This paper proposes Lacanian discourse analysis as a means of rigorously analysing leadership ethics. We aim to contribute to the field of leadership ethics through proposing a means of analysis that places the discursive constructions of leaders, and our subjective responses to these constructions, as the primary focus. In so doing we eliminate a need to read leadership (including particular qualities, behaviours and types) into a set of data and instead propose that the ethics of leadership can be interpreted and discussed by analysing the use of the signifier ‘leadership’ within the text.

A growing research agenda within leadership studies has drawn attention to the possibilities for viewing leadership as an empty-floating signifier (e.g. Driver, 2013; Kelly, 2014). As a word that in isolation means very little, ‘leadership’ is also a signifier in which people invest substantial emotional energy (Ford and Harding, 2007; Ford et al, 2008). Thinking of ‘leadership’ as a particular kind of signifier that quilts together, holds in tension, a range of meanings, allows a reading whereby leadership can be thought of as the site of significant ethical struggle. Quilting points for Lacan are signifiers which act as important points of juncture for the construction of meaning, patching together a range of other signifiers and discourses into a coherent whole (Lacan, 1997).

Adopting such an analysis is important for leadership ethics as it allows us to look beyond attributions of virtuous, or unvirtuous, characteristics of leaders and focuses attention on the discursive deployments of leaders in practice. Lacanian discourse analysis should be differentiated from a post-structuralist form of discourse analysis, in that it pays attention as much to what may lie beyond the text, the affective dimensions encircled by text, as that which is expressed only within the limits of the text itself (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000). Lacanian ethics looks within – but also beyond the text – to the realm of desire.

If for Lacan, the unconscious is what is ‘out there’ in the form of symbolic construction (laws, texts, discourses, etc), then desire is that which cannot be fully represented, that which slips past complete construction. Desire, for Lacan, is that which lies at the limit of our symbolic constructions, that which cannot be captured in words but nevertheless structures our thinking and our discourse. Desire structures behaviour and thought because of its refusal to be fully captured in the symbolic. Desire points to the limit of the symbolic, to an unbearable, traumatic form of enjoyment Lacan connects to the death drive. This is jouissance, enjoyment freed from a symbolic anchor (Lacan, 1991). As necessarily social beings we rely on language, on symbolic sensemaking and communication to survive and be in the world. Yet the system of discourses we are forced to adopt necessarily result in a form of symbolic castration, a limit to our desires (McGowan, 2013). We have...
to adopt the language of others, the conventions and traditions of others. We read the same books and listen to the same music as others. We abide by the same workplace and even political norms as others. Our desires therefore are ultimately the desires of the Other – the edifice of the symbolic, as experienced in the texts we experience, the people we encounter. Hence Lacan’s question, ‘Che Vuoi?’ What does the Other want of me? Desire is thus postulated in Lacan as the subject experiencing the desire of the Other and the Other bearing witness to the desire of the subject (Neill, 2011). Symbolic order and subjectivity are posited as mutually constitutive.

Paradoxically, it is because the symbolic order is imperfect and always incomplete that it seems to shape our desire. The symbolic order, in its imperfection, is incapable of satisfying desire, yet it is this very limit that maintains and structures desire. Of course the idea that the symbolic world which structures our existence might be inadequate, in fact, always lacking, is something distressing. Hence the role of fantasy in our lives, to both paper over the faults and contradictions in the symbolic order but also to direct our desires (Lacan, 2008). This is a refreshing theoretical stance for critical philosophy in as much as it views power (expressed and manifest in the symbolic, in law and authority) as always contingent, temporary and fragile. There is considerable opportunity for the ethical, then, for questioning and undermining power, as well as, of course, operating within its limits.

The ethical moment for Lacan is that which exposes and works with the gaps in the symbolic and in so doing exposes (albeit briefly) the underlying desires which direct our decisions, our behaviour. Such desire can never be known in its finality – as we can only experience the world within the confines of language – but can point us in the direction of seeing the unhelpfulness, even banality and blind obedience of our regular patterns of obedience to the symbolic. A Lacanian ethics of desire is thus inherently disruptive, an ethics which calls upon subjects to continually question their relationship to authority, experienced as rules, norms, law, history and custom. Hence Lacan’s Last Judgment on ethical conduct: “Have you acted in conformity with the desire that is in you (Lacan, 2008: 386)?”

