

The Leading Edge of Leadership Studies

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Thomas Carlyle rang in the modern era of leadership studies in London in 1840, with six public lectures published a year later as *On Heroes and Hero-Worship*. On that historical milestone, Suze Wilson and Bert Spector are agreed. And their agreement is of interest, since each of them published, in 2016, a critical and historical account of leadership studies.¹

Carlyle's lectures are not, however, about leadership. He shows no interest in corporate leadership, the notion of which still needed at least four years of gestation before Parliament was to pass the Joint Stock Companies Act. Nor is Carlyle especially interested in any sort of formal organizational leadership; that notion only arises in one of the lectures, "The Hero as King," where he extols "the commander over men; he to whose will our wills are to be subordinated. . . ."² The word *leadership* never occurs in the six lectures, and the word *leader* occurs only five times—less than once per essay. That is because the lectures are about greatness, offering a history of "what man has accomplished in this world." And that, according to Carlyle, amounts to the history "of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world."³ By understanding their thoughts, we understand the history of the world, so that we too may be inspired to greatness.

Carlyle, for all that, is a fine place to begin if your inquiry is into modern leadership *discourse*. For he has long occupied a rhetorical role in discussions of leadership. Do I believe that leadership makes a big difference, and that the leader should take an out-sized role? Then hooray for Carlyle! Do I believe that leadership is overemphasized, that the leader is only as good as the followers, and that big leaders are big trouble? Then down with Carlyle! Fittingly, Wilson and Spector are indeed inquiring into leadership discourse. Spector's title is *Leadership Discourse: A Critical Appraisal*. Wilson's title, *Thinking Differently about Leadership: A*

¹Suze Wilson, *Thinking Differently about Leadership: A Critical History of Leadership Studies* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2016) and Bert Spector, *Leadership Discourse: A Critical Appraisal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016)

²Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* (New York: Dolphin Books, 1966) p. 189

³Carlyle, *On Heroes*, p. 9.

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Critical History of Leadership Studies, does not mention discourse, but much of her first chapter is devoted to clarifying the nature and importance of discourse as a topic of any intellectual history, including the one that she is writing.

The differences in their treatment of Carlyle illustrate the broader differences in the two books. Spector, by calling his own appraisal *critical*, means that it “offers a platform for a diagnostic re-examination followed by learning. The opportunity for insights... is placed in the hands of the reader, not imposed by the historian on the reader.” He excoriates management authors who “use history, or at least its trappings, to position their findings and advocate for their conclusions” (10). So, true to his aims, Spector accurately finds that Carlyle’s “isn’t much of a theory, at least not a theory of how to lead. It is more of a view of the world” and “a call for subservience to the most able man.” (18) Spector goes on to use Carlyle as his foil for thinking not only about Freud’s fascinatingly compatible view but also about the continuing attraction of the view to this day, especially among CEO’s who would be Great Men. His critical appraisal in this chapter, as throughout his book, amounts mostly to probing questions that he leaves the reader to ponder.

Wilson also includes the word *critical* in her title, but what it signals for her is unapologetic criticism of the subject matter—a lambasting of leadership studies throughout as “a faith-based discursive regime... in which what is known relies on what is ignored” and “what is claimed as the truth rests on what cannot be objectively determined” (102). Her message is that leadership scholars wrongly expect leaders to be the superhuman solutions to every problem, and that needs to change. As Spector might say, she uses history, or at least its trappings, to position her findings and advocate for her conclusions. Rather than appreciating that Carlyle’s lectures were talks about greatness that were later appropriated by the leadership discussion, she anachronistically reads leadership back into them. She misleadingly credits him with “the first modern theorization about leadership” (103), and uses the terms *leader* and *leadership* far more often in her brief description of Carlyle’s views than he used them in all six lectures. Wilson—the hedgehog—seems to have a big point to make. She might be right, and she should be taken seriously. But she demonstrates why Spector—the fox—should be taken seriously about his subtler point regarding the uses and abuses of history.

