

Leadership in the Time of Plague¹

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Abstract

The main point of this article is comparison of two types of leadership: heroic, individualistic, formal, and dispersed, networked, spontaneous. The first is presented in the famous novel by Antoine de Saint Exupery *The night flight* the second is depicted in *Plague* by Albert Camus. Formal leadership is experiencing nowadays visible deficit of power. Even the top political leaders of the world, CEOs of global corporations and media moguls are not as powerful as the used to be and not as powerful as they seem. Many of them openly admit that they are simply not able to fulfill their promises and to follow their agendas. This is particularly visible in the times of plague. When degenerated “heroic” traditional power gradually evaporate new networks replace it spontaneously. People who do not seek rewards take over burden of responsibilities in the critical fight against plague. To what extent they will be able to replace the leftovers of traditional leadership?

Keywords: leadership, leader.

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Over the decades, as a researcher of management, I often wondered to what does the University owe its extraordinary position? I have concluded that the crucial factor is leadership. In the conventionally and literally understood time of plague that we currently experience, leadership is subject to extraordinary challenges. Therefore, by immodestly paraphrasing the title of Gabriel García Márquez's book *Love in the Time of Cholera*, I will devote my speech to "leadership in the time of plague."

Complaints about leadership deficit are as old as those about the lack of true love. However, recently such complaints come from leaders of the highest level, those considered "chosen by the gods." In his reflections after two terms as the President of the United States, Barack Obama writes: "Why imagine a better world if attempts at its creation fail?" Donald Tusk speaks in a similar tone after completing his mission as the President of the European Council: "What is the point of unity, sovereignty, and solidarity if we could not defend Europe?" They both know that they failed their tests, although perhaps not as dramatically as two successive popes in the struggle against pathology in the Catholic Church. If even the most powerful leaders begin to complain about leadership and power deficit, the situation requires considerable celebration.

As political scientist Moises Naim writes in his book *The End of Power*: "The decay of power is changing the world. The president of the United States or China, the CEO of J.P. Morgan or Shell Oil, the executive editor of the New York Times, the head of the International Monetary Fund, and the pope continue to wield immense power. But less so than their predecessors." Recently, the pandemic has dramatically boosted this process. We may measure this by the increasing pace of turnover in top positions of political, economic, and other organizations. Naim explains it as follows: "Today's power players often pay a steeper and more immediate price for their mistakes than did their predecessors."

In my view, the economist John Kenneth Galbraith provides the most adequate definition of leadership: "All of the great leaders have had one characteristic in common: it was the willingness to confront unequivocally the major anxieties of their people in their time. This, and not much else, is the essence of leadership." Such an approach includes not only political but also social, business, and academic leadership at different levels; but this view also throws leadership on the conveyor belt of history, which recently accelerates considerably.

For many years, the archetype of a leader Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's protagonist Riviere, from the famous novel *Night Flight*. Riviere is an airline boss from the pioneering period of aviation who pushes the idea of night flights at the cost of his pilots'

lives. This is his answer to the question he poses: “Although human life is priceless, we always act as if something had an even greater price... But what is that something?” Riviere represents the “heroic” macho vision of solitary leadership. The final passage of the book exposes the loneliness of a leader who “bears his heavy load of victory.” However, what happens in the event of a failure? Saint-Exupéry personally experienced what happens as a military pilot in the 1940 campaign, yet he did not find the answer. On the eve of capitulation, he writes: “Tomorrow, in the eyes of witnesses, we will be defeated. And the vanquished should be silent. Like grains.” And yet, failures form an integral element in the life cycle of any community or organization as it is during disasters when leadership is the most necessary. Weakened leaders cannot deal with the challenges of a fast-changing world. It seems naive to expect leaders will stop climate change. They only pretend they can do it. In one of the interviews I conducted with prominent Polish leaders, there appeared the following statement: “If we look at the leaders, ninety percent of them will be those who lost.”

