

# Dissensual Leadership: Rethinking democratic leadership with Jacques Rancière

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## Abstract

The democratic leadership literature emphasises those leadership practices that involve dialogue and communication within the frame of reference of existing organizational structures, discourses and hierarchies. Our contribution is to problematise this approach to democracy from the perspective of the work of Jacques Rancière, which highlights the importance of dissensus, that is to say a breaking away from organizational structures and hierarchies. We argue that this allows us to conceptualise collective leadership in a postfoundational way that connects a critique of individual and organization-bound leadership to a democratic logic, in particular through Rancière's analysis of the myth of the murder of the shepherd. This also enables us to study radically disruptive, non-hierarchical and pre-dialogic dimensions of leadership that may destruct as well as construct. Two democratic leadership practices are outlined: contingent acts of leadership and the practice of radical contestation. Our argument is that both practices of democratic leadership can be deployed as radical ruptures and disruptions of organizational orders, beyond dialogue.

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## Introduction

A nascent body of research has started to explore the overlapping concerns of collective and democratic forms of leadership, seeking to theorise the possibility of leadership that is more participative and egalitarian. In particular, these studies have drawn on theories of democratic practice to focus on how leaders can be held accountable by those beneath them within organizational hierarchies (e.g. Sutherland et al., 2014) and how dialogue may be mainstreamed within practice to offer groups and organizations direction (e.g. Fryer, 2012; Raelin, 2016a, 2016b). Developing our understanding of how leadership can be re-imagined as a more pluralistic and inclusive practice, rather than the property of a person, these studies have begun the task of serious engagement with theories of participative democracy. Yet to date the theorising of collective forms of democratic leadership has not focused on forms of democratic leadership that may exist beyond organizational hierarchies and that may operate outside more formalised dialogical settings and forms. In this study we therefore heed the call of scholars in this area (e.g. Smolović Jones et al., 2016) to theorise in a more focused and in-depth way the capacity of conflict and radical challenges to the status quo to provide an alternative form of collective democratic leadership.

Our main contribution in this paper is to draw on the work of Rancière (1991, 1999, 2004, 2006, 2009) on democracy to enrich perspectives in organization studies on collective forms of democratic leadership. Specifically, we foreground the notion and importance of dissensus, the capacity to create fundamental disagreement, derived ontologically from the assumption of the equality of all actors. From this point, we theorise an important act of collective democratic leadership as the generation of ruptures with the status quo and common sense of organizational hierarchies, an assertion of equality that holds the promise of radically altering the direction of organizations. Thus, dissensual democracy with, upon and against organizations operates through egalitarian leadership involving practices of contingency or radical contestation – and thereby a disruption of organizational structures and hierarchies, a disruption that cannot be smoothed over and settled from within existing organizational boundaries, logics and discourses.

We therefore assert a form of collective leadership that seeks to rupture current norms of participation within organizational and hierarchical structures that are the primary assumptions of the extant literature. Further, we offer more prominence to the creativity and playfulness of collective forms of democratic leadership, in discussion with the extant leadership literature and Rancière's analysis of the murder of the shepherd and of the myth of the ontological foundation of leadership. Engaging with the critical leadership studies literature (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Collinson, 2011; Sergi et al., 2017; Śliwa et al., 2013) we argue that a dissensual positioning of democratic leadership allows us to move away from not only hierarchical and organization-bound accounts but also those that romanticise dialogue and collective practices as goods in and of themselves (Collinson et al., 2018).

The paper proceeds as follows. Firstly, we review the literature on collective forms of leadership that engage with notions of democracy. Secondly, we argue that Rancière's work provides a philosophical foundation for a postheroic and collective turn in leadership studies. Thirdly, we explore Rancière's conception of dissensual democracy in particular by theorising two practices that we hold as vital for dissensual leadership: contingent acts of leadership and the practice of radical contestation. Finally, we discuss how the work of Rancière can help elaborate on the issue of collective forms of democratic leadership.

## Collective forms of democratic leadership

In this section, we review the literature that theorises collective forms of leadership but that also engages with participative theories of democracy. Our test for review was collective leadership literature that ‘promote[s] a clear democratizing agenda’ (Sergi et al., 2017: 40). We therefore distinguish this literature from more general accounts of collective leadership (e.g. Bolden, 2011) because our intention is to explicitly focus on the democratic practices of collective leadership, which suggest a more thoroughly egalitarian approach than more routine accounts of the distribution of leadership roles or forms of collective influencing. We also distinguish democratic accounts of collective leadership from the body of literature that maintains a focus on individual leaders as inhabiting an ethos of democracy (e.g. Levine and Boaks, 2014), as these tend to still privilege the individual leader’s personal qualities over viewing leadership as a practice that is enacted between people.

In sum, we find that the collective and democratic leadership literature offers valuable insight into how participation through dialogue and some experimentation with internal organizational hierarchies can offer fresh directions for leadership practice. Nevertheless, we also note four gaps common to one degree or another across the literature. First, the figure of the leader remains a prominent one, missing an opportunity to move beyond a consideration of leadership outside settled hierarchies. Second, the dialogic process outlined seems bounded by the structures of organization and consideration is not given to more radical incursions from outside, for example by radical protest or pressure groups. Third, the emphasis is almost entirely on language and dialogue – there seems to be little consideration of democratic leadership that may be non-dialogic. Fourth, any in-depth focus on conflict as potentially productive is mostly either missing or downplayed. The strengths and gaps in the literature will now be unpacked in more depth.

Fryer’s (2012) ‘facilitative leadership’ draws on the deliberative democracy theory of Habermas (1985) and leadership here is equated with, as the title suggests, the facilitation of a dialogic process that offers the promise of groups ‘reaching understanding’ (p. 30). Such understanding arrives through communicative participants of equal standing offering and contesting ‘validity claims’ through dialogue and then reaching consensus via interrogating such claims through the lenses of factuality, authority and intentions. When such a process is facilitated well, the hope is that groups may reach a certain ‘truth’ (p. 30), of ‘ideal speech’, based on the most rigorous form of communicative engagement available at the time. It is a process that assumes equality of status and contribution and that has participation at its core. What provides the leadership in Fryer’s model largely, and certainly initially, falls to formal organizational leaders, and their ‘task. . . would be to facilitate the conditions of ideal speech. . . and to ensure their own conduct meets those conditions’ (p. 31). He continues by stating that it is the duty of leaders to remove any ‘barriers’ (p. 31) to achieving ideal speech. From Fryer’s perspective, a leader’s authority and status within an organization can therefore be leveraged and put to the emancipatory work of setting the framework and tone for others to make decisions via dialogue.

