The moral order of leadership studies:

Can mainstream leadership studies teach us the power of emancipation?

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Critical leadership studies (CLS) have made important strides towards highlighting the role of systemic forms of power and their limiting effects on emancipation in organizations (see e.g. the forthcoming *Routledge Companion to Critical Leadership Studies*). However, the critique raised by CLS towards more mainstream leadership studies (MLS) entails not merely a critical description of the shortcoming of traditional theories and more agentic views on power, but also a strong normativity. CLS is constituted as the 'good' in leadership discourse, in contrast to a 'common' mainstream perspective which is positioned as 'bad' (for a discussion on the 'good' in leadership literature, see Ciulla, 1995). Building on Foucault, we suggest that critical leadership studies have been constitutive for creating a moral order between CLS and MLS. Following from this, we will in this paper argue that elements, in particular those entailing more episodic forms of power from MLS (see e.g. Alvehus & Klitmøller, *Forthcoming*), has been 'organized out' of CLS studies (Haugaard, 2012, p. 40). We find this particularly problematic for two reasons. First, that CLS distances itself from a broader understanding of what constitute leadership in organizations, thereby making concrete engagement with mainstream leadership discourse difficult. Second, it downplays the interplay between episodic and systemic forms of power. The latter is central if we are to understand emancipation in and around the leadership phenomenon, so pivotal for the broader CLS agenda (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996).

Our argument emerges from a leadership politics perspective (Alvehus and Klitmøller, *Forthcoming*; Ammeter et al., 2002; Ammeter et al., 2004), and builds on recent insights on power and politics (Haugaard, 2012). Venturing out from the relation between domination and emancipation, we argue that in the CLS literature, structure have largely been seen as a systemic domination restricting

the potentiality of emancipation for actors in organizations. By large MLS has been viewed as 'bad' due to it being constitutive for the reproduction of restrictive organizational and societal structures. In the process, and granted the discursive moral order, the CLS literature has been less attentive to the role that episodic uses of power plays in the reproduction of structures – and in the potential of episodic power to challenge and subvert a reigning order. In other words, the focus in CLS has been to position itself as a perspective, which can unveil the 'bad' through the analysis of systemic power. What is striking concerning the work in CLS is the lack of discussion of the structures one might find 'desirable' (see Haugaard, 2012, p. 36), viewing all structures by a large as a negative. So, while references to the work of Foucault are abundant in the CLS literature, they can be criticized for a problematic which can also be raised against the work of Foucault himself (Haugaard, 2012).

Taking a leadership politics perspective, we propose that both episodic and systematic forms of power can be both positive on the empirical and normative level. We suggest CLS scholars look at leadership politics, enabling CLS to take seriously a both/and (rather than an either/or) perspective. It further allows for exploring the interrelation between what is normatively constituted as 'good' or 'bad', in relation to leadership phenomena, not as a given a priori, but something to be explored empirically. Here, MLS might have lot to offer CLS in relation to understanding the agentic uses of power on the micro level in relation to both the reproduction and change of structures and the emancipatory potential entailed in these.

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The Role of a 4th-Person Perspective for Leadership and Collective Intelligence

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Abstract
Dynamical systems thinking, and complex thinking in general, is often highlighted as an essential aspect of leadership for addressing grand challenges, complex environments and organisational systems change (Jordan, 2021). In the field of adult development psychology, complex thinking in terms of hierarchical complexity is sometimes proposed as an underlying and basal dimension of human development. Another such basal dimension is according to Hagström (2023) subject-object duality, or perspective taking. This can be understood as the relation between a subject (that which sees) and object (that is seen) and describes how the conception of self, other, relations and the physical world develops Stålne (2023). Thus, perspective taking – what you can see – and complex thinking – how you operate on what you can see – should be seen as different dimensions, which was also recognised by Selman (1980) in his study of social perspective taking.

The aim of this theoretical paper is to highlight the role of perspective taking in leadership and collective intelligence. Drawing on research from developmental psychology and adult development psychology, a 4th-person perspective will be introduced and applied in leadership settings. The adult development perspective associates the 4th-person perspective with the post-conventional stages of ego development (Cook-Greuter, 2013) and should thus be considered a skill to be developed, rather than something everyone can be assumed to operate from. It is also emphasised as one of the skills of the Inner development goals framework that we need to develop to have a better chance of reaching the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Jordan, 2021). Here it will be outlined how perspective taking, and particularly a 4th-person perspective can be relevant in discussions around leadership and collective intelligence.

