to be led by a leader that is never satisfies but always desires more and more – a leader with an incessant urge to desire *everything and eternally*. This particular individual is someone who receives libinal fulfilment and satisfaction of his/her desires being fulfilled and even enjoyed. The amount of space they are able to create for manoeuvring increases to a point in which their status transcends ethics. Thus, it is not enough (in fact, not allowed) to reach one’s objectives: one has to want even *more*!

Taking a look in the military context, Mansfield (2008: 52) sees that the existence of a military group is a way of controlling violence and aggression, but at same time, one has to be ready to use violence. The common soldier submits to the leader whom he thinks of as an ideal version of himself. The soldier controls his aggression by the installation into himself of the leader’s commandment. The soldier’s aggressive violence is taken away from him, while it is intensified within in the form of discipline. The role of the leader is to channel this aggression to the adversary or enemy, according to the demands placed upon the group by the context and time at hand. In other words, the military leader provides the meaning to which his/her followers should distribute the destruction in their limited powers. The military is relevant, as it so clearly brings about the ethical judgment. In our time, it is customary to talk about the justification of war, the rules of conduct and legal processes in the international war crime tribunals. All
this, despite that a large number of people view violence towards other human beings to be unethical in the first place! This can be accommodated by shifting levels: as long as violence is meant to secure or further the interests of the common good of the society, it automatically becomes more or less legitimate. And this negotiation process has very much to do with the structuring of leadership in that socio-cultural contingency.

One thing that Derrida (2011) invites us to do with his juxtaposition of the animal, the criminal and the sovereign is to challenge, redefine and deconstruct the nature of leadership. He invites us to assess the validity of these conceptual categories and see that they are not separate in practice, far from it. Rather, they are different expressions or manifestation of the same thing – something beyond good and evil (of a society), making the whole discussion of leadership one of ethics (or meta-ethics, in fact). Moreover, the oft-assumed genealogy between those concepts is a false one (first animal, then criminal, then and so on…). They all are outside of the sphere of the social, however in slightly a different manner. The animal is ‘innocent’, ‘instinctual’ and ‘natural’, hence outside society (and ethics). The criminal is ‘ill’, ‘inherently evil’ and ‘socio-politically dislocated’, hence outside society (and ethics). The sovereign is ‘authoritative’, ‘leading’ and ‘(silence)’, hence outside society (and ethics)². Although silence has been discussed vis-à-vis silencing opposition and anxiety (Grint, 2010), we

² We spent a considerable time reflecting on this matter, with little new insight. It seems that leaders are not only beyond the ethical register – also the articulation of its ‘beyondness’ is often communicated with silence on the matter. How this is separate from a conventional ‘taboo’ remains an open question.
have not found any trace of a theoretical discussion of the ‘silence of leadership’!

**Meta-ethics of leadership – or transcending the false genealogy**

Whereas the intuitive view on the animal-criminal-sovereign –triad might be lured in identifying their association to be hierarchical by nature; we argue that we need to include the third dimension to the picture. It is not the case that the relationship between the leader and the followers would be hierarchical, but a lateral one instead. Followership lies below the leader and at the same time in-between of the different articulations – what *does* stand above is the transcendental that is being pursued by all of them (although it does not ‘exist’ in the strict sense of the word – it suffices to behave in a way that it would). What stands at the podium above the sovereign is the one with the focal interest, bringing us to understanding the need of articulating beyond the apparent. As mentioned above, discussing leadership is a meta-ethical business that opens up questions of *why* leaders are beyond the ethical systems of societies. As noted earlier, animals are ‘natural’ and criminals ‘ill’, but the only characteristic of a leader seems to be an impenetrable aura of silence. This brings about the third dimension; followership lies below and in-between, ACS stands above (shown below in Figure 1)!
In fact, we propose to take the meta-ethical reflection of leadership even further. Meta-ethical reflection is not enough, but requires an account of desire to be taken into the picture. In our view, desire is meta-ethical by nature, something hanging above the processes of socialisation. Our additional insight in understanding the limits of leadership is the identification of the double hermeneutic of the becoming of leadership.

First of all, the one who desires leadership enough is close of becoming a leader in actuality. Second, followers need leadership, thus making an eternal desire to be lead. It is also the main contributing mechanism that creates the possibility of leadership in the first place.
Figure 2. The double hermeneutic of desire in the becoming of leadership

Third – and this is the main contribution of this paper – followers desire a leader that desires them. In other words, it is not enough to desire leadership or to be desired, but the crucial point is to be a desiring leader (explicated in Figure 2)!

We know from the field of development psychology that dislocation from the parents generates anxiety in an infant – similarly, leadership should not be separated from the eager followers! Friedrich Nietzsche once wrote of madness to be ‘…something rare in individuals – but in groups, parties, peoples, ages it is the rule.’ (2003: 69). Considering this point carefully, we are brought to understanding something of the meta-ethics of leadership. It is not a matter of becoming involved in the register of the ethical, but going beyond that very register is required from the leader. The society that elevates someone to be at the helm of things makes its call for sovereignty precisely because they want that someone to be beyond good and evil – above the vice of morality – and the herd instinct in man.

References


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