There is space in Fryer’s theorising for leaders to be challenged, with their ‘position, along with everything else. . . up for ongoing communicative authorization’ (p. 32) and the leader is not always necessarily the facilitator but can step away when the process is self-organizing. Fryer himself acknowledges some challenges with this perspective – chiefly the difficulty in practice of avoiding a leader’s authority growing beyond the democratic ethos of the intended practice, the time-pressured nature of many organizations making deep dialogic processes challenging in practice and the persisting unwillingness of participants to ‘discard their emotional commitments’ (p. 35) in the pursuit of ideal speech. In many ways, Fryer’s theorising offers a form of leadership that is radically different to the experiences of the majority of people at work, one that places value in the

communicative contributions of all actors, and in this sense would be considered a radical break with the participative norms of most workplaces. Furthermore, the leader-figure presented by Fryer is a less domineering one than more traditional accounts of leadership. Yet the theory ultimately defers to a leader – who can determine when processes have run their course and sets an example (see also Gastil, 1994: 958). Fryer's facilitative leadership is also bound within the confines of an organization – he regularly reiterates the functioning of this form of leadership within organizations – with little consideration given to whether and how leadership may intrude from the outside or through non-dialogic means. Facilitative leadership engages with an outside of organization in the sense of seeking to ameliorate 'external coercion' (p. 31) but also in more procedural terms as holding potential for formalising dialogue with 'external interest groups' (p. 39), a far more bounded and safer leadership than the one we will proceed to outline.

Raelin's leaderful practice and leadership-as-practice theorising (2011, 2012, 2016a, 2016b; see also Woods, 2004, 2016) is closely linked to Fryer's in terms of the primacy it offers dialogue as the driving force of leadership work but proposes a more decentred focus, with 'leadership. . . viewed as a form of intersubjective collaborative agency' (Raelin, 2016a: 133), or 'co-development' in the words of Woods (2016: 78), rather than the act or property of an individual. His work is democratic in the sense that it promotes 'democracy by direct participation by involved parties who, through their own exploratory, creative and communal discourses, contest a range of issues' (Raelin, 2016a: 144) and such an emphasis remains true to 'the norms of the democratic tradition' (Raelin, 2011: 196). Dialogue is the most prominent aspect of Raelin's work, dialogue that takes the form of 'critical' and 'reflective' but 'non-judgmental inquiry' (p. 137). This dialogue is intense, requiring participants to be 'willing to face their own vulnerability' but also to act in 'suspense', 'a temporary state of ignorance' (Raelin, 2016a: 145) in order to be fully open to the deliberations of others.

The ambitions of the work are high – 'that emancipatory dialogue of this nature can potentially transform human consciousness from conditions of alienation and oppression in the direction of freedom' (p. 145). Hence why Raelin holds onto the possibility that his approach to dialogue and deliberation may 'either reproduce or transform' (2016a: 138) structures. Such transformation does also include conflict: Raelin acknowledges, for example, the role of leadership in 'nurtur[ing] relations or confrontation to bring out disagreements' (2016a: 141) and argues that he is 'not interested in eliminating adversarial expression' because 'once a dialogue begins, any assumptions underlying even taken-for-granted constructions become "fair game"' (Raelin, 2012: 14). Developing his approach within the leadership-as-practice framework, Raelin (2016b: 38) positions his form of leaderful leadership-as-practice as 'rich in power dynamics', one that 'resists closure'. There is an ambivalence to this acknowledgement of relational power, however, and in addition to providing more scope for 'resist[ing] oppression' can also 'cause suppression of voices and self-muting amongst those disenfranchised from the dominant discourse, thus thwarting critical review' (2016b: 40). Raelin's conclusion is that his account of leadership-as-practice 'may, in the end, be more critical than critical leadership studies' (Raelin, 2016b: 41), as it offers a performative means through which leadership equated with hierarchy and disempowerment within organizations can be undone. Yet he does not go a step further in providing a vocabulary and theoretical orientation for how conflict may drive democratic and collective forms of leadership and the performative emphasis is therefore blunted. The focus in Raelin is on a discursive community of equals (2012: 10) and yet this also implies that what occurs outside, and what may destabilise the community from outside, remains outside the scope of what can be regarded as leadership, at least as far as the theory has developed to date. In line with the work of Fryer, the theories of leadership-as-practice and leaderful practice also play out within the confines (and possibilities) of dialogue and

deliberation and consideration is not given to the potential of non-dialogic contributions, such as direct action or the withdrawal of labour.

Similarly to Raelin, Tourish's (2014) account of leadership, which engages in some depth with Habermasian ideas, also decentres leadership as a communicative process. Tourish holds that any form of healthy communicative leadership is a process where 'meaning is constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed between those in leadership positions and those that they lead' (p. 84). For meaning to be deconstructed in leadership practice, 'follower dissent' needs to be 'institutionalised' (p. 80). Tourish's perspective is somewhat more lukewarm in relation to the potential of dialogue, however, warning that injunctions to communicate up through organizational hierarchies can become an 'imposition' (p. 92) and that people often stay silent for pragmatic reasons of organizational, and therefore also material, survival. Despite a more judicious stance towards communicative forms of leadership, however, the emphasis in Tourish's study remains dialogical, as well as bounded by organizational hierarchy and 'upward communication' (p. 92). Little space is left for considering leadership in moments that may destabilise and redraw structure and hierarchy – within or external to communication.