Such a statement should not be read as a form of injunction to tear up the rule book, to put aside the bonds of society and follow a form of anarchism rooted in some sort of pre-symbolic desire. Rather, Lacan’s argument here is that through surfacing our structuring desires we might be more aware, ethical decision makers:

One knows what it costs to go forward in a given direction, and if one doesn’t go that way, one knows why. One can even sense that if, in one’s accounts with one’s desire, one isn’t exactly in the clear, it is because one couldn’t do any better, for that’s not a path one can take without paying a price. The spectator has his eyes opened to the fact that even for him who goes to the end of his desire, all is not a bed of roses. But he also has his eyes opened – and that is essential – to the value of prudence which stands in opposition to that, to the wholly relative value of beneficial reasons, attachments or pathological interests, as Mr Kant says, that might keep him on that risky path (Lacan, 2008: 397).

Lacan’s system of ethics is thus quite a subjective form of ethics, which places a burden of responsibility on the subject to explore her/his desire, to look beyond what he/she is being urged to do and think within the boundaries of power and law (the symbolic). There is a burden on the subject to look beyond what she/he is being told to do unconsciously (symbolically), to question conventional thinking and to be self-critical of her/his motives (Neill, 2011). For example, a political leader might question what lies behind the temptation for military intervention – or, conversely – an aversion to the notion of military intervention in certain circumstances. What is the symbolic
structure of moral reasoning which says it is acceptable to use military force on certain occasions but not others? What would it mean to step outside such structures, to hold oneself accountable for one’s desire?

Hence Lacanian ethics has been read as distinctly anti-utopian (Stavrakakis, 1999) and suspicious of the ‘good’ in ethical thought. Lacan’s scepticism regarding the good can be thought of in relation to fantasy, in as much as a ‘good’ in ethical thought, according to Lacan, is tied up with an exercise of power, via fantasm. A leader may claim to be motivated by the ‘good’ of another. Yet in the very act of shaping another’s good, one exercises power over this other (Lacan, 2008). Is this truly an act motivated by pure, selfless kindness, or is there another form of desire at work? Desire for fulfilment in an afterlife? Desire to be seen by others as good? Desire for fame and adulation? Desire for another to serve? Desire to shape the desires of another? And so on. The trap provided by the service of goods, in Lacan’s view, is the permanent postponement of desire in the name of an exercise of power, power over the enunciating subject, power over the other.

We propose to draw on Lacanian discourse analysis and Lacanian ethics to interrogate the leadership of one of the most divisive figures of recent political past, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair. Most people have a view as to whether Blair was, and remains, an ethical leader. Was he someone who started off with the best intentions and became ‘bad’ over time? Was he a leader who was motivated by the ‘good’ all along? Undoubtedly Blair is a figure whom many attribute and impute fantasies of both villainy and heroism.

In this study we aim to illustrate the potential of Lacanian ethics and discourse analysis through exploring the constructions of leadership offered by Blair throughout his tenure as leader of the Labour Party. Can we learn anything about the ethics of leadership through exploring Blair’s use of the signifier ‘leadership’?

The study took as its data set a range of texts authored by Blair, between his winning the leadership of the Labour Party in 1994 and his resignation in 2007. Analysed were Blair’s speeches, press conferences and media interviews. All documents were drawn from the extensive archive housed in the People’s History Museum in Manchester. In addition, the text of Blair’s memoirs (2011) was included. In total, 929 documents were analysed. Searching for words beginning ‘lead-’ we discovered 557 instances of the use of ‘to lead’, ‘leadership’, ‘leading’, etc. Having isolated an instance of leadership, we highlighted the broader narrative within which it was contained, with narrative here viewed in the pragmatic sense of a passage of text containing a beginning, middle, end, form of plot and characterisation (Riessman, 2008). Of particular interest in the data analysis was the chain of signification adopted by Blair in relation to leadership, with individual leaders referenced (including himself) interpreted as another signifier within the chain. This process acts as a decentring of the text, allowing for a more rigorous view of how a specific subject presents him/herself, or others, in relation to other signifiers at work (Neill, 2013). As stated, we were interested in how leadership might act as a quilting point, knitting together a range of other signifiers (Lacan, 2007; Parker, 2005 and 2014; Pavón Cuéllar, 2010). We paid attention to the use of metaphor and metonymy within the text (Lacan, 1997 and 2007), as an indication of slip, or fluidity, in Blair’s constructions, or of relative fixedness of meaning.

Broadly speaking we chart a discursive progression in Blair’s language from the quilting point of ‘partnership’ to the quilting point of ‘leadership’. Blair’s early years were characterised through collaborative signifiers, as he projected himself as the leader who could unite the nation. Leadership is mentioned sparingly in the talk of his early years and when it is it is adopted as a surrogate for collaboration and partnership. Hence ‘leadership’ may be read in the early years as a quilting point
in a metonymic sliding of meaning, of a leader making sense of the diverse demands of stakeholders (the Other). ‘Leadership’ begins to emerge as a dominant signifier after the 9/11 al-Qaeda attacks. It is at this point that we witness ‘leadership’ used in Blair’s talk as something that is simultaneously masterful and mysterious. Blair does not provide a definition of leadership. Yet ‘leadership’ is a quilting point for a series of signifiers of strength and determination, in addition to remaining that mysterious, unexplained quality which differentiates leaders worthy of praise from those not worthy of praise. Specifically, ‘leadership’ is a signifier that enters Blair’s vocabulary in relation to the qualities of President George W Bush.