Building on the seminal work by Piaget and Inhelder (1970), the research on social perspective taking by Selman (1980) and ego development research according to Cook-Greuter (2013), Stålne (2023) has proposed a formal theory for the development of perspective taking as the understanding of the physical, psychological and social aspects of reality in terms of orders of perspective taking: A 1st-person perspective means observing the concrete world by means of one's senses; a 2nd-person perspective develops in early childhood and implies seeing the concrete world through another's eyes and acknowledging what cannot be seen from that concrete vantage point; a 3th-person perspective develops around age 10-12 years and means understanding the world in terms of abstractions and generalisations such as formalised natural laws, formal roles and structures; a 4th-person perspective defined as "…recognising the relation between a certain view of reality and the abstract interpretation of it due to underlying assumptions of frameworks or outlooks. It can recognise what cannot be seen from the respective abstract perspective…" (Stålne, 2013). The relation between the 3rd- and 4th-person perspective are parallel to the relation between a 1st- and 2nd-person perspective, where one in the latter can differentiate between the concrete reality and our perception of it, as demonstrated by Piaget and Inhelder (1970).

Significant for operating from a 4th-person perspective is the recognition of how we actively participate in our world by constructing reality rather than being objective and passive recipients of it, which is typical for the outlook from a 3rd-person perspective.

Historically, a 4th-person perspective was arguably first employed by Kant in his Critique of pure reason and further articulated in critical approaches associated with postmodern critique. It is also demonstrated in critical perspectives on leadership, such as feminist or post-colonial perspectives, and self-reflective practices on leadership research (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017) and practice (Alvesson, Blom & Svenningsson, 2016). The practice of Clear leadership developed by Bushe (2011) also fits well in the description of how a 4th-person perspective can be developed and practically applied since it emphasises making one's maps and understanding of one's organisational surroundings explicit and thus assuming that peoples' understanding seldom matches and shouldn't. He argues that implicit assumptions lead to "interpersonal mush", where people construct stories about each other and the situations rather than making their assumptions explicit, which requires psychological safety (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). This is also emphasised by Runsten and Werr (2020) in their model on knowledge integration for collective intelligence applied in teams. Their model consists of the four components or collective abilities: reflection, representation, relation and integration, where perspective taking can be argued to be relevant in all.

It is here argued that perspective taking as a skill is essential to develop to understanding collective intelligence and reflective leadership as well as successfully engaging in collective endeavours in complex contexts in general.

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ASPIRING FOR CONTESTATION

Performative Contradictions in Leadership Communication

> …we still do not understand […] what it is that makes a manager a good manager. Clearly, it is *not* to do with finding and applying a true or false theory, but something to do with a complex of issues centred on the provision of an *intelligible formulation* of what has become, for the others in the organization, a chaotic welter of impressions.
>
> Shotter, 1993, p. 148

Today, 30 years after John Shotter's (1993) excellent chapter "The Manager as a Practical Author", what actually makes a good manager or leader may still be up in the air. Despite enduring uncertainty, the general expectation among management scholars and practitioners seems to be that today's leader must be a *skilled communicator* (e.g., Falkheimer et al., 2017; Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014; Ford & Ford, 1995; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016). The aim of this paper is to unfold and critically examine what that means in some detail. In contrast to the consultancy literature, replete with overconfident imperatives and long lists of dos and don'ts, this paper foregrounds the ambiguous and often conflicting demands that confront contemporary organizations and cause their leaders to engage in "communicative acrobatics" (Christensen, Morsing & Thyssen, 2021, p. 419).