Grint's (2005, 2010) 'wicked' approach to leadership does foreground challenge to formal leaders as central to properly functioning collective forms of leadership, as such a practice can help draw out the complexity of problems. Grint demonstrates how, in relation to major collective disasters, such as the second Iraq war, failures to challenge leaders' framing of problems in overly simplistic and binary ways can perpetuate an environment where democratic challenge is subdued. Connecting notions of democracy with leadership, we see how the very system of representative democracy can work against the effective functioning of democratic leadership, as leaders who articulate issues as complex, 'collaborative leadership processes with no easy solutions' (2005: 1478), may be unlikely to cut through into the time-bound and transitory public consciousness. Although effective in demonstrating the shortcomings of status quo leadership, Grint stops short of theorising how moments of dissensus in and of themselves may present as forms of leadership and so we are left with the impression that such conflictual 'wicked' work assumes a leader in charge (perhaps one more adept at handling critical feedback), that such work occurs within the boundaries of existing organizational forms and that the process is largely dialogical (asking pertinent questions of authority): these are assumptions we will challenge through our theorising of dissensual leadership.

Sutherland et al.'s (2014) account of 'anti-leaders(hip)' sets itself the goal of seeking to better understand leadership as a practice within social movement organizations. Here, in a similar manner as the work of Raelin, Fryer and Tourish, the democratic is equated with innovative forms of participation and communication, '*the* key principles underpinning these organizations' (p. 769; emphasis in original). The authors go a step further in proposing institutionalised practices to prevent anyone permanently adopting formal leader roles, such as 'rotating formal roles' (p. 771) and challenging individuals when they become too prominent, and in this sense the study can be seen as a step away from assuming that democratic forms of collective leadership take place only through dialogue and within the confines of more traditional and bounded organizations.

Smolović Jones et al.'s (2016) postfoundational and agonistic theorising presents a more contested account of democratic leadership. They mainstream conflict, identifying dissent as crucial in finding the symbolic limits of people's identifications and therefore providing more scope for movement and development in democratic forms of leadership. The role of leaders is acknowledged in the study, albeit as discursively articulated symbols, whose status is worked out and contested through everyday practice, dialogue and debate – a process they refer to as 'democratizing leaders' (p. 430). Most importantly for the purposes of our study, however, is the authors' emphasis on what they refer to as 'eruptions of the Real', or 'incursions from a radical outside' (p.

436) of a group and its symbolic boundaries. Such incursions are acts or events outside an organization or an organization's control that disrupt because no ready script or lexicon is available to answer them. Within such moments, 'language falls short' (p. 436) and groups must reorient themselves and search for a new direction. For the authors this is a crucial aspect of collective forms of democratic leadership because remaining faithful to an external unknown and its potential to destabilise is also what can hold groups accountable to external actors and prevent injustices being overlooked. Smolović Jones et al.'s focus (2016) on the implications of this insight is primarily on how relatively bounded groups can reflexively learn, adapt and develop rather than viewing such radical incursions as themselves distinctive forms of democratic leadership – which may derail and destruct, as well as construct.

To conclude, the literature on collective and democratic forms of leadership is valuable in the sense of decentring leadership away from the figure of the leader and onto practices of leadership. In particular, it foregrounds the importance of participative dialogue that in itself can be thought of as leadership. Yet there remains great scope for expanding the possibilities of what can be thought of as democratic forms of collective leadership. In particular, we can expand the work of Smolović Jones et al. (2016) to further enrich understanding of how dissensus and radical incursions into the status quo of organizations can act as powerful forms of democratic leadership and it is with these tasks in mind that we now turn to the work of Rancière. We will first focus on his allegory of the shepherd and his critique of the myth of the ontological foundation of leadership, as these provide us with a foundational way of both critiquing current studies of collective democratic leadership but also for providing the groundwork for offering a radical and alternative conceptualisation of democratic leadership.

## Dissensual leadership

Rancière is an influential contemporary philosopher who has been working in the French academy since the 1960s. He has developed a significant reflection on democracy (Huault et al., 2014; Kalonaityte, 2018) within a postfoundationalist perspective (Marchart, 2007). Postfoundationalism is understood as the idea that it is impossible to ground social and political truth through a form of absolute reasoning (Marchart, 2007). This would be disconnected from sceptical relativism as '[postfoundationalism] refers to a theoretical position which denies the existence of an ultimate foundation of the social without, and this makes it post- rather than anti-foundational, disputing the necessity of contingent groundings' (Marchart, 2011: 131). Accordingly: 'for Rancière, social or political order cannot be instituted on a firm, quasi-natural ground, yet no nihilistic consequences follow from this, as the absence of ground is what makes politics possible in the first place' (Marchart, 2011: 131). It is this absence of ground which helps us to reactivate the radical persistence of disagreement at the heart of democracy and democratic leadership.

From this postfoundational basis we theorise dissensual leadership as a form of democratic leadership that goes beyond forms of leadership bound by the structures and hierarchies of organization to consider radically disruptive, non-hierarchical and pre-dialogic modes of action that may destruct as well as construct. Our focus is on three concepts from Rancière's work and we engage with each in relation to the body of work on collective forms of democratic leadership and by drawing out some implications and principles for an alternative and more dissensual form of democratic leadership. We conclude this section by theorising two practices of dissensual leadership: contingent leadership and the leadership of radical contestation.

### *The myth of the ontological foundation of leadership*

In our appropriation of democracy, we need to set aside what has been commonly (mis)understood about it: 'democracy is neither a form of government nor a form of social life. Democracy is the



institution of politics as such, of politics as a paradox' (Rancière, 2010: 50). Why a paradox? Because it has to do with the moment in which we seek a base where we can ground the legitimacy of power in a community or, by extension, in an organization. From this paradox of the grounding of democracy we can therefore infer that leadership always rests on a principle that confers a sort of legitimised right to be obeyed or a right to be followed. Such a reasoning could be applied to practices of deliberative democratic leadership or the democratically mandated position of a leader.