‘Leadership’ becomes a signifier associated with what we consider to be ‘command’ (Grint, 2005). A familiar theme of Blair’s talk is that although he may take unpopular decisions, people respect him for it and respect the role of the leader in society as making such difficult decisions in the face of opposition. It is in such a transition from ‘partnership’ to ‘command’ that we begin to witness a foreclosing of meaning Blair attached to the word ‘leadership’. Such a foreclosing can be seen as the eclipsing of the mediating symbolic structures between Blair and his ‘leadership’. Blair characterises the task of leadership as making the difficult decision almost regardless of injunctions to do otherwise. Adopting such a discourse of mastery, foreclosing one’s position in relation to the symbolic, is characteristic of Lacan’s notion of a slip into psychoses (Lacan, 1997).

Nevertheless, the transition to position of psychoses cannot be characterised as clean-cut. There is a battle at play, and considerable effort in Blair’s texts of leadership whereby he positions, justifies and struggles against an Other. The reader is subjected to significant, extended passages where leadership is constructed in terms of grappling with uncertainty. Leading a nation is, after all, a difficult, even impossible task. Leadership, in this sense, perhaps takes us to the heart of desire – of our desire as subjects of leadership and to the desire of those who adopt the symbolic mantle of leadership.

So who is this Other against who Blair struggles? It is us, ‘the public’. This ‘public’ (the Other) demands a form of psychotic certainty from its leaders, according to Blair’s constructions. In answer to the question Che Vuoi (What does the Other want of me?), Blair’s answer is ... ‘Me’! Or at least Blair’s self-image as commander. Leadership becomes metaphor, a metaphor for Blair as the embodiment of the commander. It is in this final foreclosure that we witness the ethical failing of Blair’s account of leadership. The symbolic Other, under psychoses, becomes a backdrop to be manipulated at the will of the leader, becomes realigned to fit the leader’s desire. Hence, after 9/11, Bush sought affirmation of his Command posture in the symbolic – acts of terror represented crises to be solved militarily and via force (Grint, 2005). Saddam’s psychoses manifested differently. Asking the question of why Saddam erected a veil of mystique around his lack of weapons of mass destruction in the face of impending military catastrophe is perhaps the wrong question to ask. The right one might be to ask what sacrifice in the Big Other was required to confirm Saddam’s psychotic self-image as Commander Supreme (Grint, 2010)? In essence, under all of these examples, although each manifests differently, the symbolic order is short-circuited. This bypassing of the symbolic occurs with Blair via a form of moral certainty which creeps into his language. One must put aside counter-arguments and focus on the unquestionable justness of the moral decision to remove a murderous dictator. Desire is indefinitely postponed. Complexity, cracks in the symbolic consistency are placed to one side. In the case of Saddam, the Other is simply sacrificed, obliterated in order to feed his psychosis.

If Lacan teaches that the essential ethical task is one of taking responsibility for one’s desires, then pushing such responsibility onto an Other may be seen as ethical lapse. Rather than standing in judgment of Blair, however, we might consider what we can learn from similar episodes of tragedy.
(descent of a leader into psychoses and unpopularity triggered by unpopular decisions which resulted in great loss of life) (Gabriel, 2000). Lacan (2008) elevated tragedy as a narrative form that holds the possibility of highlighting the fragility of our symbolic constructions. Spectacles of tragic leadership, such as that of Blair’s, can act as powerful stimulation for reconsidering how we position ourselves relative to our desires in the future.

Analysing a case study such as Blair’s as a tragic text allows us as subjects to take stock of our own ethical stance in relation to leadership. If leadership can be interpreted as the Other against whom we experience our desire, then what is the stance we take in the face of such symbolic power? To what extent are we comfortable with our desire to be led, to be mastered? Is this mastery what we seek in our leaders, even as we sacrifice them, lash out at them, when the going gets tough (Grint, 2010)? If so then perhaps we ought to start thinking of ourselves as hysterical citizens par excellence, continually levelling an accusatory voice at the Other for not fulfilling desires for which we have not taken responsibility.

Adopting Lacanian ethics in relation to leadership therefore allows us to see the cracks, strains and contradictions in other powerful symbols of western society, those of liberal democracy and freedom.

References