In spite of their similarly described projects, the two overlap less than might be expected. They share territory at the methodological level, where both eschew any aspiration to truth. Wilson finds the pretense of truth in leadership studies to be a disguised socio-political act, and offers her work not as truth but as a “provocation and invitation” to “think differently about leadership” (5). Spector suggests that aiming for truth is unduly positivistic, so aims merely for a “plausible narrative” (8). But no sooner do they shun truth than do they accept one position as correct (true) and reject another as mistaken (false). And readers cannot *but* understand their every sentence, “*P*,” as the equivalent of “It is true that *P*.” Wilson and Spector cannot have it both ways. Doubting truth—in a nonfiction book that is not about epistemology—only adds confusion and distraction. If they must say something, let it be this: “I recognize that both you and I are limited by our individual perspectives and biases, so we could be wrong; in that spirit, let us offer for consideration the best reasons that we can for our conclusions.” And that is the truth.

Both authors see Carlyle as a precursor to trait theory, which in the first half of the twentieth century sought to identify the personality characteristics unique to leaders. But they take different paths. Wilson’s insight is that the rise of Darwinism worked both for and against the Great Man principle. Spencer, the social Darwinist, inferred that heroes must be the result, not the cause, of history. But Galton inferred that if his cousin Darwin was right about heritable traits, then those traits could be ranked, allowing us not only to identify but also to breed for

traits that produced superiority. Galton's role in the discourse is important, Wilson rightly notes, even if its embarrassing eugenicism has pushed it out of sight. Spector, for his part, recognizes the challenge posed by Spencer (but, inexplicably, assigns Tolstoy—that paradigmatic leadership minimalist—to Team Carlyle), skips Galton, and provides an intriguing and thoroughly-researched account of the role of the military, IQ testing, the Third Reich, Allport, and Adorno in the search for leadership traits.

The two are similarly complementary in their accounts of the shift from trait theory to behavior theory, then on to contingency theory, and finally to what Wilson helpfully dubs the “new leadership” era ushered in by Burns' call for transformational leadership in the late 1970's. Wilson finds places for B.F. Skinner, Kurt Lewin, and Warren Bennis. Spector sees roles for Alfred Sloan, Norbert Weiner, and Henry Mintzberg. Their accounts are helpfully harmonic.

When the authors do branch into disparate territory, however, is when the disparity of their achievements emerges. Perhaps the most compelling chapter of either book is Spector's “(White) Men Named John and the Persistence of Bias.” Did you know that there are more CEO's named John than there are CEO's who are women? Writing in a lovely prose that is rare among academics, Spector reaches all the way back to Chaucer in his survey of the ongoing dialogue about the paucity of both women and racial outsiders in the C-suite. In another chapter, he traces with perception and wit the evolution of the discourse from management to general management, then on to leadership and, then, to transformation. Another Spector essay traces the intellectual roots of shareholder theory, its transmutation into stakeholder theory, and the implications of it all for leadership. And his final chapter reviews the emergence of a new category, global leadership. His engaging survey of this approach, still well within its sell-by date, is couched by a gentle challenge. Is it possible that *global* leadership is really nothing other than leadership that is sometimes—but not always—more complex than leadership *simpliciter*?

But wait! There is more! If you buy now, you get two free bonuses! Spector's volume includes two elements that are worthwhile aside from its seven narrative chapters. He concludes with a 40-page time-line of “key moments in leadership discourse.” Because his chapters tend to be thematic, each can extend across significant spans of time. So this section, to our benefit, rewrites and condenses the entire book chronologically, from Carlyle in 1840 to Sheryl Sandberg in 2014. In addition to the time-line, the research apparatus Spector provides is outstanding. There are almost a thousand footnotes which consistently provide additional reflection, alternative sources, and specific citations. (By way of contrast, Wilson has even more footnotes; but, after a few frustrations, I abandoned them. The vast majority merely list an author's last name and a year; if my curiosity has been piqued, it is left up to me to hunt down the book or article and to sift through its entirety on my own for the relevant reference.) And Spector's bibliography is itself a 40-page, 800-entry wonder. He grants that it is “quite enormous,” but justifies it as reflecting the task he undertook in “tracing the movement of ideas from person to person and across the years, decades, and centuries” (257). It is a service to any scholar who would like a curated version of other more exhaustive bibliographies.

