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Inventing Leadership

The Challenge of Democracy

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NEW HORIZONS IN LEADERSHIP STUDIES

Edward Elgar

Cheltenham, UK • Northampton, MA, USA

Prologue: of fictions, implicit theories, and leadership in a democracy

The role of leadership in a democracy is a perplexing one. Democracy is grounded in, and indeed is the ultimate manifestation of, a belief in popular sovereignty – power in the people. It presumes popular participation in government, yet there is evidence enough that the people do not always govern themselves well. Leaders have ever been called upon to rescue democratic societies from their foibles. Unfortunately, the very notion of leaders in a democracy is rife with tensions. Reality dictates that there must be ‘leaders’ of some sort; the few must govern the many in any social grouping of size. Moreover, a belief in wise and virtuous leaders acting for the common good has a long and honorable pedigree. But, in modern times, democratization and egalitarian values have undercut the deference necessary to follow such virtuous leaders – if any there be. Likewise, individualism and diversity have undermined the very notion of the common good. Many recent scholars and practitioners have sought to avoid the perceived evils of leaders by championing a participationist approach to the workings of democracy, but many thoughtful observers remain unconvinced that merely gathering stakeholders together yields wise policy. The difficulties of creating and maintaining an effective democracy remain patent.

If concentration shifts from ‘leaders’ to ‘leadership’, however, new possibilities begin to unfold. Leadership should be understood as an influence relation among leaders and followers that facilitates the accomplishment of group or societal objectives.¹ This shifts the focus from the leaders to all members of the polity, and suggests an ongoing process of mutual influence. The central tensions of a democracy remain, but the leadership process, if properly understood and implemented, holds the promise of mediating those tensions. For example, one of the central dilemmas of democracy arises when there is a belief in the power of the people, yet at the same time a distrust of the ability of the people to govern well. Leadership is a construct that seeks to mediate that dilemma through the actions of leaders, structural constraints and the utilization of appropriate processes. In a similar vein, leadership, rightly understood, mediates the tension in a democracy between the desire for strong and visionary leaders and the deeply held values of participation, egalitarianism and diversity. In short, leadership, both as a construct and a reality, promises to hold the key to a viable, functioning democracy in our postmodern world. It is the intent of this volume to explore the role of leadership in a democracy, and to put forward specific proposals to help implement an effective leadership process.

In addition to a definition of leadership, an accompanying definition of democracy must be proffered. As Raymond Williams has noted, ‘Democracy is a very old word but its meanings have always been complex’.² For centuries – really until the nineteenth century – democracy was viewed by most as an evil – the equivalent of mob rule. Since then, the term has been held hostage to (that is, defined to accommodate) various ideologies.³ This

text will adopt a variation of the definition of political scientists Philippe C. Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl. Those scholars begin by ‘broadly defining democracy ... as a unique system for organizing relations between rulers and the ruled’. This book will somewhat modify their more precise definition by stating that ‘democracy is a system of governance in which ultimate sovereignty resides in the people (however defined) and in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting directly or indirectly’.⁴

Juxtaposing the two operative definitions helps to justify the many instances in this narrative in which democracy and leadership are treated as virtually inseparable. If democracy is ‘a unique system for organizing relations between rulers and the ruled’, and leadership is ‘an influence relation among leaders and followers that facilitates the accomplishment of group or societal objectives’, the leadership process in a democracy might be viewed as simply democracy at work.

The close connection between democracy and leadership does not lessen the complexities posed by their interrelationship. It simply means that the specific leadership challenges in a democracy will echo the challenges for democracy itself: the need to secure sound action and policy in a regime based upon a conception of power in the people.

To pursue this study, it is necessary to introduce two constructs that will serve as vehicles to carry this analysis forward. Specifically, it is important to understand the concepts of *fictions* and *implicit theories of democracy and leadership*.