Becoming a leader in an organization, public as well as private, implies being met with an often unarticulated set of contradictory expectations. For example, while generally expected to be truthful and deliver accurate accounts to employees and other relevant stakeholders (Bouilloud, Deslandes & Mercier, 2019), leaders are simultaneously required to articulate interesting goals for which accurate words and accounts are either inadequate (Weick, 1995), demotivating (Christensen, Morsing & Thyssen, 2013) or otherwise inefficient (Eisenberg, 1984). Also, while increasingly confronted by demands for transparency and stakeholder insight, leaders need simultaneously to retain or manage some

level of secrecy and opacity (Fan & Christensen, 2023). As Deslandes and Bouilloud (2023) put it: “Leaders are in fact faced with a tangle of contradictory injunctions, and must somehow navigate a path between them: tell the whole truth, but don’t say too much, and of course don’t tell lies.”

Importantly, contradictory injunctions are not rare incidents, but common and recurrent situations, often perceived as “normal” or unavoidable by leaders and managers (Pérezt, Bouilloud, de Gaulejac, 2011; see also Brunsson, 2003). Contemporary leaders, we are told, therefore need to engage in “the management of contradiction” (Morgan, 1986, p. 266) or “discursive struggle” (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014, p. 17). Such vague and idealized prescriptions, however, may not fully capture the conflictual nature of leadership communication, including its performative potential. When Shotter (1993) describes leadership as the practice of providing direction in situations shaped by uncertainty through the authoring of a “determinate linguistic formulation” (p. 150), he not only emphasized the significance of extracting a shared image of the future – an ideal frequently promoted in the leadership literature (e.g., Senge, 1990; Smircich & Morgan, 1982) – he simultaneously indicated that such images are bound to be contested: “…our talk is not about something which already actually exists, but is about what might be, what could be the case, or what something should be like” (p. 153). What Shotter did not bring forth, however, was how such contestation might in various ways serve leadership goals.

Organizational leaders charged with the provision of intelligible formulations of complex ideals, such as CSR programs or large-scale sustainability projects, often need to convey certainty of direction when there is none, to downplay doubt when doubt is ruling, and perhaps to pretend that the glorious futures envisioned are within reach even though their realization are likely to extend far into an unknown future. While an ethical approach in such situations might be to admit the shortage of knowledge and the consequent uncertainty of the

project, unmitigated truth-telling, while one of the leader's "fundamental commitments" (Bouilloud et al., 2019, p. 1), may jeopardize the project and prevent a better reality from emerging.

Contemporary leaders therefore often engage in aspirational talk on behalf of their organizations, hoping to inspire an optimistic attitude toward higher goals, instill confidence in the project and, perhaps, motivate collective commitment (Christensen et al., 2013). Defined as "organizational self-descriptions to which current practices cannot yet live up" (Christensen et al., 2021, p. 412), aspirational talk escapes usual distinctions between truth and falsity, because what is not true in the moment the talk is delivered *may* become true because of the talk. Inspired by Speech Act theory and its notion that talk can be performative provided the right ("felicity") conditions are present (Austin, 1962, 1979), writings on aspirational talk seek to specify the conditions under which organizational aspirations may unfold into further action (Christensen et al., 2021; Koep, 2017; Penttilä, 2020; Winkler, Etter & Castelló, 2020). However, in contrast to Speech Act theory that builds its arguments on examples of conventionalized speech acts where expectations are commonly shared and where proper responses are relatively well-defined (see also Searle, 1969), the performativity of aspirational talk is usually more uncertain. This is the case not only because the meaning and implications of such talk is vague and ambiguous, perhaps strategically designed as such (Eisenberg, 1984), but also because the talk often pertains to contentious issues where interpretations and interests are likely to clash.

Interestingly, however, while leaders may want to avoid conflict by nurturing shared interpretations and stimulating collective commitment to their talk, the risk of contestation may nonetheless be a significant felicity condition for aspirations to perform beyond the moment in which they are articulated (Christensen & Christensen, 2022b; Winkler et al., 2020). Whereas some writers on aspirational talk emphasize the significance of alignment,

trust, recognition, and affirmation for such talk to perform (e.g., Laurino, Reinecke & Etter, 2022; Trittin-Ulbrich, 2023), such signs of sharedness may instead work as sedatives that convince employees and other stakeholders that the aspirations are realistic, and that the communication of their leaders therefore is justified. Without a risk of being called out as hypocrites, green-washers, or bullshitters (e.g. Spicer,2017), leaders may not need to take their own communication seriously. Thus, it is possible to argue that leaders seeking to produce change through communication (see e.g., Ford & Ford, 1995), should deliberately aspire for contestation because the risk of contestation applies pressure on the communicator (Christensen & Christensen, 2022b) and thereby increases the likelihood of self-commitment (Elster, 2005).

