

## **Don't look up! Rebooting leadership with resistance from below**

### **Guest editors**

Owain Smolović Jones, owain.smolovic-jones@open.ac.uk

Charles Barthold, charles.barthold@open.ac.uk

Sarah Bloomfield, sarah.bloomfield@open.ac.uk

Daniel Haslam, daniel.haslam@open.ac.uk

Olga Solovyeva, olga.solovyeva@open.ac.uk

Nela Smolović Jones, nela.smolovic-jones@open.ac.uk

All at The Open University Business School, UK

Submission deadline: 1 November 2022

### **Introduction**

As the world recovers from a pandemic, which has disproportionately harmed the poorest and most vulnerable amongst us, it is worth taking some time to reflect on whether leadership studies is as relevant as it could be to the big problems of the day. In many ways the pandemic has been a dress rehearsal for how the world conceives of and addresses climate change. On our current trajectory we are headed towards climate catastrophe. Such catastrophe is likely to mimic the dynamics of the pandemic, with the poorest suffering the severest consequences. Meanwhile, intensification of technology in workplaces and societies offers the promise of more empowering and autonomous lives but tends in reality to deliver less job security, worse pay and conditions, and ever more upward redistribution of wealth (Benanav, 2020). Finally, while important strides have been taken with regards equality in gender, race and sexuality, multiple regressive movements opposing equalities have also gained traction.

The key justification of this special issue call is therefore twofold. First, that leadership studies should take more seriously the major events and challenges of our time (Tourish, 2019). Co-opting the title of the hit allegorical climate emergency film, *Don't look up*, there is far too much of leadership scholars looking down at their laptops and not enough looking up at the world. Our second justification, however, is that we should in fact stop looking up, at least up the hierarchies of organisations, and instead pay more attention to the energies and movements of resistance from below. After all, it is the present crop of leaders who have engineered and maintained the world's multiple serious and chronic problems, so the case for merely refining their personal characteristics, behaviours and practices seems weak indeed. Instead, far more effort is needed from leadership research to better understand how the power of those who have created our problems is resisted, and how alternative leadership practices may be offered.

This call for papers is inspired by the submissions we received for the 19<sup>th</sup> International Studying Leadership Conference, hosted by the Open University in December 2021. We hope that delegates and presenters at the conference will consider submitting their work to this special issue but we are also keen to invite contributions from people who were unable to attend.

## **Rebooting resistance leadership**

For special issue submissions, we emphasise the need for careful thought regarding our key words of ‘rebooting’, ‘resistance’ and ‘from below’.

Notions of rebooting suggest something more than piecemeal or incremental alterations and instead evoke a foundational change to the operating system of organisations, groups, movements and societies. Regardless of whether authors strongly identify with the rebooting metaphor, we invite submissions that address its sentiment, papers that explore leadership that disrupts, or holds the potential to disrupt, status quo leadership in some meaningful way.

It becomes impossible to reboot without resistance holding a primary position in practice and study. Resistance is a topic that has been written about extensively in organisation studies but less so in our field of leadership studies (Zoller and Fairhurst, 2007). Leadership studies can play it safe when it considers acts of dissent, focusing on the (no doubt important) dynamics of upward communication to make organisations more effective and inclusive places – rather than considering more radical acts that seek to confront, dismantle and dissolve organisations and status quo power as important leadership practices (Grint, 2021; Barthold et al, 2020). Resistance offers the potential for bold framing that does not flinch from confronting the harder edges of organisational, social and economic life.

We are eager to invite submissions that adopt a dialectical view of resistance leadership (Collinson, 2005 and 2020; Zoller and Fairhurst, 2007), as such a perspective holds the capacity for exploring how the distinction between power and resistance can be an ambiguous and dynamic one. We would like to hear more, dialectically, about the alternative power posited by resistance leadership from below – the kind of agency it engenders (Zoller and Fairhurst, 2007); the specific challenges resistance groups face when they need to grapple with what gaining power would mean to them (Sinha et al, 2021); and the de-romanticising strategies that groups adopt to avoid their leadership mimicking the tendencies and dynamics of the power they try to unseat (Collinson et al, 2018). Additionally, we are interested in extending understanding of the various guises that resistance leadership may adopt, some offering more upfront and obvious dissent than others (Gagnon and Collinson, 2017; O Smolović Jones et al, 2021a). Finally, we welcome submissions that offer compelling conceptual and empirical perspectives on what distinguishes ‘resistance leadership’ from ‘resistance’ more generally, and what such distinctions might mean for how this field of study is envisaged.