FICTIONS

The intellectual frame that will guide the ensuing analysis is the notion of societal ‘fictions’, which requires some explanation. Historian Edmund S. Morgan pioneered the use of fictions as vehicles to explain historical developments.⁵ His words may help to introduce the subject. Morgan argues that political society is built upon a series of fictions. In Morgan’s words, ‘[A]ll government rests on the consent, however obtained, of the governed.... The success of government thus requires the acceptance of fictions, requires the willing suspension of disbelief....’ He goes on to provide several examples of prominent fictions: ‘Government requires make-believe. Make-believe that the king is divine, make believe that he can do no wrong or make believe that the voice of the people is the voice of God. Make believe that the people *have* a voice or make believe that the representatives of the people *are* the people. Make believe that governors are the servants of the people....’⁶ None of these assertions are completely true in actual fact, yet people in certain societal situations have acted as if they were true.

Fictions, then, are idealized notions of what should be; they are societal beliefs in ideal values and organizing structures. Although the term ‘fiction’ carries a pejorative connotation, such idealized beliefs are necessary for any polity to function. Without such fictions, government could not stand, because it is such idealized conceptions that induce the governed to accept the regime. Equally important for our purposes, it is upon such fictions that leadership is based. As David Hume commented in 1758, ‘Nothing is more surprising ... than to see the easiness with which the many are governed by the few.... When we enquire by what means this is brought about, we shall find ... ’tis on opinion only

that government is founded.⁷ If we are to understand the complex interrelation between democracy and leadership, we will need to identify the ideals – the fictions – that constitute these constructs, and thereby maintain the people’s allegiance.

This becomes all the more important when one realizes the dynamism of the relationship between fictions and reality. Fictions, by their very nature, are idealized notions of what should be; they are only imperfectly related to how things really operate in the real world. Nonetheless, fictions, in order to be maintained, must bear some relation to reality. When the fiction and reality get too far apart, tension builds, and one of two things must happen. Either the fiction must change (this is often a revolutionary event), or the reality must change to bring it more into conformity with the fiction (this is called reform).⁸ Indeed it can be argued that it is the tensions between existing fictions and reality that drive historical change. Any aspirations to reform leadership in our present democracy, then, must begin with an assessment of the congruence of existing fictions and current reality.

This notion of the role of fictions helps to make sense of the ensuing analysis. This book will trace the rise and development of a series of related fictions that have been central to our issue of leadership in a democracy. The ideals contained in these fictions are, in essence, our ‘first principles’, and will serve as the touchstone for our analysis. An evaluation of the nexus between these fictions and contemporary reality will provide a means of assessing the propriety and success of various attempts to implement leadership in a democracy, and also serve as the catalyst for proposed reforms.

Specifically, this study will treat three fictions that are related in a dialectic of sorts. Part I will draw upon a range of classical philosophers and commentators to discern the emergence of a fiction of the ideal of a leader. As we shall see, despite considerable differences in time and context, the substance of this ‘classical ideal’ will remain remarkably stable, applying alike to regimes with and without popular participation. This classical ideal of the leader continues to have considerable influence even today. This ‘thesis’ will in time be joined by its antithesis, the fiction of the people. Part II will trace the emergence of a conception of the people and, gradually, the further (fictional) gloss of power in the people – popular sovereignty. With the emergence of this dialectic (at the end of the eighteenth century) there appears the important synthesis that will be the focus of our further consideration: leadership. As Edmund S. Morgan states in the conclusion to his study of the rise of popular sovereignty, ‘The word “leader” is old, but “leadership” was a term that no one seems to have felt a need for as long as the qualities it designates remained an adjunct of social superiority. The decline of deference and the emergence of leadership signaled the beginnings not only of a new rhetoric but of a new mode of social relations and a new way of determining who should stand among the few to govern the many.’⁹

The remainder of this volume will address ‘this new mode of social relations and [its] new way of determining who should stand among the few to govern the many’. Part III, then, will explore this new fiction we call leadership and its various permutations over the past two centuries. Part IV will return to the dynamics of fictions and reality, and assess how well current conceptions and practices of this fiction leadership meet the realities of our postmodern world. It is in the context of this discussion that proposals for the remaking of leadership in a democracy will arise.