Both leadership and democracy offer a kind of legitimacy for a community or organization and are both therefore bound to the 'myth' of ontological foundation. Leadership as such always rests on a principle that confers a sort of right to be obeyed or a right to be followed. Such a 'right' can be a right grounded in a form of sovereign or 'exceptional' power (Agamben, 1998), of democratic institution – or a blend of the two, with the former offering an initial founding but leading to a formalised democratic basis of governance (Honig, 2009). While the sovereign solution is relatively straightforward – follow the leader – the democratic form of legitimation is one that is profoundly disruptive and provocative as 'the very ground for the power of ruling is that there is no ground at all' (Rancière, 2010: 50). By an absence of ground Rancière means that democracy itself reveals the contingency of politics – and of organization rooted in a democratic form of legitimacy. What both Plato and Aristotle hated of democracy is the scandal that taints its very foundation: the ultimate impossibility of founding an order based on a leader's natural virtues or characteristics. This hatred of democracy persists for Rancière (2006) in the fact that the threat of a reversion to the 'exceptional' mode of authoritarian leadership can persist (see Smolović Jones et al., 2019).

In Plato, this hatred takes the form of a nostalgic lost age where it was indeed possible to found leadership in nature. In the *Statesman*, the reference is to the golden age of Cronus: 'In those days God himself was their shepherd, and ruled over them, just as man [sic], over them, who is by comparison a divine being, still rules over the lower animals' (Plato, 2018). What makes this divine shepherd a legitimate ruler is a natural superiority over human beings. This mirrors the natural superiority that Plato attributes to humans over animals. Only this inequality in nature can confer to leadership not only legitimacy but also the guarantee of a just and successful power. The necessity of some form of unequal distribution in nature to ground power persists in Plato even after the end of the age of Cronus. His republic cannot appeal to that lost age whose memory is relegated to the fables of the ancestors. But, at the same time, he cannot do without a principle that can hold the community together under the rule of somebody who still somehow embodies that divine shepherd. This is the way in which Rancière reads Plato's renowned, 'beautiful lie':

Plato [. . .] relegate[s] the reign of Cronus and the divine shepherd to the era of fables [. . .] at the cost of compensating for the absence of this fable by means of another fable, that of a 'republic' founded on the 'beautiful lie' according to which God, in order to assure a good order in the community, had put gold in the soul of the governors, silver in those of the warriors, and iron in those of the artisans (Rancière, 2006: 34).

From the divine shepherd to the governors with gold in their souls, there is the passage from a lost era to a community that seeks to ground its hierarchical organization. The necessity of a lie displays the fragility of this hierarchy and of its foundation, hence the founding of sovereign power remains fragile and contested (Laclau, 2005). Plato therefore has to fabricate this divine intervention that distributes metals unequally into the soul of the members of the community. Who is the target of this lie? Definitely not the governors – they do not have to believe in the legitimacy of their own power as their rule is already a fact. The artisan and the warrior instead are faced by the reality of their subordination. They have to believe that they are endowed with lesser metals. They are the ultimate targets of this lie. What Plato is implicitly suggesting here is that the artisan and the warrior would have never accepted being governed unless they felt that the governors were

entitled to govern. The lie of the unequal distribution of metals provides the governors with this title to govern, a title that otherwise would not exist.

But this precisely reveals the scandalous nature of politics, which is proper to democracy: the title to govern does not exist. There is no natural order that can be mirrored in a political community, no inequality in nature that can provide the foundation for political inequality and domination. According to Rancière (2006: 38), this passage marks the beginning of politics. It is the moment in which the divine shepherd is once and for all relegated to an irrecoverable pre-political time. When titles to govern need to be invented through an improbable lie, their actual ontological absence appears as the ultimate ground for any political order. The acknowledgement of this absence marks the ultimate ‘murder of the shepherd’ (Rancière, 2006: 33). The shepherd is dead and any shepherd to come will be nothing but the nagging reminder of an already accomplished murder.

The problematisation of the good order within a community strongly resembles the problem of the leader in an organization. The fundamental problem of leadership is not so much how to lead, but how to lead in order to be followed (Grint, 2005). Hence traces of the ‘lie’ of the shepherd persist even in some studies of democratic forms of collective leadership. Grint (2005) and Tourish (2014), despite their emphasis on criticality and contest, persist with a notion of leadership as involving a form of critical upward communication; Fryer (2012) relies on a leader figure who will facilitate and open space and time for deliberation; and Sutherland et al. (2014) suggest a form of rotating leaders, albeit with a highly sceptical tone concerning any drift towards formal leaders. While none of these studies defer to a more traditional and authoritarian form of leader – indeed they largely seem to pragmatically and reluctantly accept the cultural potency of leaders and seek ways of softening or undermining this potency – the presence of a leader-figure, or several leader-figures, is inescapable. Raelin (2011, 2012, 2016a, 2016b) and Smolović Jones et al. (2016) perhaps go the furthest in moving beyond the lie of the shepherd in reconceptualising leadership as a practice not possessed by any individuals and thus assume an absence of ontological grounding, with leadership being a practice constituted through articulating subjects. This emphasis on practice corresponds to what Śliwa et al. (2013: 867) describe as a ‘demystification’ which ‘annihilates the mystery [of leadership] by rationalizing it’.

### *The presupposition of equality*

According to Rancière (2006), any inequality cannot do without the fundamental presupposition of equality of all: that of the equality of anyone at all with anyone else, which is immediately the sheer contingency of any social hierarchy and the impossibility of a universal natural order. This equality of all speaking beings is revealed from the commonality of an ‘initial logos that orders and bestows the right to order’ (Rancière, 1999: 16). This equality is postulated not on logos *tout court*, but merely on the capacity, inherent to this initial logos, which allows someone to understand the order and understand that he/she must obey it:

in order to obey an order at least two things are required: you must understand the order and you must understand that you must obey it. And to do that, you must already be the equal of the person who is ordering you (Rancière, 1999: 16).

The equality of all speaking beings may be totally foreign to the mechanisms that establish a hierarchical order and its relative inequality. Yet, without this equality, ‘none of [these mechanisms] could ultimately function’ (Rancière, 1999: 17). Inequality occurs *despite* the equality of all speaking beings, and *in virtue* of this same equality.



As much as equality functions as a form of legitimation for political power, it can also function against it by delegitimising power. The appeal to the anarchic principle that must be presupposed for establishing hierarchy precludes at the same time the possibility of fixing permanently that specific hierarchy and it is this logic that is properly democratic. The role of the democratic logic is to ‘re-stage the anarchic foundation of the political. [. . .] [B]ecause the foundation is riven, democracy implies a practice of dissensus, one that it keeps re-opening and that the practice of ruling relentlessly plugs’ (Rancière, 2010: 54).