Regardless of whether resistance was included in the title of conference papers, the dynamics of power and oppositional activity were often latent. We therefore ask authors – those who attended the conference and those who did not – to think about how their work relates to existing thought on resistance within the field and beyond.

Finally, we invite submissions that take seriously the need for more studies ‘from below’. We take ‘below’ to mean studies from a position being marginalised by economies, societies, hegemonic discourses and scholarship. For us, the word ‘from’ evokes movement, liminality as groups of people find agency, a surge of energy and activity with the potential to reboot.

## **Rebooting resistance leadership through what?**

Our preferred empirical contexts for submissions to address are as follows:

*Leadership through workers.* Despite rhetoric of participation, inclusion and transformation within leadership studies, the voice of the worker remains absent from almost all studies. Acknowledging that the field tends to write in ways that mystify the alienation, disempowerment and exploitation of workers by the ‘leaders’ of capitalism also means facing the hard truth that as things stand, leadership studies tends not to regard workers as a legitimate source of leadership. Yet in the real world, examples of leadership from workers brimming with potential abound, either within or outside trade unions (Rosile et al, 2021; O Smolović Jones et al, 2021b). We are interested in submissions that take seriously the materiality, wages, terms and conditions of work – and perspectives from Marxism are encouraged in order to better situate leadership that resists capital accumulation. Especially interesting would be papers that engage with the use of technology by and against workers (Woodcock, 2021). Submissions that consider how technology is adopted or subverted by workers for the purposes of offering resistance leadership is important if we are to envisage how technology can be made to work for the masses, rather than for extraction and exploitation. Of value would be workerist and workers inquiry submissions that build insight from the real experiences of workers (O Smolović Jones et al, 2021b). In this area, we are open to receive shorter pieces of reflective writing from workers who feel that their experiences of struggle merit consideration by the scholarly community. Finally, we are also interested in papers that address resistance to work from the perspectives of gender, race and sexuality.

*Leadership through social movements.* Social movements can offer bold and generative leadership that reaches across space to unite previously disparate people and causes. Such leadership is richly hybrid, practiced digitally and through bodies. Black Lives Matter and other movements rooted in racial justice help transform the ways in which people conceptualise racism, colonialism and racial justice (Jackson, 2021). Climate activism, particularly amongst young and Indigenous peoples, has started to force a reckoning with unsustainable environmental, economic and social practices. Social movements continue to resist authoritarian regimes and practices – in contexts where liberal democracy is more or less well entrenched. Movements may also challenge sexist and misogynist norms in societies and economies (N Smolović Jones et al, 2021). However, we are also interested in the leadership offered by regressive social movements, as much can be learnt about the dynamics of leadership through study of its shadow and taboo sides (Tourish, 2013).

*Leadership through community.* Community is an important constitutive aspect of leadership (Edwards, 2015). But we do not know enough about how ‘community’ can be a driver of resistance that holds the potential for radical change, originating as bounded to specific communities but holding the potential to break beyond such boundaries to offer lessons for resistance leadership more broadly. Thinking here could involve contributions in the areas of housing, gentrification, sustainability, civil rights and mutual aid. Of interest could be how community organisations responded to the pandemic, addressing particular but diverse needs of community when support from more established power was lacking.

*Leadership through and against populism.* As well-studied phenomena of Brexit and Trumpism suggest (Robinson and Bristow, 2020), populist leadership can occupy positions of power and stifle democratic practice through the scapegoating of racialised minorities, yet as important as this is to understand, in this special issue we are interested in the insurgent

dynamics of populist leadership. Populist groups can offer potent resistance within liberal democracies, leading them in more regressive (Mondon and Winter, 2020) directions that make it harder to attain rights for women, workers, LGBT people and racialised minorities. Such leadership thrives in online communities and through social media (Krämer, 2017). However, such groups also gain their power through physical co-presence, using intimidation and violence as means to an end.

