FROM THE PARIAH TO LEADERSHIP: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF PARRHESIA IN FORMING LEADERSHIP

Federico Puga Ph.D.
Prof. Jonathan Gosling
Beverley Hawkins Ph.D.

Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between leadership and the truth-telling practice of “parrhēsia” (Foucault, 2011; 2010; 2001) in an executive group, and with the company’s community and employee stakeholders.

The paper is based on a qualitative study of a large mining company (Puga, Gosling & Hawkins, 2013), and draws on a detailed interaction analysis of executive group meetings (Rogers & Escudero, 2004; Bateson, 2000). The main topic of these meetings was an attempt to implement a sustainability-oriented strategy, the leadership of which we examined from a relational perspective (Hosking, 2011; Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012; Fairhurst, 2001; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Puga, Gosling, & Hawkins, 2013; Puga, Gosling, & Hawkins, 2013). We show that this group relates to strategy in a non-reflexive confusion between practice and rhetoric. This type of relation to strategy becomes aggravated since one of the key intentions of this strategy is to create ‘trusting relationships’ with all company stakeholders. We theorize these as practices, which can be understood as phrnetic, a non-instrumental form of action which “arises in situations in which the self is drawn into action to realize itself” (Chia & Holt, 2011, p. 107). Trusting relationships are thus to be understood as a non-instrumental practice of subject constitution.

The practice of parrhēsia seems to have a key role in this process. Known as a coherent relationship between truth, logos and bios, this is a key practice in the constitution of a subject and his or her conduct towards others (Foucault, 2011; 2010), condensed in the concept of governmentality: a practice of structuring the field of action in relation to others. Interestingly however, in this case we found the presence of the pariah (Arendt, 1978), personified in the company CEO, a struggling subject that instead of constituting a leadership presence becomes an isolated figure with almost no capacity to form the intended subjectivity, even when his rhetoric showed clarity and determination with this strategic (and most needed) intention. Contrarily, through the analysis, we revealed the configuring of a discourse of contradictions, cynical emotions, and untruthfulness through almost the entire company network.

From here we explore the role of parrhēsia as a desired (but often imperfect) practice in the construction of leadership, focusing on the formation of phrnetic subjectivities and basing our interpretation on a relational perspective (Hosking, 2011; Nayak & Chia, 2011). We thus evoke the figure of the ‘conscious pariah’. Introduced by Arendt (1978) as someone who keeps the key parrhesiastic question of “what are we doing right now?” at the forefront of practices of care of the self (Foucault, 2005; 1988), the conscious pariah configures the possibility of leadership as subject-forming process,
intimately related to the capacity of forming new institutional arrangements and subjectivities through reflexive governmentality.

In this paper, we enrich the leadership literature with a process philosophy approach (Chia & Tsoukas, 2002; Nayak & Chia, 2011; Shotter, 2010), exploring the notion of parrhēsia in the configuration of leadership. Whereas much literature on leadership puts emphasis on the leader as the visionary prophet, our analysis emphasizes the parrhēsiatic pariah, providing a more nuanced, relational and processual understanding of leadership and strategy.

Works Cited
