

Social identity and the dynamics of leadership: Leaders and followers as collaborative agents in the transformation of social reality

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Abstract

Traditional models see leadership as a form of zero-sum game in which leader agency is achieved at the expense of follower agency and vice versa. Against this view, the present article argues that leadership is a vehicle for social identity-based collective agency in which leaders and followers are partners. Drawing upon evidence from a range of historical sources and from the BBC Prison Study, the present article explores the two sides of this partnership: the way in which a shared sense of identity makes leadership possible and the way in which leaders act as entrepreneurs of identity in order to make particular forms of identity and their own leadership viable. The analysis also focuses (a) on the way in which leaders' identity projects are constrained by social reality, and (b) on the manner in which effective leadership contributes to the transformation of this reality through the initiation of structure that mobilizes and redirects a group's identity-based social power.

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1. Introduction

In May 1840 Thomas Carlyle delivered a series of influential lectures on ‘Heroes and Hero Worship’. In the first of these lectures, ‘The Hero as Divinity’, he wrote that “Universal history, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here”. He went on “We cannot look, however imperfectly, upon a great man, without gaining something by him. He is the living light-fountain, which is good and pleasant to be near. The light which enlightens, which has enlightened the darkness of the world” (Carlyle, 1840, p. 3). In this lecture Carlyle expresses a core strand of western thought that can be traced back as far as Plato (380bc/1993): a glorification of the human will and a fascination with those figures whose will appears to set them apart from the mass.

In reviewing the historical trajectory of such ideas, Lindholm (1990) charts a lineage which progresses from John Stewart Mill’s notion of the genius whose pleasures are of a higher order than the animalistic gratifications of the majority (Mill, 1975), through Nietzsche’s ‘superman’, who would let nothing—especially not compassion—stop him satisfying his appetites (Nietzsche, 1977), to Le Bon’s notion of the hypnotic crowd leader (Le Bon, 1895/1947) and Weber’s concept of charisma (Weber, 1921, 1947). From this field, Weber emerged as a seminal figure in the study of leadership and as the high priest of rationalism—prophesizing that the future of humanity would lie in an inexorable advance of instrumental rationality (*zweckrationalitat*) and institutional routine. However, it was not a future he viewed with equanimity. He wrote: “The routinized economic cosmos . . . has been a structure to which the absence of love is attached from the very root . . . Not summer’s bloom lies ahead of us . . . but rather a polar night of icy darkness and hardness” (Weber, quoted in Lindholm, 1990, p. 27). Only charismatic prophets could save society from such a fate, but their time, he thought, was almost gone.

Of course, events surrounding World War II proved Weber right about the polar night, but they also showed him to be spectacularly wrong about the role that charismatic leaders would have to play in historical progress. For, far from saving the masses from darkness, charismatic dictators created the gloom. A core problem with Weber’s analysis lay in a conception which *counterposed* the will of the leader to that of the rest of the population. According to his view, leaders need agency because masses lack it and hence heroic leadership is required in order to save the masses from themselves.

It is clear, though, that the dictators themselves saw the masses as a material to be used (and abused) in the service of the leader rather than vice versa. Both Hitler and Mussolini articulated this through a strikingly similar conception of the leader as an artist. An insight into this emerges from an interview that the German journalist Emil Ludwig conducted with Mussolini in 1932. In this Mussolini described how:

When I feel the masses in my hands, since they believe in me, or when I mingle with them, and they almost crush me, then I feel like one with the masses. However, there is at the same time a little aversion, much as the poet feels towards the materials he works with. Doesn’t the sculptor sometimes break the marble out of rage, because it does not precisely mold in his hands according to his vision? . . . Everything depends upon that, to dominate the masses as an artist (cited in Falasca-Zamponi, 2000, p. 21).

In a similar vein, Hitler described himself as an artist who created history through his domination of the masses where they themselves were incapable of creation. As Susan Sontag wrote of Nazi Germany “never before was the relation of masters and slaves so consciously aestheticized” (cited in Spotts, 2002, p. 54).

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