Fictions thus form the analytical framework for our study. However, there is yet another construct whose function it is to allow the sort of in-depth analysis necessary for a thorough treatment of our subject. It is to that construct we now turn.

IMPLICIT THEORIES

The analysis of leadership in a democracy in historical and contemporary context is complicated by the fact that the various approaches to democracy and leadership begin from quite different and often conflicting basic assumptions and premises. Unless these are articulated and understood, it is impossible to compare and analyze adequately the historical solutions for the dilemmas of democracy. Moreover, when one turns to contemporary discourse on democracy, these differing starting points stir much of the passion that fuels the disagreements. Only if these basic assumptions are brought out into the open can one hope for current debate over the workings of democracy to move beyond polemics and into a reasoned discussion of substantive differences. This book will make every attempt to isolate and identify the base assumptions of the approaches under study, and to suggest the implications for the workings of leadership in a democracy. When it comes time for promulgating proposed reforms, the underlying assumptions and premises will be laid bare. This will permit and encourage informed debate and disagreement.

Political scientist Benjamin Barber labels such beginning points as constituting an 'inertial frame', which he defines as 'a starting point or rest position from which a theorist launches his argument'. They represent, according to Barber, a 'pretheoretical substratum over which theory can be laid'.¹⁰ To be sure, much of modern democratic theory is grounded in such assumptions.¹¹ However, in this analysis, such foundational assumptions will go by a different name. Adapting a term used by modern leadership theorists, they will here be called 'implicit theories' of leadership and democracy. According to the leadership scholars, implicit theories are filters through which individuals perceive the actions of others. These filters determine whether or not the individual attributes to the perceived actor or action the term 'leader' or 'leadership', respectively.¹² To be sure, the use of this construct in this volume differs from the role it plays as a psychological filter as portrayed in the leadership literature. At the same time, it goes beyond Barber's conception of inertial frame, which he views as merely the starting point for deductive theory building. As used here, an implicit theory has both the Barberian attribute of logical premise and the aspect of more active intellectual engagement with perceived reality drawn from the leadership studies. That is to say, in this volume, implicit theory operates both as the foundation for one's articulation of the proper functioning of democracy and leadership and as the lens through which he or she evaluates other solutions to democracy's challenges. This more dynamic conception best captures the multiple roles played by one's assumptions and premises in the discourse over leadership and democracy.

Although each contributor to the discourse brings a unique constellation of assumptions and premises to the debate, it is possible to identify several common issues that each has to confront. It is the resolution of these core issues that creates one's 'implicit theory' and largely determines one's perspective and course of action in approaching leadership in a democracy.

CREATING A TEMPLATE FOR LEADERSHIP ANALYSIS

In order to make analytical sense of the myriad sources upon which this volume draws, and to serve as a basis for proposals for reform, this study will apply a protocol of analytical

questions that are designed to isolate and identify key premises and assumptions pertaining to leadership, thus creating a template for leadership analysis. This approach has several benefits. First, it is a way of pulling together quite disparate sources and focusing upon their leadership implications. The scope of the ensuing analysis will be quite extensive. It will explore with some care the works of political philosophers, political scientists, historians, sociologists and other commentators on democracy. Many of the sources utilized do not explicitly address leadership; often, it is necessary to distill from each the leadership implications. In creating a template that addresses identical issues for each source, it makes them comparable, thus facilitating analysis. Second, by drawing out the suppositions of each commentator or approach in this manner, it serves the purpose of clarifying points of disagreement among observers of leadership in a democracy. Finally, by categorizing the various responses of a long and rich history of individuals and societies to the challenges posed by leadership in popular regimes, we are afforded a catalogue of potential solutions for contemporary leadership challenges.