Still, contestation can be extremely time-consuming and risky, and many leaders may therefore prefer to avoid engaging in aspirational talk. At the same time, leaders cannot easily opt out of this specific communication genre. Being referred to as a "leader" means being expected to perform and, eventually, master a specific type of communication that challenges conventional distinctions between truth and non-truth, between what "is" and what might be (Thayer, 1988). Althusser (1971) referred to such expectations as "interpellation". When individuals are interpellated, Althusser pointed out, they are called upon by dominant ideologies to think and behave in certain ways (see also Butler, 1999; Christensen & Christensen, 2022a). In principle, this is the case whether leadership is concentrated in the hands of few or shared and distributed. Certain communicative expectations seem to be ascribed to leadership and whoever we decide to call leaders. Without suggesting an inescapable determinism, being classified as a "leader" tends to mobilize specific role expectations to which the classified individuals or groups will have a strong tendency to adapt (Hacking, 2002; Meier & Carroll, 2019). In that sense, also, leadership is wrought with communicative contradictions.

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A return to Form: the benefits of a form-dialectical understanding of leadership for appreciating and critiquing the Form and forms of leadership

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While the concept of 'Form' may appear omnipresent in mainstream versions of leadership – interred within the monolith of 'trans*form*ational leadership', or demonstratively labelled in the interminably expanding list of leadership 'styles' – there has been little serious consideration of the Form of leadership, from a philosophical consideration of Form.

Even Barker's (2001) metaphysical dissection of mainstream conceptions of leadership does not engage in a developed consideration of what Form is. Barker (2001) does, however, prefigure much of contemporary interpretative and critical accounts of leadership by focusing on leadership as a de-centred, socially constructed process, and by foregrounding its adaptive nature. Barker's intervention, in many ways, is an early harbinger (or symptom) of many of the practice- (Raelin, 2017; Simpson, 2016), process- (Kelly, 2023; Wood and Dibben, 2015), distributed (Bolden, 2011; Gronn, 2002; 2015), relational (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012), plural (Denis et al., 2012), collective (Fairhurst et al., 2020), and dialectical- (Fairhurst and Collinson, 2023) understandings of leadership that are at the core of many contemporary interpretative and critical accounts of leadership. This broad 'relational process' turn indicates that a mechanical understanding of Form as the shape of an entity is inadequate for understanding the durational and emergent nature of Forms, as well as their relational aspects.

In order to return to the Form of leadership, four inquiries and related arguments structure this paper. Firstly, an inquiry into Form in the abstract is developed. Drawing on Simmel and Merleau-Ponty, an argument for understanding Form as durational, emergent, relational and processual, is outlined. Secondly, the phenomenon of (human) leadership is defined as the direction of human energy. Thirdly, utilising these understandings of Form and human leadership, the abstract Form of human leadership (as the direction of human energy) is identified as a transitive process, which foregrounds the de-centred nature of leadership.

Fourthly, this abstract Form of leadership is further developed by delineating five analytical aspects of instances of leadership that are dialectically developed through social processes. The paper proposes a form-dialectical understanding of leadership by combining Grint and Smolović Jones' (2022) 5Ps framework and dialectical theorisations of leadership (Collinson, 2005; 2020; Fairhurst and Collinson, 2023). The paper argues that the 5Ps framework can be developed to provide a foundational philosophically-informed contribution to leadership studies. Rather than seeing the five perspectives of leadership proposed by Grint and Smolović Jones' (2022) as competing or complementary modes of understanding leadership, we argue that re-ordering and developing these perspectives with attention to the analytical distinctions between content and form, and modes of dialectical processes, provides the basis for a form-dialectical analysis of five aspects of leadership that are dynamically and dialectically developed through social processes.

The paper thus argues for a return to Form in the understanding and analysis of leadership. The benefits of this return to Form are a clearer articulation of what leadership is (and is not), and of the abstract Form of leadership. In turn, the benefits of the form-dialectical framework for

understanding leadership are its potential to inform understandings, appreciations, and critiques of instances, practices, and systems of the production of leadership.

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