From this basis, we can read hierarchy and upward communication within leadership, as seen in Grint (2005) and Tourish (2014), as largely irrelevant to the practice of *dissensual* forms of democratic leadership, as it concerns less keeping a senior leader in check than it does asserting a more fundamental equality: no one individual, no matter whether they are adopting a temporary, rotating (Sutherland et al., 2014) or facilitative leader identity (Fryer, 2012) would have a privileged position over others. Rather, acts of leadership could emerge from any location or from any pre-conferred status. In this sense the logic is closer to Raelin’s (2016a) leaderful focus, where leadership is instituted through non-hierarchical practice and can emerge from anywhere, albeit our dissensual and postfoundational perspective is less bound to the confines of organization, which already implies an intra-ordering and taming antithetical to the possibility for radical dissensus. Asserting equality through acts of dissensual leadership could therefore also mean (re)claiming equality through acts that destabilise intra-organizational practice or even seek to shatter hierarchy.

### *The logic of police versus the logic of politics*

Rancière’s concept of the political is developed around the conflict between two opposite logics that he respectively labels police and politics. He calls them two ‘modes of human being-together’ (Rancière, 1999: 28). These two logics are conceived as antagonistic to one another and their interaction determines the organization of a community. In particular, the police determines a system of allocation that politics interrupts and contests:

[The police is] the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution. [. . .] The police is thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying (Rancière, 1999: 28).

By contrast, politics is defined as:

an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing: whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined by a presupposition that, by definition, has no place in that configuration – that of the part of those who have no part (Rancière, 1999: 30).

The logic of police prescribes the hierarchical organization of a given community. This defines a certain order of domination. Such an order is nevertheless doomed to be constitutively illegitimate because of the impossibility of a universal natural order. The equality of all speaking beings, ‘the equality of anyone at all with anyone else’ (Rancière, 1999: 15) is enacted by the logic of politics directly in opposition to the existing police order. In particular, the staging of equality aims to disrupt and revoke ‘the purported naturalness of the existing order of domination’ (Bosteels, 2010: 80). This is the disruptive logic of politics that interrupts the order of domination and puts forth an alternative order that includes, counts and accounts for those who have no part in the current order. The encounter of these two logics determines a moment of struggle that does not result in a

dialectical synthesis (Deranty, 2003), but in the constitution of a new order with a new system of distribution of the sensible that is ultimately a new system of domination. If the logic of police enacts an existing and functioning order, the disruption of this order cannot stem from the same logic (Rancière, 1999). It is politics that forces the order of domination to arrest its ordinary circulation. The antagonistic encounter of the two logics occurs exclusively through the interruption that politics brings about through its enactment. The effect of this interruption is the transformation of the present police order into a new one.

From this basis we can better understand dissensual leadership as that which undermines and disrupts sedimented norms and structures of leadership, whether or not they are enacted through seemingly egalitarian dialogic practices (Fryer, 2012; Raelin, 2016b), for as Ford (2016) reminds us, the language of leadership practices can disguise and normalise problematic practice in ‘neutral’ language: even facilitative, leaderful and democratic leadership-as-practice models institute a form of police order that cannot be left to its own devices if equality is a central aim of leadership. The purpose of dissensual leadership is therefore not to improve the existing (non)hierarchy or systems of communication, no matter how dialogic these already are (Grint, 2005; Tourish, 2014), but to assert a logic of politics upon one of police. Such assertions may occur through or outside dialogue, but as Rancière’s emphasis in his conception of politics (1999: 30) is upon the excluded, we might imagine that the politics of dissensual leadership is reserved for matters outside dialogue, where those enacting leadership are the ignored and marginalised, unrecognised by the police of the status quo as legitimate organizational equals. These actors could include precarious employees disregarded and discarded by an organization, such as temporary agency workers, people subjected to dangerous working conditions further down a supply chain who are ‘invisible’ to executives and consumers, people segregated in expensive and unhealthy rented housing or people routinely marginalised through gendered or racialised working norms.

## **Towards dissensual democratic leadership practices**

Having outlined the main concepts from Rancière to outline some key principles of dissensual democratic leadership, we now draw on these to propose two practices we posit as potentially constitutive of this form of leadership.

### *Contingent leadership practice*

Contingent acts of leadership consist of those disruptive acts of leadership that cannot be controlled and predicted by organizations (and are not to be confused with the leader-centric and functionalist mode of contingency leadership theory, which claims that effective leadership means matching leader style to contextual challenge (Fiedler, 1967)). Our focus on the radically contingent means that however organizations try – it is almost impossible to anticipate in advance what adapting to contingent acts could mean. However, any contingent event is not the same as an act of contingent leadership. Contingent acts of leadership in this context would be a collective leadership practice disconnected from organizational hierarchies and exclusively based on the ‘presupposition of equality’ (Rancière, 1999, 2006). Democracy is based on the fact that leadership is deployed on a strictly egalitarian mode without distinction between leaders and followers. Furthermore, these contingent acts can emerge at any time and in any space, in particular outside the regulated spaces and forms in which leadership scholars have argued democratic leadership is deployed – either through dialogue (Raelin, 2011, 2012, 2016a, 2016b) or by institutionalising certain practices and structures, such as the democratic ‘rotating [of] formal roles’ (Sutherland et al., 2014: 771).

Contingent acts of leadership can appear inside organizations, as previously marginalised, dispossessed or precarious workers assert through acts of politics their right to be considered as equals. Leadership actors respond spontaneously and in unpredictable ways, destabilising the status quo and its assumptions of hierarchy and privilege. Such acts reject an order of police within an organization through radical forms of challenge but also through enacting within the boundaries of the group a prefiguration of equality (Rancière, 1999, 2006). For example, this was the case with the staff of Wayfair, the home goods company, and the staff protest movement that arose in opposition to management's decision to sell pieces of furniture to detention camps for migrant children who had been separated from their parents by force as a result of a policy from the Trump administration (BBC, 2019). The mobilisation deployed a threefold repertoire. First, a letter was sent to management and signed by 500 members of staff stating that:

At Wayfair, we believe that 'everyone should live in a home that they love'. Let's stay true to that message by taking a stand against the reprehensible practice of separating families, which denies them any home at all (BBC, 2019).