Before turning to the specifics of our 'leadership template', a word of clarification is in order. It is the argument of this volume that the actual fiction of 'leadership' – and the term itself – did not come into popular usage until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. However, we will be applying the analytical framework provided by the 'leadership template' to all aspects of the ensuing study, even those antedating the emergence of the construct itself. This is legitimate, in the sense that issues relating to leaders and the people and the relations between them have always been relevant. In sum, the template identifies some eternal 'leadership issues' that existed long before the term itself came into being as an adjunct of modern democracy. With this potential confusion resolved, we can turn to the protocol of queries which make up our analytical 'leadership template'.

What is the Leadership Challenge?

The initial task in the analysis of each approach to leadership in a democracy is identifying how the commentator or approach defined the central challenge to the implementation of a successful polity. While it is true that all governments face certain generic problems such as the keeping of good order and the accomplishment of societal objectives, each commentator whose thought is detailed in this volume uniquely defines a specific leadership challenge that must be addressed. The perceived challenge may be the result of specific historical conditions, the ideology of the commentator, or both, but it is this definition of the problem that goes a long way toward explaining the content and tenor of the response.

The identification of the perceived leadership challenge is also useful in terms of our continuing analysis of the role of fictions in understanding leadership in a democracy. That is to say, for any version of the fiction of leadership to achieve hegemony, that fiction must appropriately identify the essential challenges facing society, and adequately respond to them. By beginning our analysis with an identification of each commentator's basic starting point, we can begin to assess how well each approach to leadership serves its intended purpose, and thereby to evaluate its success as a societal fiction.

What is the Perception of Human Nature?

What appears at first blush to be a rather cosmic question more suited to a metaphysical analysis is in actuality one that is central to an ultimate understanding of the social relation

we call leadership. For example, one's assumptions about whether humans are by nature social or independent, selfish or altruistic, rational or irrational, or incorrigible or capable of improvement, determines in great part one's view of leadership and democracy as well as one's proposed solutions to perceived challenges to both.

Unfortunately, few commentators take the care to identify explicitly their assumptions in this regard. Accordingly, our answers to this question must often be the result of logical implication, and thus remain somewhat suspect. Nevertheless, to the extent that such assumptions can be laid bare, the resulting insights into the nature of the leadership fiction that is created can be quite useful.

Are the People Capable of Governing?

This question is, perhaps, a subset of the previous query, but the issue is so central to the operation of a democracy that it deserves separate treatment. Whether or not the people are capable of governing themselves may be the most important foundational assumption related to leadership in a democracy. If the conclusion is that the people are not capable, it poses a fundamental problem that must be addressed – and opens the way for many leadership solutions. Even the opposite assumption – that is, that the people do have the capabilities to govern themselves – leaves many important issues unresolved. How, then, the various approaches to leadership resolve this issue is worthy of careful study.

What is the Proper End or Purpose of Leadership?

Every fiction relating to leadership has its own *raison d'être*. Each articulates an image of what constitutes the desired outcomes of the relation among leaders and the people. One important task of any leadership analysis is to identify those desired ends.

Although it can take many forms, this question of the nature and purpose of government and leadership often involves consideration of the existence and nature of the common good. Commentators and approaches differ as to whether such a thing exists, how it is defined, and how it is to be achieved. In applying this leadership template to the sources addressed in the text, a consideration of each commentator's conception of the common good is both useful and unavoidable.

The answers to such questions, in turn, depend in part upon the commentator's values and value hierarchy. These, too, need to be identified. Even where multiple observers agree upon the same basic set of values – say, liberty, equality and justice – the definition of these terms can be quite divergent. Thus, for example, whether one stresses positive liberty or negative liberty, equality of opportunity or equality of condition, or distributive or procedural justice – and how one ranks them in priority – can lead to dramatically differing conclusions concerning the appropriate processes and structures to be implemented. Therefore care must be taken to attempt to discern these nuances in every approach under study.

What is the Epistemology of Leadership? (How Do We Know What to Do, or if What We are Doing is Correct?)