Spector doesn't score every time he shoots. He makes his own job harder than it needs to be when he tries to exhibit a simple point in a fancy theoretical frame. I have already noted that unconvincing talk about the subjectivity of truth, in both authors, is better replaced by a convincing confession of fallibility. Elsewhere, I struggled with Spector's effort to establish that “all business leadership is ideological” (97), until I saw that he only means that leaders have values. His account of presentism as “the assertion that the times in which we live are exceptionally turbulent” (11) does not fit easily with the accustomed meaning of presentism as

reading the present into the past. And his elaboration of Weber's ideal type theory turns out to be an extravagant way of saying that some theories are more practical than others. But Spector avoids enough traps to prove that he indeed is the fox who knows many things.

Wilson would be the hedgehog who knows one big thing—that the modern worship of leadership must yield to new ways of thinking. And she would do it in one big way—by applying the techniques of Michel Foucault to the history of Western leadership discourse. As she sees it, this exercise is needed because we are trapped inside a concept of leadership that prevents us from thinking in new ways. The way to break down the walls is by showing that the concept arose in a different cultural context, as the solution to a different set of problems, driven in part by the self-interested pursuit of power. Once we are confronted with this, she believes, our current concept of leadership suddenly looks unfamiliar, the walls come down, and we can step outside of it to explore new ways of thinking. (This is my English translation of several pages that are weighted heavily with terms like *episteme*, *discursive regime*, *de-familiarization*, and *power/knowledge dynamics*.)

The failure of Wilson's project is nowhere more evident than in her chapters on the ancient and Renaissance discourses. Unfamiliarity is indeed an outcome that she achieves, but what is unfamiliar—what is utterly unrecognizable—is her own historical account. In the effort to depict a sole discursive model for each era, she not only treats the ever-evolving Plato as if he has a single view, but she treats Plato, Aristotle (that notoriously apostate student), and Xenophon as though *they* have a single view. She describes the ancient Greek discourse, which includes Plato's revolutionary call for women as rulers, as containing “not even the merest hint of the feminine” (49). And she labels Greek political thought as having a “marked preference for philosophical reflection...rather than empirical observation” (59), despite Aristotle's well-known stockpiling and examination of dozens of constitutions from far and wide. Most bewilderingly, she states that the Greeks “rendered unthinkable” the possibility that leadership could have “problematic aspects” (60). This, even though Plato and Aristotle both labor over questions about the sorts of governments that might best protect the people from the evils of tyranny, mob rule, and oligarchy, and even though Plato writes that if we could just count on our rulers to be wise and effective, then, “citizens would fight in order *not to* rule, just as they now do in order to rule.”⁴

Wilson's portrayal of the Renaissance discourse is, if anything, even less familiar. Again, she treats her selected Renaissance thinkers as though they have a single view. Thus, with the merest of discrimination, she lumps together “mirrors for princes” authors Erasmus, Luther, Calvin, Lipsius, and...Machiavelli. The uninformed reader would learn from Wilson that Machiavelli is not *perfectly* in line with the rest of them, since “he tended toward lip service in respect of the religious elements.” But, otherwise, “there is a remarkable degree of consistency in the texts...” (89).

No writer in history has done more to disrupt traditional approaches to leadership—to change the discourse, to help people think in new ways—than Machiavelli. Wilson's hammer simultaneously demolishes both the round peg and the square hole. She aligns Machiavelli with the others in endorsing “the virtues required of leaders...both secular and spiritual” (78), which virtues include being as “upright as Christ” (93). She names him to the club whose credo is that monarchy is the best (84), that leaders are divinely ordained (84), and that the goal is to “normalize the status quo” (86). This is the same Machiavelli who scandalously jettisons traditional virtues for the nefarious notion that the only virtue of a prince is the ability to do

⁴ *Republic* (347b9-e2)

whatever it takes to succeed; who severs ties with morality and religion, prescribing that the successful prince must know how *not* to be good; who, as a likely atheist, cares about religion only as a political tool; who abundantly and unambiguously documents his preference for republicanism over monarchy as a form of government; and who writes his own “mirror for princes” solely in the hope of destabilizing the status quo as a means to attain a unified republic of Italy. Wilson’s procrustean approach to history not only results in a massive missed opportunity, but in a Machiavelli identifiable only by DNA evidence.