Second, a protest was organized in front of the Wayfair headquarters in Boston. Finally, there was an aggressive social media campaign, in particular on Twitter. Strikingly, this leadership was egalitarian and not controlled by an individual leader. Any member of staff could participate in it irrespective of their position in the organizational hierarchy. It was clearly collective as anyone could sign the letter, protest in front of the headquarters or tweet about it. Importantly, it was also contingent in that it could not have been predicted by Wayfair management as it was spontaneous and had not been a traditional demand of trade unions – such as increasing remuneration or the improvement of well-being. Similarly, those employees who started the movement could not have predicted its significant dynamic. Last but not least, this contingent act of leadership entailed a significant disruption of Wayfair's management in that it impacted negatively its reputation and caused a drop of its share value of more than 5% (BBC, 2019). Another striking point is that this disruption caused by a democratic leadership practice was deployed by organizational members on their organization but outside its structures, in that staff members did not remain within the framework of internal communication.

Contingent acts of dissensual leadership can also emerge outside the organization that is disrupted: dissensual democratic leadership creates an unpredictable disruption from the exterior of the organization. This can be the case for those social movements that are contingent and whose actions it is not possible to anticipate. Such interventions operate at a different ontological register to the police of an organization. Contingency operates on at least two levels here. From the perspective of organizations, it is impossible to predict such acts as they could happen in any place at any time. From the perspective of activists it is a live interaction that cannot be entirely controlled, as a number of variables are unknown, including: the reaction of the organization's employees; the time the police will take to arrive if they are called; the reaction of the police; and the spatial configuration of the organization, in the sense of the possibilities allowed for assembly and disruption by the built geography of an organization's premises.

Contingent acts of dissensual leadership can be operated through artistic performances. For example, the chair snatchers ('faucheurs de chaises') social movement in France organized artistic performances in order to disrupt banks in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis (Astier, 2015). Essentially, a group of activists would go to a particular bank branch and they would steal chairs, thereby creating an artistic event conveying the idea that banks should be claimed back by the people – just like the chairs. In Rancière these interjections are always affirmations of equality and obtain an aesthetic quality through their embodied and sensory re-ordering of what organizations

and societies deem to be ‘sensible’ (Rancière, 2004). Artistic performance as dissensus may be seen as holding a privileged position in Rancière’s system, therefore, as he does view the aesthetic form as particularly containing dissensual potential, although dissensus is by no means restricted to the artistic. Rather, it is a matter of the political relationship of dissociative organizational and sensory logics clashing that is performed through the somatic and sensory. One such example of an external contingent act of leadership was provided by a social movement action against Amazon. A group of activists, including yellow vests and environmental activists protesting about the poor environmental and social performance of Amazon, were able to organize a surprise sit-in at Amazon’s France headquarters in Clichy (Massemin, 2019). The activists arrived at the premises on 2 July 2019 at 8:02 am and deployed an embodied and sensory reordering by occupying space – blocking the entrance of the building by a sit-in – chanting ‘New warehouses are a danger for climate’, and painting slogans on the ground such as ‘Amazon stop’ and ‘No to social and climatic impunity’ (Massemin, 2019). This produced a sizeable disruption, as management asked Amazon’s employees to leave the building at 9:45 am (Massemin, 2019). Those contingent acts of leadership involved equality in that all activists participated in them and the yellow vests movement refuses individual leadership and hierarchies. Additionally, the way the interaction unfolded could neither have been anticipated by Amazon’s management nor by the activists. It also displayed a clear aesthetic dimension through an embodied reordering of the sensible – of space and the configuration of bodies within it.

### *The leadership practice of radical contestation*

The second leadership practice constitutive of dissensual leadership that we posit is radical contestation. Radical contestation is different from sheer contestation of the power of corporations or of a particular leadership practice in that it also involves democratic moments, events and ruptures. Grint’s approach to leadership as connected with ‘wicked problems’ points to the articulation of leadership as conflictual in that it is an ‘inherently contested arena’ (2010: 170). But he does not address forms of conflict that may overturn organizational hierarchies. Maintaining an effective and robust hierarchy of communication is extraneous to our democratic perspective where radical contestation involves applying ‘the presupposition of the equality of anyone and everyone’ (Rancière, 1999: 17) to leadership.

The leadership practice of radical contestation we propose is subtly different from agonism – a form of politics which has been both associated with democracy and contestation through conflict. Mouffe (2009), one of the leading theorists of agonism, argues that democracy involves non-violent, regulated conflict between citizens, as opposed to the reaching of a hypothetical general interest through consensus. Agonism has been applied to the field of organization studies, in which it corresponds to those forms of organizational contestation that involve conflict between adversaries who adhere to the loose norms of liberal democracy (see Parker and Parker, 2017; Smolović Jones et al., 2016). Radical contestation refuses the institutionalisation of organizational conflict, however, and thereby challenges organizational structures through democratic processes. Only those radical contesting practices that are connected with a collective and egalitarian process can be characterised as dissensual *and* democratic.

The leadership practice of radical contestation can happen inside organizations. An example of this antagonistic logic in an organizational context is the worker-recuperated companies in early 2000s Argentina. A number of organizations went bankrupt because of the 2001 Argentinian crisis (Atzeni and Ghigliani, 2007; Palomino et al., 2010). They had been managed according to traditional organizational principles with individual leaders and hierarchies. However, workers were able to recuperate the businesses and operate self-management in a variety of industries, which

involved an egalitarian and democratic logic. Workers did not try to negotiate with either management or the government through a process of dialogic communication – something which the literature on democratic collective leadership emphasises (see Fryer, 2012; Raelin, 2011, 2012, 2016a, 2016b) – or engage in an agonistic practice of leadership (Smolović Jones et al., 2016). A collective leadership process of democratic communication was not possible because neither management nor the workers accepted that they belonged to the same collective and because no one agreed that this was a regulated interaction with rules of the game on which everyone agreed.