The role of leaders is much more defensive than it may seem. Leaders negotiate their ever more numerous and steadfast limitations. The strength of their leadership – namely the ability to implement their mission – depends on how much can they negotiate. In reference to the Nobel Prize winning idea of *bounded rationality* proposed by one of my masters, Herbert Simon, I formulated the concept of *bounded leadership*. A term neither flattering nor pleasant for the tested leaders, who complained to me “What do you mean I am limited?” They would prefer to see themselves on the proverbial white horse that jumps over all obstacles.

I managed to identify the following types of constraints that restrict leaders:

- political,
- cultural,
- formal and legal,
- related information and knowledge,
- ethical,
- emotional,
- motivational.

Over time, ever tighter limitations restrict the leaders. They cope with the limitations increasingly worse. White horses end up at the butcher’s. Since the measure of leadership strength is the ability to elbow aside the constraints, we speak of special abilities. The most important ability is self-reflection, namely the ability to look at oneself analytically and critically and draw conclusions; in other words, to learn from one’s

own weaknesses and failures. Systematic studies confirm that leaders are self-reflective only very rarely. The inevitable “courts” that surround them substantially contribute to such a state of affairs. In the famous *Poem for Adults*, Adam Ważyk characterizes Polish leaders from the 1950s in the following manner:

Snake charmers
assembled in the Great Tent,
possessors of passes to special stores,
where pants are sold
embroidered with the dogma of infallibility,
thinkers
hatching your theses
(which the throng of executors will never understand),
dispensers of 70 thousand different forms
for our everyday life –
and for festivals
an abundance of sweets:
inquisitors,
sermonizers,
flagellants,
Spartans,
put on your best array!
The Kingdom of God on earth
will come
in two weeks from today.³

The critique sounds painfully current! Dignitaries of all kinds still put on their best array and gladly admire themselves in “their” media.

We expect leaders to deliver outstanding results, and they deliver because they can mobilize others. It is clear in both politics and business. They teach this in business schools, and they teach it well. What is doubted is the goal of this increased effort and the distribution of its results. As one of my interviewees claims: “one may be a completely cynical leader. Then appealing to values remains purely verbal and manipulative.” Here, we touch on value-creating competencies. Another interviewee calls it “sniffing time,” which is particularly difficult in the time of plague. After all, it is the plague that tests leaders best.

³ Trans. Alfred Dressier; obtained from: http://banmarchive.org.uk/collections/nr/01_51.pdf (access: 28.02.22).

Camus calls the state of the plague in the following way: “Everybody knows that pestilences have a way of recurring in the world; yet somehow, we find it hard to believe in ones that crash down on our heads from a blue sky. There have been as many plagues as wars in history; yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise.” There is the “faint qualm for the future, a vague unease.” After formally declaring the plague and closing the city, the plague becomes “the concern of all of us,” as Camus writes at beginning of his story of combatting the plague. Fear and uncertainty affect and surprise everyone.

We may probably call Doctor Bernard Rieux the protagonist of Camus’s *The Plague*: a leader in the time of plague. I say “probably” because Rieux surely would not call himself a leader. I do not know if other characters from the book would refer to Rieux in such a way. However, this does not matter because I cannot resist the impression that doctor Rieux is a leader in the fight against the plague. He performs his professional role on the scale of a whole community. It is him who insists on convening the health committee and who plays a crucial role in the formulation and announcement of the final opinion about the plague’s character, not to mention later decisions about the introduction of restrictions and remedial measures such as city closure or obligatory quarantine. Rieux leads analytical work on the plague’s nature and spread. It is by his initiative and under his direction that works begin on a serum to counteract the plague’s spread, which continue despite spectacular failures. At the same time, Rieux works twenty hours a day with enormous devotion as a doctor in hospitals and at homes of the sick. This earns him respect and respect, which makes him almost naturally the representative of the whole community in relations with the authorities. Moreover, he can play the role of a buffer that receives the hatred and fear of anti-vaxxers and opponents of medicine. Rieux listens to complaints and confessions. He explains the situation. However, above all, Rieux inspires other citizens to self-organize. He establishes voluntary first-aid groups, as we read: “Who taught you all this, doctor? The reply came promptly: “poverty.” Rieux is a poor leader of the poor; he does not have a “best array” like the leader’s from Ważyk’s poem.

