

ROUTLEDGE STUDIES IN LEADERSHIP, WORK  
AND ORGANIZATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

# Foucault on Leadership

The Leader as Subject

Nathan W. Harter



# Foucault on Leadership

“Harter has done the heavy lifting for us. He distills the complex work of Michel Foucault on leadership in a way that is both accessible and interesting—and challenging. Foucault—and Harter—urge us to think deeply about our assumptions regarding leadership. This book makes a very valuable contribution to leadership studies, and should be read by all who take the study of leadership seriously.”

—*Michael A. Genovese, Loyola Marymount University, USA*

“Nathan Harter has mined Foucault’s three last lectures to produce a radical rendering of how individuals develop the capacity to lead others with integrity. Accessibly written and illustrated with contemporary examples, this book is essential reading for serious leadership scholars as well as those charged with the ethical development of acting and aspiring leaders.”

—*Donna Ladkin, Plymouth University, UK*

Michel Foucault, one of the most cited scholars in the social sciences, devoted his last three lectures to a study of leader development. Going back to pagan sources, Foucault found a persistent theme in Hellenistic antiquity that, in order to qualify for leadership, a person must undergo processes of subjectivation, which is simply the way that a person becomes a Subject. From this perspective, an aspiring leader first becomes a Subject who happens to lead. These processes depend on a condition of *parresia*, which is truth-telling at great risk that is for the edification of the other person. A leader requires a mentor and advisors in order to lead successfully, while also developing the capacity in one’s own mind to heed the truth. In other words, a leader must learn how to guide oneself.

As a valuable contribution to the field of leadership studies, this book summarizes these last lectures as they pertain to the study and practice of leadership, emphasizing the role of ethics and truth-telling as a check on power. It then presents several other contexts where these same lessons can be seen in practice, including in the life of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, whose career as a writer epitomized speaking truth to power, and somewhat surprisingly in the U.S. military in response to its twenty-first century mission of counterinsurgency.

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# Preface

## A. FIRST, A CONFESSION

For many years, I avoided Foucault's work, in part because his books in particular seemed impenetrable. One expositor admitted that his early works are "not always easy reading. . . ." (Philp, 1985, p. 81) Another alluded to his "tense, impacted prose style. . . ." (C. Geertz, quoted in Macey, 1003, p. 432) In fact, one biographer (whose work was not without some controversy) James Miller used words such as "hermetic [and] bewildering . . . puzzled or confused . . . [and] deeply perplexing." (1993, pp. 124, 210, 293 & 294) Miller wrote, "Like Theseus lost in a maze of forking paths, the reader was often left guessing, uncertain which way to turn . . . baffling." (Miller, 1993, p. 125) Another biographer not only admitted that Foucault's early works were difficult reading but also mentioned their "complexity," "oversubtlety," and "hermetic quality." (Eribon, 1991, p. 122) Foucault even indicated once that for those who expected concrete answers and plain direction on what to do, the confusion in his writings was intentional. (Miller, 1993, p. 235, quoting *Colloqui con Foucault*, 1981; see Macey, 1993, p. 432.)

Making matters worse, Foucault was interested for the longest time in a range of topics that are tangential to leadership at best. Foucault said, "Madness, death, sexuality, crime—these are the subjects that attract most of my attention." (Miller, 1993, p. 158, quoting from an interview published in *L'Express* in 1984) One characterization of Foucault's broader interest had been some kind of disintegration of the self, from without and within. (Miller, 1993, p. 248, quoting Wade, *Foucault in California*) Foucault believed that the idea of an "identity" is either an illusion or simply boring. (Miller, 1993, p. 256, quoting an interview published in *The Advocate* in 1984; see also Miller, 1993, p. 258, quoting an interview published in *Gai Pied* in 1981) And in order to transgress the norms of modern society, he considered it important to experience these disintegrations for himself—activities such as drug use, sadomasochism, and rebellion—which he did with gusto for many years, apparently to escape his "self," or in his words, to desubjectify and affirm a nonidentity. (Miller, 1993, p. 264) All of this language can seem remote from the conventional treatment of leader



development, if not hostile to the very idea, so for the longest time I had little reason to study Foucault.