This question of the protocol refers to the issue of how one knows what is the proper action to take in any given situation. This can take many guises. Differing approaches to

leadership, for example, posit various 'external' standards or 'independent grounds' by which to judge the propriety and success of actions. Examples of such external standards include truth, the actions of the market, the greatest good for the greatest number, natural rights, law and the like. On the other hand, in some versions of the leadership fiction, the issue is not so much what one looks to, but whom we rely upon to make the determination. Still others rely upon a given process to establish an acceptable course of action. By identifying, to the best of our ability, the epistemology of leadership for each approach to leadership, we reveal many assumptions about the leadership relation, and gain some insight into how it should operate. I will normally shorten this template question to 'What is the Epistemology of Leadership?'

What is the Role of the Leader?

This issue is often the first one that comes to mind when thinking about leadership, but in the logic of this protocol it is so interrelated with the responses to other queries in the protocol that it belongs well down the list. It is an important issue nonetheless, and we need to cull from our various sources the specific expectations of the leader.

This question embraces several possible subtopics. They include the threshold issue of who should lead, as well as role expectations. In addition, in this study of regimes grounded in the sovereignty of the people, any consideration of leader behavior will also include issues related to representation.

Moreover, although this topic will be addressed in more detail later, we must make the connection between a commentator's view of proper leader behavior and the commentator's underlying ideological orientation. For example, one of the great divides in the contemplation of leadership is between those who favor an *elitist* approach and those who champion a *participationist* approach. Expectations of leader selection and leader behavior (as well as of follower behavior, below) are part and parcel of such foundational assumptions. Thus, someone who adheres to an elitist conception of leadership will probably call for a leader who has the ability to perceive the interests of society and act upon them – a philosopher king, or at the very least someone drawn from an aristocracy of merit. That leader will then have considerable latitude in his or her actions. In contrast, those who reject elite theories and embrace a participationist model will undoubtedly call for a much different leader role, one geared to the needs of the followers, or perhaps facilitating the debates among follower interests.

What is the Role of the People?

This question is in many ways the obverse of the preceding one. In the study of leadership in a democracy, this issue is both unavoidable and surpassingly important. What may come as a surprise to some may be the variation in responses the respective commentators and approaches provide, which is often a function of the elitist/participationist divide mentioned above.

For each commentator or approach to leadership in a democracy depicted below, there must be an explication of this issue. The varying responses will go a long way toward helping us to understand the core philosophy and approach of the commentator under study.

How Should Leaders and the People Interact?

A derivative issue that deserves separate attention is the dynamics of the interaction between leaders and the people. Another way to frame this issue in a democratic context is: 'What is the appropriate relationship between the few and the many?' This query forces us to look at the leadership process itself.

This question is in many ways the culmination of the responses to the other questions of the protocol. Many of the same issues are raised again, but in a manner more directly related to the functioning of the polity. Representation, for example, must be revisited, but *this time in a more holistic manner that suggests the dynamics of the relationship between the representative and his or her constituents.* Again, implicit theories will drive the debate. A participationist who believes that there is no independent ground for determining the rightness of actions will view the process itself as all-important, and strive to structure interactions in such a way as to maximize the contributions of followers. One who adopts the classical liberal emphasis upon representative democracy will call for quite a different dynamic. One whose core value is justice may advocate a leadership structure and process that is different still. Again, the purpose of identifying and analyzing this issue across time is to gain thereby a further understanding of the operations of leadership in a democracy.

How is the Matter of Diversity and Minority Interests Addressed?

This is another of those questions that is in reality a subset of the previous query, but which is important enough for separate consideration. As is the case with many of our template questions, not all commentators address this basic issue. For example, the issue of diversity was ignored or assumed away until relatively recently. Concern for minority interests has a longer track record, but this, too, has received uneven attention. For a well-working democracy, of course, such matters must be addressed successfully. The ensuing analysis will attempt to suggest at least the implications of each approach for this fundamental issue.

What Institutions and Processes Must be Designed to Accommodate the Premises and Assumptions about Leadership Articulated in the Responses to the Leadership Template?