In particular, from the beginning the workers refused to find a solution that would guarantee ownership of the factory by its private owners or the preservation of the existing management team. By contrast, they operated a radical contestation of the existing police (Rancière, 1999) and organizational structures through occupying the factory. In other words, democratic action involving dissensual bodily presence replaced dialogic communication. Strikingly, this leadership practice entirely transformed organizational structures. In Rancièrian terms the oligarchy of the former hierarchy of leaders was replaced by a democracy of equal workers, who were able to institute new hierarchies and ways to organize work. It can be noted that softer forms of contestation internal to organizations could potentially bring about more radical forms of conflict at a later stage and so radical and milder forms of contestation need not be interpreted as strictly opposing logics but as a continuum of available approaches. For example, Huault et al. (2014: 38) argue that employees can collectively enact contestation of organizational structures ‘through asserting their preferred understandings of their own working [. . .] [and using] identities, humour, irony and cynicism’. In that case, humour, irony and cynicism would be a first level of contestation which might be followed by radical contestation. Similarly, Beyes and Volkmann (2010) explain how staff contested in subtle ways the new and Western organizational culture which the Berlin State Library wanted to impose in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall and thereby were able to derail the former.

There are also activist organizational processes external to the boundaries of more traditional organizations that correspond to the leadership practice of radical contestation. Those social movement organizations that deploy a leadership practice of radical contestation in the context of anti-corporate activism (see Munro, 2014) provide an illustration of this. In particular, these democratic leadership practices disrupt the police order (Rancière, 1999) of specific organizations. For example, the Occupy movement, through its camps and demonstrations in central locations such as Zuccotti Park in New York for Occupy Wall Street, or in front of the Bank of England for Occupy the City, was able to disrupt the police logic of financial businesses (Barthold et al., 2018). Demonstrators employed democratic practices characterised by a refusal of leadership, for instance through the functioning of the General Assembly, which neither accepted spokespersons nor elected individual leaders (p. 9). The radical contestation of financial business operated through a ‘delegitimation. . .[producing a] misalignment between organizational characteristics, structures and actions and the expectations of the stakeholders’ (Shrivastava and Ivanova, 2015: 1213). Another site of such democratic leadership is environmental activism. For example, Extinction Rebellion is a social movement that radically contests those organizational practices that contribute to climate change and the degradation of the environment (Extinction Rebellion, 2019). It is also characterised by democratic leadership and a refusal of hierarchies (Extinction Rebellion, 2019), and by non-verbal action involving bodily presence, such as sit-ins. Leadership practices of radical contestation can also be implemented to resist a particular corporate degradation of the environment, for instance, an oil fracking project (Kalonaityte, 2018) or the construction of an airport. It can be noted that the Occupy movement and Extinction Rebellion are characterised by modes of organizing that are close to the anti-leadership described by Sutherland and colleagues in their democratic modes of organizing (2014). However, as Sutherland et al. note, as do some accounts of Occupy and other social movements (e.g. Smucker, 2017), social movements can develop



characteristics of more traditional organizational forms, for better or ill, either unintentionally or pragmatically. Suppressing the hierarchical associations and practices of leadership therefore becomes a conscious task of these groups, the challenge of accomplishing which is evident in the emergence of shadow, informal or unacknowledged leadership relations and structures. Nevertheless, we need to differentiate between dissensual acts of leadership that disrupt an order of the sensible and the internal ordering of the organization of dissenters. Contradictions in the prefigurative practices of the latter may undermine the longer-term integrity and capacity for disruption of the dissenting organization, suggesting that an important aspect of dissensual leadership may be the cultivation and modelling of dissensual practices amongst resisters, as well as in relation to antagonists.

## Discussion

The collective and democratic leadership literature offers valuable insight into how participation through dialogue can bring about democratic leadership practices (Fryer, 2012; Tourish, 2014; Raelin, 2011, 2012, 2016a, 2016b). This literature has recognised in different ways the role of conflict for democratic leadership practice (Grint, 2005; Smolović Jones et al., 2016). However, Rancière's postfoundational theory of democracy, through emphasising contingency and radical contestation, can bring about new ways to conceptualise democratic leadership practice.

Our first contribution to democratic leadership is linked to contingency. Democratic leadership practice can be linked to those contingent acts which can neither be predicted nor delimited in terms of time and space and that escape the *structures* of organizations. This is novel in that the extant literature on democratic leadership does not emphasise the potential of leadership to radically challenge organizational structures in the context of a business organization (Fryer, 2012; Tourish, 2014; Raelin, 2011, 2012, 2016a, 2016b), a social movement (Sutherland et al., 2014) or a non-for-profit leadership collective (Smolović Jones et al., 2016). In line with postfoundationalist theories of language, Smolović Jones and colleagues recognise that contingency is linked to democracy, as “‘democracy’ can signify both meaningful struggle for hegemony and the ultimate impossibility of final closure. . . the struggle always continues’ (p. 425). Accordingly, contingent acts of leadership, as long as they unfold a disruptive and egalitarian logic contesting an existing order, cannot be separated from democracy or a democratic logic in an organizational context. However, drawing on Rancière we establish that democratic leadership can be constituted by contingency in a deeper and more radical way, hence we emphasised that contingent practices can be deployed internally or externally to organizations, and not only in the context of a more bounded organization, in ways that hold the potential to destruct as well as construct.

Our second contribution to democratic leadership resides in emphasising radical contestation. There is only limited engagement with the role of conflict and contestation in democratic leadership. Sutherland et al. (2014) and Grint (2005) see contestation as a particular way to check and prevent excesses from leaders, but they do not consider it as constitutive of democratic leadership in the sense of identifying its potential for redrawing organizational boundaries – as we argued, for example, with the case of workers recuperating their companies (Atzeni and Ghigliani, 2007; Palomino et al., 2010). In other words, for the existing literature (Grint, 2005; Sutherland et al., 2014) contestation is supposed to solidify democratic leadership as a balancing force, whereas radical contestation disrupts organizations. Notably, Smolović Jones et al. (2016) go a step further through associating more clearly contestation and democratic leadership. Accordingly, they argue that agonistic practice – drawing on the work of Mouffe (2009) – brings about ‘constructive disruption at appropriate points’, so particular collectives can be more reflexive and innovative as a result (Smolović Jones et al., 2016: 432). However, the leadership practice of radical contestation inside



or outside organizations moves beyond agonism through instigating action that is not bound by any adherence to organizational structures or even the continued existence of an organization. Its logic can be as much one of undoing as strengthening or improving.