It is not easy to characterize such a specific leadership role. The role emerged neither from nomination nor Rieux’s own efforts or choices. Rieux becomes one with the role as the events unfold. This role is certainly not permanent: it ends when the plague subsides. It is leadership that not only comes with no benefits or privileges but is also a burden undertaken in the name of the common good. Such leadership is relatively easily shared if a leader like Rieux manages to “infect” other people with his motivation and passion; then, others smoothly assume the tasks of leadership. In such a way, the Rieux team emerged, consisting of his closets collaborators. One could describe

such leadership as blurred, or even invisible, hidden. Such leaders come and go, playing specific roles. They are mainly motivated by an ideology and purpose; they seek neither popularity nor profit. Such a concept of leadership allows us to solve the conundrum of apparent leadership deficiency and the seeming amorphousness of such social movements as the Yellow Vests, Women's Strike, or Occupy Wall Street. These movements involve networks of people who periodically fulfill leadership roles in different configurations.

What strikes me is the radically different understanding of leadership by the two great writers of the twentieth century: Saint-Exupéry and Camus. The temporal proximity of the two authors is apparent because, in fact, they belong to different worlds. Saint-Exupéry creates his archetype of leadership in the Golden Twenties, the time of economic expansion and growing globalization wave, reinforced after the catastrophe of the First World War. What symbolizes the energy of the time is Saint-Exupéry's fascination with aviation. Camus writes his book after the Second World War hecatomb, the second suicide of globalization, the still-warm ashes of fascism, and during peak Stalinism. We could recommend Saint-Exupéry's *Night Flight* to management students in the "roaring" 1990s – as Stiglitz calls the period – and maybe in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Today, Camus's *The Plague* seems more relevant.

We can encounter Camus's blurred leadership – adjusted to the challenges of our times – in social movements, NGOs, and different kinds of spontaneous initiatives, usually short-lived. Such leadership is clearly better adapted to challenges posed by the plague, and such leadership rarely appears at the highest levels of administration. Everybody knows well how infinitely distant today's presidents, prime ministers, and cardinals are from the moral standards of the humble Doctor Rieux, who is prone to infinite personal sacrifices. This growing leadership gap becomes even more pronounced because the media mercilessly expose it: this gap "sells" well in the press. Indeed, this is the mystery of the recently growing delegitimization of political power.

Many authors today seek the causes of this delegitimization in the "twilight of democracy." This phenomenon is not a first in modern Europe. Already at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s, the situation received important in-depth analyses. In *The Revolt of the Masses*, José Ortega y Gasset describes the situation in the following words: "these masses have ... shown themselves indocile to the minorities; they do not obey them, follow them, or respect them; on the contrary, they push them aside and supplant them." Ortega y Gasset means the delegitimization of traditional elites and growing populism.

Ortega y Gasset's masses easily succumb to emotion, namely high consumer aspirations supported by the conviction that "one is entitled to everything" and that there are some "them" who stand in the way to fulfill these legitimate expectations. A comparative study of twenty-two European OECD countries in 1999–2017 conducted at Kozminski University showed a specific division of Europe into rational and emotional countries. The latter continue to hastily fulfill consumerist social expectations formulated in the previous year. They display low investment levels and increasing dependence on international financial markets to provide funding for populist aspirations. Examples of emotional countries come from the European south: Italy, Greece, Spain, and Portugal. Over the years, the group was joined by Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, the United Kingdom, and Slovenia. Rational countries are the richest ones in Europe; they realize aspirations gradually as resources and productivity increase. They implement long-term policies in a stable manner. Seemingly, they are role models. Unfortunately, it is the opposite: only the group of emotional countries is growing with time. The reason probably lies in the temptation of leadership based on stimulating and "feeding" populism. The temptation is strong because populism allows for quick political success. Breathless players think not about the future.