### **How to submit your paper**

For further details on the aims, scope and submission guidelines of the journal, please visit <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/lea> We also strongly encourage authors to refer to the editorials on ‘the critical ethos of Leadership, and what we look for in submissions’ (Tourish, 2015) and ‘writing differently about leadership’ (Tourish, 2017b).

To discuss potential submissions please liaise with a member of the editorial team. Submissions should be made through Manuscript Central, accessed from the journal website, clearly identifying that the paper is to be considered for the special issue on resistance leadership.

### **References**

- Barthold, C., Checchi, M., Imas, M., & Smolović Jones, O. (2020). Dissensual leadership: rethinking democratic leadership with Jacques Rancière. *Organization*, 1350508420961529.
- Benanav, A. (2020). *Automation and the future of work*. London: Verso.
- Collinson, D. (2005). Dialectics of leadership. *Human relations*, 58(11), 1419-1442.
- Collinson, D. L. (2020). ‘Only connect!’: Exploring the critical dialectical turn in leadership studies. *Organization Theory*, 1(2), 2631787720913878.
- Collinson, D., Smolović Jones, O., & Grint, K. (2018). ‘No more heroes’: Critical perspectives on leadership romanticism. *Organization Studies*, 39(11), 1625-1647.
- Edwards, G. (2015). *Leadership as community*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Gagnon, S., & Collinson, D. (2017). Resistance through difference: The co-constitution of dissent and inclusion. *Organization Studies*, 38(9), 1253-1276.
- Grint, K. (2021). *Mutiny and leadership*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jackson, S. J. (2021). Black Lives Matter and the revitalization of collective visionary leadership. *Leadership*, 17(1), 8-17.
- Krämer, B. (2017). Populist online practices: the function of the Internet in right-wing populism. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(9), 1293-1309. doi: 10.1080/1369118X.2017.1328520

Mondon, A., & Winter, A. (2020). *Reactionary democracy: How racism and the populist far right became mainstream*. London: Verso Books. Mouffe, C. (2019). *For a left populism*. London: Verso.

Rosile, G. A., Boje, D. M., Herder, R. A., & Sanchez, M. (2021). The Coalition of Immokalee Workers uses ensemble storytelling processes to overcome enslavement in corporate supply chains. *Business & Society*, 60(2), 376-414.

Robinson, S. and Bristow, A. (2020) 'Riding populist storms: Brexit, Trumpism and beyond, Special Paper Series Editorial', Organization. doi: 10.1177/1350508420910576.

Sinha, P., Smolović Jones, O., & Carroll, B. (2021). Theorizing dramaturgical resistance leadership from the leadership campaigns of Jeremy Corbyn. *Human Relations*, 74(3), 354-382.

Smolović Jones, O., Smolović Jones, S., Taylor, S., & Yarrow, E. (2021a). 'I wanted more women in, but...': oblique resistance to gender equality initiatives. *Work, Employment and Society*, 35(4), 640-656.

Smolović Jones, O., Briley, G., & Woodcock, J. (2021b). Exposing and re-placing leadership through workers inquiry. *Leadership*, 17427150211026431.

Smolović Jones, S., Winchester, N., & Clarke, C. (2021). Feminist solidarity building as embodied agonism: An ethnographic account of a protest movement. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 28(3), 917-934.

Tourish, D. (2013). *The dark side of transformational leadership: A critical perspective*. Hove: Routledge.

Tourish, D. (2015). Some announcements, reaffirming the critical ethos of Leadership, and what we look for in submissions. *Leadership*, 11(2), 135-141.

Tourish, D. (2017). Introduction: Writing differently about leadership. *Leadership*, 13(1), 3-4.

Tourish, D. (2019). Making a difference: Doing leadership research that matters. *Journal of Management & Organization*, 25(3), 364-369.

Woodcock, J. (2011). *The fight against platform capitalism: An inquiry into the global struggles of the gig economy*. London: University of Westminster Press.

Zoller, H. M., & Fairhurst, G. T. (2007). Resistance leadership: The overlooked potential in critical organization and leadership studies. *Human Relations*, 60(9), 1331-1360.