Both of these contributions have implications for leadership studies. Firstly, dissensual leadership opens up a pathway and vocabulary for considering how and why purposive acts that seek out confrontation over dialogue can provoke a reordering and reconsidering of a political order, elevating such acts to the status of leadership rather than boxing them as discrete acts of rebellion. Such a positioning need not mean privileging dissensus over dialogue but considering the potential of dissensus to *lead* to more sustained, structural and radical forms of change – through dialogue or otherwise. In this sense, we view dissensual leadership as contributing a more rounded, grounded and faithful reading of the connection between leadership and change, where it is undoubtedly the case that acts of dissensus can yield results where dialogue has failed, or can provoke dialogue that would have been impossible prior to moments of dissensus.

Second, dissensual leadership enables us to deal with the danger of leadership romanticism pointed out by the critical leadership studies literature (see Collinson et al., 2018). Leadership romanticism sets leaders in a ‘position (of purity) beyond critique’ (p. 1632). Essentially, leadership through a romanticised logic would correspond to ‘possessing the imaginative and heroic capabilities to access transcendent natural truths’ (p. 1626). This is connected to an ‘enduring and naturalistic tradition of romantic thought that has survived and evolved since the mid-18th century’ (p. 1625), which has shaped leadership theory until now with heroic and transformational theories. In fact, such a romanticised framing of leadership can also apply to the postheroic and collectives, generating a view of ‘expressive harmonious collectives. . . that. . . neutralize rupturing power in favour of collective work, portrayed as seeking harmonious dialogue and consensus’ (2018: 1634). Our suggestion to reconceptualise democratic leadership as something related to dissensus and conflict and not purely dialogic communication is a way to avoid romanticisation because it does not presuppose a collective which would necessarily be able to enter into dialogue on equal terms. Rancière’s theory of democracy helps us avoid the trap of idealising collective processes and to see that dissensual practice may be not only an effective method, but perhaps also the only way in which certain people and groups are able to exercise agency in the face of a power that does not recognise them as legitimate interlocutors. Therefore, conceptualising democracy in a postfoundational way (Marchart, 2007, 2011), as Rancière does, allows us to denaturalise both leadership and democracy by saying that there is no ultimate foundation for either of them as they are both intimately connected to contingency and conflict.

The third implication of our argument for leadership studies is related to the differentiation between collective leadership and democratic leadership. Democratic leadership is not only about collaboration, communication and dialogue within a particular collective – something that can equally be found within those leadership practices associated with shared leadership (e.g. Serban and Roberts, 2016) or pluralised leadership (e.g. White et al., 2014, 2016). Reflecting on the philosophy of Rancière allowed us to note that a key differentiator of democratic leadership is the presence of contingency and conflict. While the authors we have engaged with on the terrain of collective forms of democratic leadership recognise such contingency and conflict to a degree, they tend not to follow through on the more radical implications of such insights – the possibility for leadership to be conceptualised as dissensual as well as dialogic. We therefore seek to denaturalise collective leadership by providing a framework for questioning whether leadership practices associated with collaboration, communication and dialogue are necessarily democratic *ipso facto*. Our argument allows, therefore, the consideration that collective leadership and organizational democracy can at times be in tension.

Finally and briefly, although this remains outside the direct remit of our study, we can speculate as to the value of dissensual leadership for exploring organizational politics more broadly. We view our study as holding potential for provoking reflection in particular for scholars studying equality and diversity but also wider ranging forms of organizational democratic practice. We hope we have offered a language and perspective that can help demystify both the unnaturalness of organizational inequality and the allure of rationalised and purportedly ‘inclusive’ processes and initiatives, which may or may not deliver on their promises. Further, situating notions of dissensus alongside approaches that account for space and socio-material assemblages (for example, Barthold and Bloom, 2020) in studies of equality and diversity could hold the potential to inject a conflictual emphasis to such work, one that exposes the synthetic nature of unequal spaces and configurations, as well as their capacity for radical reinvention. Subjecting purportedly democratic, prefigurative and horizontal organizations (Graeber, 2002; Reinecke, 2018; Sutherland et al., 2014) to a dissensual reading could assist in further interrogating the consistency and authenticity of practices as they are enacted beyond rhetoric and official policy (King and Land, 2018). Conversely, the possibility of exploring further how contingency and contestation can enrich prefigurative forms of organizational politics, ‘seek[ing] to address inequalities by directly intervening in the ongoing reproduction of institutions at the local level, such as by enacting horizontal decision-making’ (Reinecke, 2018: 1300), remains an area of study rich with insight for how alternative organizational forms generate novel processes and outcomes.

## Conclusion

In naming acts that disrupt, unravel and even destruct as potentially ones of democratic leadership, our hope is that they may be considered alongside and as equal to dialogic forms of democratic leadership. This shift of emphasis in theorising seems particularly pressing in a world where the oppression of people due to race, gender, sexual orientation and class remains rife and where such marginalised people are often either excluded from, or merely humoured through, dialogic processes. We write the conclusion of this paper at a time of mass mobilisation asserting that Black Lives Matter, a movement that has gained energy and traction through dissensual tactics. In Bristol in the UK, try as they might for decades to have a statue of a notorious slaver removed from their city, attempts to secure this outcome through dialogue with power failed repeatedly for decades – and yet within the space of a couple of minutes protestors simply pulled down this symbol of brutality and inequality and dumped it in the river. Meanwhile in Minneapolis, following days of street protests and confrontation following the killing of George Floyd by police officers, the City Council announced that it wanted to replace its police force with an alternative, community-led organization. Again, for decades the city had tried to reform the police through dialogic methods, most notably training, but with little success. More prosaically, many organizations globally – including our own – began conversations about how they could instigate reforms for racial equality. Acts of dissensual leadership have *led* organizations to interrogate their hierarchies, have *led* to difficult conversations and have offered communities leadership through quick, impactful results. For these reasons alone, we need to take seriously the radical dynamics and potential of dissensual leadership.

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### Author biographies

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