To top it all off, I am both a Christian and a conservative. Foucault represents so much that I was meant to oppose. Mentors and ideological allies put me on my guard when it came to this French intellectual who is often caricatured as chic, impossibly clever, and dreadfully wrong about a lot of things. Yet here I am writing a book based on his work. Why is that? The answer begins with the fact that in his last years, Michel Foucault delivered a series of lectures explicitly about leadership, which is my chosen field of study. These lectures are more accessible to someone like me than his books ever were. And at this stage in his life, he was bending away perceptibly from some of the implications of his earlier beliefs, just as I too am bending toward a kind of rapprochement.

In short, I had originally found Foucault difficult to understand on topics tangential to the study of leadership. In addition, I had been persuaded for years to regard Foucault as an ideological foe. All of that changed when I began reading his 1982 lectures on Plato's *Alcibiades I*.

Before going much further into the content of those late researches, we should consider what is meant by leader development.

## B. LEADER DEVELOPMENT, *PAIDEIA*, AND *BILDUNG*

Programs of leader development—and especially those in academic settings—aim to help students acquire the knowledge, skills, and ability to understand and participate responsibly in the leadership process. As David Day has put it, leader development focuses on “the development of individuals (leaders) . . . building individual capabilities.” (2011, p. 38) Although formal programs explicitly designed for leader development are relatively recent in academe, the problems these programs were designed to address are very old. In fact, they are perennial. The historical record demonstrates that intentional preparation of young adults for leadership has been undertaken for centuries in just about every culture—in religious communities, for instance, and in the military. This preparation is a ritual process to be undertaken before one is equipped to lead.

Just to pick an example from the remote past, Homer recounted the role of Nestor (*Iliad*) and Mentor (*Odyssey*), elders chosen to develop prospective leaders. (Mentor was even portrayed as a representation of Athena in human form.) We now use Mentor's name to designate this developmental activity. A more complete account of the ancient Greek ideal for education appears in the seminal work by Werner Jaeger titled *Paideia*. (1933/1945)<sup>1</sup> This developmental enterprise has been regarded ever since as a “supremely human task and privilege . . . central to civilization . . .” (Park, 1984, p. 153) The logic is fairly simple. As José Ortega y Gasset once pointed out, “In every society someone governs, whether a group or a class, few people or

many.” (1930/1944, p. 39) He went on to state, “It is of the first importance to these societies [that its leaders] possess the power to make their lives a vital influence. . . .” (1930/1944, p. 40) Leader development is one way to characterize this perennial project of replacing a generation of leaders.

From a broader perspective, leader development is not exclusively about preparing young men and women literally to govern other people and therefore dominate as an elite. Manning Marable once exhorted his African-American readers in 1990 to raise up leaders for an oppressed people *in opposition* to those who govern. He sought creative young people and successful older adults to come together and establish what he called “freedom schools” to supplement the official public school curriculum, i.e. providing internships for African-Americans, mentorships, and specialized training in leadership. (1990/1993, ch. 16) So it is not the case that leader development exists exclusively to identify and set aside an elite, preparing the happy few “to control and exploit others in support of [their] hierarchy [and] enable coercion, force, and exploitation.” (Laudeman, 2012, p. 43) Which is not to say this doesn’t happen, but the aspiration has been to be proactive about bringing adolescents into responsible positions throughout the community, to make active and independent subjects of them. In the absence of which (to paraphrase the historian Leopold von Ranke), every generation is equidistant from barbarism.

The German Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) shared his concern that adequate education was entirely lacking or had become the preserve of a select few. It was his contention that what he called *Bildung* be “powerfully and universally propagated”—not just for the sake of perpetuating civilization as it has been, but of elevating it further. (Lüth, 2000, p. 59) In addition to serving the purposes of civilization, *Bildung* would serve the fulfillment of individual striving as well, inasmuch as these twin purposes are one and the same. What improves the individual, in his opinion, makes possible the improvement of civilization. (Lüth, 1967/2000, p. 67) Leader development as it is presently understood serves both (a) the student as an individual emerging into adulthood and (b) the community he or she comes to serve. What’s good for the goose is good for the gaggle. Whether this belief in a dual or mutual benefit is true or not, it supports the enterprise of leader development.