Wilson’s final chapters are not redemptive. She never makes the case for her most basic claim, namely, that today’s leadership scholars maintain inflated expectations of what leaders can do. Some of them do expect too much, but Wilson ignores the extensive literature that questions that claim (including anarchists like George Woodcock⁵ and Kathleen Ianello⁶ in political philosophy, syndicalists like Richard Wolff⁷ in economics, and deflationists like Phil Rosenzweig⁸ in management and even Daniel Kahneman⁹ in psychology). She complains, “Repeatedly, leadership discourse has relied on a belittling, patronizing account of followers to sustain its claims” (174). But these are far too often Wilson’s own tactics in her critique of leadership discourse. She calls for us to think in new ways, yet assumes in a belittling and patronizing way that her colleagues are incapable of doing so unless we submit to the curative of her misbegotten history lesson. Better to participate with good will, among others of good will, in the current robust discussion, and in doing so to embrace the mutual, if humanly erratic, commitment to ultimately being convinced by the best reasons.

And so, we arrive at Suze Wilson’s final chapter. What is her big new idea? How are we supposed to think differently? She has a few tips for researchers: be suspicious of new theories, involve more academic disciplines, and mine history for new ideas. And she offers hints for builders of new leadership theories: do not define someone as a leader if you don’t need to—but if you must have leaders, then encourage them to be less arrogant, to extend their concern beyond the workplace, and to care more about environmental sustainability. “Lest the reader be alarmed,” she assures us, there are so many “entrenched interests” that “I do not think that these fairly dramatic implications will eventuate” (206). And yet, far from being alarmed, many readers may find these proposals to be the most familiar, and least dramatic, part of the book.

Both books demonstrate just how vibrant the discussion among leadership scholars has been for over a century. But they also document how the discussion sometimes loses its way in a mist of conceptual unclarity. If there is a single lesson to be learned from studying them, it may be to pay closer attention to the question being addressed by the theory being offered. If we are asking about successful leadership on the part of someone *who has no leadership responsibility* (like those in most of Carlyle’s lectures), this will yield an answer that focuses entirely on certain sorts of favorable influence. But if the question is about successful leadership on the part of someone *in a formal organizational position*, that

⁵ George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (Cleveland: Meridian Press, 1962).

⁶ Kathleen Ianello, *Decisions Without Hierarchy: Feminist Interventions in Organization Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

⁷ Richard Wolff, *Democracy at Work: A Cure for Capitalism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012).

⁸ Phil Rosenzweig, *The Halo Effect... and the Eight Other Business Delusions That Deceive Managers* (New York: Free Press, 2007).

⁹ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), p. 204–207.

answer may, in addition, refer to resource management, planning, strategy, hiring, firing, and even paperwork.

Further, when we consider the series of theories offered in recent decades, we can benefit by identifying them as *more than simply theories of leadership*. What exactly is the question that each is attempting to answer? Presumably, one theory asks which, if any, *traits* are most likely to produce successful leadership. Another asks which, if any, *behaviors* are most likely to produce successful leadership. A third asks how variations in *context* affect the way we answer each of the first two questions. And a fourth asks when, and to what extent, successful leadership is a matter of *morally transforming* followers. None of these questions excludes any of the others, so there is no reason why the theories should be taken as competitors. They are answering different questions, and are potentially complementary.

Other confusion can arise when leadership scholars change lanes, without signaling, from corporate leadership to state leadership and back again. This is really a special case of question three—how a change in context changes other things. But it is a much-neglected case, which takes on special significance when we are studying Plato and Machiavelli alongside Drucker and Kellerman. Leaders of states, unlike leaders of corporations, oversee organizations which are not strictly accountable to a higher social authority and which are the legitimators of all activities within them. They are organizations whose members rarely join voluntarily and can leave only with great difficulty, whose members the leaders cannot typically fire or demote, but can tax, draft, imprison, and even kill. Both are examples of leadership, but what is recommended or even required in one case may be disastrous and even criminal in the other.

None of this conceptual clarification is easy, or it would have been done long ago. But it is achievable. And the stimulus to focus on it, provided by books such as these, is welcome.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

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