However, leadership based on "feeding populism" while maintaining at least the appearance of democracy involves several risks for those who practice the approach. The opposition – even weak opposition – threatens the comfort of governance and continued rule. The rulers must mind limitations when implementing any "own," more or less "crazy" projects – especially related to image or ideology – and especially when deriving personal benefits from occupied positions. If the economy is not dynamic, innovative, and well-rated in financial markets, then resources run out, and a "devil's alternative" appears: should one risk social discontent or finance apparent prosperity with real inflation? The latter inevitably leads to an economic disaster – although not necessarily to the loss of power – as we learn from the frightening examples of Venezuela, Nicaragua, or Turkey. Therefore, a temptation appears to eliminate limitations, overcome impossibilism, and reach for absolute power, namely utter ostentatious departure from civilized forms of liberal democracy and adoption of the authoritarian model. The temptation is stronger during the pandemic when weak leaders must seek the support of anti-vaxxers, flat-earthers, creationists, Odinists, conspiracy theorists, and other "ignoramuses." Ortega y Gasset puts it this way: the masses do not "wish to share life with those who are not of it. It has a deadly hatred of all that is not itself." This raises a serious general question: Do contemporary democratic societies of mass consumption, entertainment, communication, and poor education inevitably change into their grotesque opposites: dictatorships, oligarchies, and kleptocracies? There is a widespread agreement that even American democracy would not

survive Trump's second term, which still remains a possibility. Leaders are forced to move in "the narrow corridor" between anarchy and tyranny. As economists Acemoglu and Robinson argue in their newest book under this very title, liberal democracy is the only right way on this path. However, the narrow corridor is the most demanding and by no means certain, even in the most-grounded democracies. Leaders often fail this test. The degeneration of political leadership is striking.

Therefore, there emerges the question of how the plague influences leadership in business and in other, more or less independent organizations, including universities. The pandemic only accelerates the process observed for some time now, in which leaders move from the real into the virtual world: cyberspace. The confrontation of bounded leadership with the virtual world leads me to conclude that individuals who perform leadership roles use the opportunities provided by technology to overcome the constraints they face in the real world. We may expect that the spectacle of leadership will gradually move to the virtual sphere. The ability to function in this environment will become essential among other competencies of leaders.

Readings of Shoshana Zuboff and other researchers of technology's influence on society on a macro scale paint the picture of a dual model of leadership: for the masses and for the elites that manipulate these masses. The former means a manipulative model of technological behavior modification employed to maximize the profit and market value of tech giants that control information platforms used by virtually all people who provide unimaginable amounts of data. The processing of this data allows tech giants to construct algorithms for controlling the behaviors of groups and even individuals. Therefore, in this scenario leadership undergoes industrialization and mechanization as it becomes subordinated to precisely defined economic interests. The latter model of leadership among the elites who rule the modern technopolis seems less obvious. The infrequent and usually censored leaks from tech giants indicate they follow a traditionally oligarchic or authoritarian leadership style.

Therefore, is there a place for democratic and participatory leadership in modern society during the plague? In search of an answer, I believe we should return to Camus. Let us give voice to the protagonist of his novel, the "probably" leader Doctor Rieux: "We're working side by side for something that unites us, beyond blasphemy and prayers. And it's the only thing that matters." This "something" happens during the plague. In the 2020 encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis calls it "fraternity," while we, Poles, called it "solidarity" in the 1980s. It is during that "something" when unworthy and incompetent leaders fall under the weight of responsibility as challenges appear that they cannot face. There appears a chance that their positions will be filled by the

likes of the humble Doctor Rieux. However, we must first collectively notice this “something” when the plague really becomes the “concern of us all,” like in Camus’s *Oran*. For now, we still do not collectively notice this “something,” but maybe the real plague is yet to come?

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