This is the all-important issue of application. The previous questions of the protocol are designed to elucidate the core assumptions relevant to leadership in a democracy. If these premises are to become workable, structures, institutions and processes must be devised to realize them in practice. An attempt will be made in each instance to identify what these structures, institutions and processes might be. It is here that various fictions of leadership get transformed into some form of functioning reality. This will also provide an opportunity to evaluate the closeness of the match between the fiction and the reality. This, in turn, will provide grist for the mill of proposed future reform of leadership in a democracy.

In applying this 'leadership template' to the contents of this volume, an attempt will be made to do so in a consistent manner, in order to derive the greatest analytical benefit from its use. However, given the great disparity in sources utilized herein, some flexibility is required. Not all sources address each of the questions of the protocol. In many cases, the leadership template will be applied at the conclusion of an often lengthy explication

of the commentator's argument. To avoid unnecessary repetition, the discussion of the template will draw upon the previous analysis in a summary manner. In other cases, the template itself will drive the analysis. Whatever the format, the intent is to highlight the leadership implications in an organized manner suitable for comparison and analysis.

This Prologue has introduced the principal analytical tools that will shape this analysis. The point is that we can gain no clear understanding of the role and purpose of leadership in a democracy unless we can unravel the tangled threads of underlying values, intended purpose and modes of implementation of leadership in a democracy. The use of fictions and implicit theories help us to accomplish this level of understanding. Only after these have been made clear – in both historical and contemporary context – can we hope to address the central challenges of leadership in a democracy.

NOTES

1. This definition is akin to, but not completely congruent with, that found in Joseph C. Rost, *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 1991). It is sufficiently broad to carry our analysis for the moment. A more detailed explication of the term leadership must await the final sections of this text.
2. Raymond Williams, *Keywords* rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 93.
3. *Ibid.*, 93–98.
4. Philippe C. Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl, 'What Democracy Is ... and is Not', *Journal of Democracy* 2 (1991): 75–88.
5. Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988). This book will serve as the principal resource for Part II of this volume. Note that political scientist James A. Morone also asserts that the notion of 'the people' is a fiction: Morone, *The Democratic Wish: Popular Participation and the Limits of American Government* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), 7.
6. Morgan, *Inventing the People*, 13.
7. Morgan begins his book with an epigraph from David Hume's 'Of the First Principles of Government':

Nothing is more surprising in those, who consider affairs with a philosophical eye, than to see the easiness with which the many are governed by the few; and to observe the implicate submission with which men resign their own sentiments and passions to those of their rulers. When we enquire by what means this wonder is brought about, we shall find, that as Force is always on the side of the governed, the governors have nothing to support them but opinion. 'Tis therefore, on opinion only that government is founded; and this maxim extends to the most despotic and most military governments, as well as to the most free and most popular.

David Hume, *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*, 1758 edition, quoted in Morgan, *Inventing the People*, 13.

8. Morgan, *Inventing the People*, 14.
9. *Ibid.*, 306.
10. Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 26–28.
11. Several of these democratic theories will be addressed in Parts III and IV of this volume.
12. See, for example, Billy J. Calder, 'An Attribution Theory of Leadership', in Barry M. Staw and Gerald R. Slancik, eds, *New Directions in Organizational Behavior* (Chicago: St. Clair Press, 1977), 179–204; Dov Eden and Uri Leviatan, 'Implicit Leadership Theory as a Determinant of the Factor Structure Underlying Supervisory Behavior Scales', *Journal of Applied Psychology* 60 (1975): 736–741; H. Kirk Downey, et al., 'Attribution of "Causes" of Performance: A Constructive, Quasi-Longitudinal Replication of the Staw (1975) Study', *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance* 24 (1979): 287–9. More recently, Robert J. House and associates apply implicit leadership theory to explain differences in perceptions of leadership across cultures: Robert J. House, et al., *Culture, Leadership, and Organizations: The GLOBE Study of 62 Societies* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2004).