The actual process of leader development entails something called “liminality” or “the liminal.” Because this concept of liminality will play a part in the argument of my book later, we should consider it briefly here.

### C. THE CONCEPT OF LIMINALITY

The process known as leader development entails bringing someone through stages from adolescence into adulthood. As the anthropologists have taught us, cultures usually sponsor rites and rituals intended to guide young people

along the way, and these episodes are supposed to introduce a discontinuity into his or her life, a shift in one's identity that can seem liberating and terrifying at the same time. This transitional or in-between phase from one state or condition to another has become known in the literature as liminality. (Thomassen, 2014; van Gennep, 2004) One might say it has become the purpose of leader development to induce and then guide the prospective leader through a liminal phase—to the extent this doesn't happen ad hoc to young people anyway in the form of adversity and “crucible” moments. (see Bennis & Thomas, 2002)<sup>2</sup>

For purposes of clarification, it is more than simply saying that liminality is the phase between stages of life, after letting go of the past and before grabbing hold of the future. If anything, it is both/and: i.e. a mingling or blurring of both past and future. More importantly, liminality for leadership is preparation for a lifetime of entering, tolerating, and exploiting the experience of liminality. Leaders must become familiar with liminality. Leaders are the ones who recognize the potential of liminality—its creative or generative function in life—so that they can induce and guide others to consider the world as being otherwise, i.e. better. Leaders gird themselves for the experience of liminality and even seek it out, over and over, for themselves and others, because on the far side of the disorientation and discomfort that comes with liminality can be the realization of a vision and the fulfillment of a dream.

One sees already in the literature that prospective leaders are being prepared for a reality that plainly conduces to liminality. Writing in 2002, for example, Judith Stiehm explained the U.S. military's interest in preparing future commanders for conditions labeled as VUCA, which is an acronym that stands for Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous. It is hard to imagine a more succinct description of liminality. If in fact leader development expects to prepare prospective leaders for the reality within which they will be expected to function, then much depends on the characterization of reality they take with them. VUCA describes episodes where leadership is most acutely desired.

In the spirit of Peter Vaill (1989), perhaps we should consider the possibility that all of reality is VUCA. Perhaps stability, certainty, simplicity, and disambiguation are illusions. (Harter, 2006, p. 92) Our existence often seems inherently tensional, betwixt and between, a space in which we orient ourselves by the cardinal directions for our convenience and not because there is in actual fact an East or West. We operate according to boundaries that aren't as strict as we might suppose (see e.g. Bauman, 2007; Bergson, 1946/2007; Kosko, 1993; Tillich, 1966; Wilber, 2001), which is precisely what the etymology of the term “liminal” implies: namely, that threshold, gateway, or point of breach in what had been perceived as a solid border. Liminality comes with passages, between ports on the open sea, crossing over, penetrating barriers. And if paramount reality is not so neatly differentiated as our minds apparently need it to be, then perhaps every moment is liminal. Life itself is liminal.

In a manner of speaking, at some level, leaders perceive this creative possibility; nevertheless, they must also communicate with followers, in the language of Kurt Lewin (1951), that we transit from one state or condition of relative stability to another. That is to say, in a world of liminality, leaders induce passage from point A to point B, even though in actuality there is no end to the process. Humans move from A to B and then to C, D, E, F, G, H, and so on. Leader development therefore means preparing prospective leaders for the “fuzziness” within which they will be asked to operate en route to an indefinite future.

Not long ago, Randall White and Sandra Shullman (2010) said it all: acceptance of uncertainty is an indicator of effective leadership.

Liminality itself is a very old problem, or at least a very old and formative experience, recounted in Homer’s *Odyssey* and in the *Exodus* of Moses. Yet liminality is more than a journey. It is a kind of space suspended between two points; that is, from the inside (i.e. as it is experienced), without the usual points of reference; it is a disorienting and whirling confusion of everything and anything in shades of gray, akin to symptoms of anxiety, and not unlike Newtonian space that is infinite in every direction.

The pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus tried to warn his reader that despite our perceptions, day and night and all things are one, and every day the same, so that all things abide in some hidden attunement, even though nothing is stable—“it scatters and again gathers, it forms and dissolves, and approaches and departs.” (Kahn, 1979, fragments XIX, XX, XXXVI, LXXX) Not dissimilar from these texts are the accounts of mystics in various religious contexts, where they claim ecstasies about being caught up in some enveloping union that defies differentiation and specificity. It is almost as though in such moments, one reverts to that primordial condition described so vividly by William James as “one big blooming buzzing Confusion” (1948, p. 16)—an encounter with reality that is unmediated by discernment and category, which the philosopher might describe simply as Being. The maturing human mind increasingly resists the experience of liminality or (in a manner of speaking) holds it at arm’s length in order to make sense of it, to remember it, to express it aloud to others, to recognize one’s self in relationship with it. Otherwise, the experience makes us uncomfortable or worse. Charles Sanders Peirce (1877) explained this discomfort in a classic essay written many years ago as a spur to critical thinking.

If this “liminality” is the condition for leadership, how then does one navigate? Why even bother? What Foucault had been diagnosing earlier in his career was the development of elaborate power structures that arguably make liminality and leadership unnecessary and unlikely. These power structures were becoming veritable “substitutes for leadership,” as described later by Gary Yukl (2013, p. 165). Once certain power structures were in place, leadership as we usually mean the term would be superfluous. And then followers could avoid the unpleasant experience of liminality (and thus have no reason to seek out leaders) if only they would submit themselves to

the prevailing power structures. No liminality, no leadership. It was a trend foreseen already by Max Weber (1921/1947), who had been describing the closing of an “iron cage” around our social lives. Foucault had spent his earlier career looking around at the evidence.

#### D. LIMIT-EXPERIENCES AND THE TURNING

Because of Foucault’s belief about the emergence of these encompassing power structures, as though we are living in a vast, totalitarian dystopia, he was especially interested before 1982 in what he referred to as limit-experiences, i.e. activity at the extreme, in contravention of norms, and even in violation of common sense. There just might be, he suspected, a considerable freedom in madness and crime and perversion. These activities cross boundaries, expressing a desire to evade detection and control. There is a kind of secret thrill to the possibility of eluding these systems, of sneaking away to indulge forbidden appetites and entertain fugitive thoughts. Perhaps what society forbids or treats as a taboo is essentially liberating. For many years, Foucault dedicated himself with *frisson* to exploring these dark topics. By doing so, in both his personal life and his work, Foucault’s “intention [was] to throw our assumptions and certainties into question.” (Philp, 1985, p. 79) He had been using forms of resistance against the prevailing forms of power as a kind of “chemical catalyst [in his words] so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, find out their point of application and the methods used.” (1982/1983, p. 211) What he was exploring in his own way was the incidence of liminality. In a world that is dedicated to eradicating the experience of liminality, perhaps freedom lies in transgression.

By the 1960s, Foucault’s fascination with “limit-experience” went beyond doing book research. With the so-called baby boomers taking it to the street, he had discovered revolutionary politics. (e.g. Miller, 1993, p. 170f; see generally Macey, 1993) At that time, this meant he associated with the radical left, especially a kind of Maoism in Europe that was becoming both chic and violent.<sup>3</sup>

After flirting with political violence and even terrorism, however, around 1973, Foucault “pulled back and quietly began to rethink his position. . . . [H]e would eventually express open skepticism about the ‘very desirability of the revolution.’” (Miller, 1993, p. 233, citing a 1977 interview in *Le Nouvel Observateur* titled “Foucault: non au sexe roi”) After years of political leftism, he slowly swung toward becoming anti-Marxist. (Miller, 1993, p. 58, citing *Colloqui con Foucault*<sup>4</sup>) Later in life, he would become in Didier Eribon’s words “violently anticommunist.” (1991, p. 136) By 1979, he was even expecting that students read libertarian stalwarts, such as Ludwig von Mises and Frederick Hayek! (Miller, 1993, p. 310, citing an anonymous interview from 1990<sup>5</sup>) His biographer James Miller referred to his turn as “political self-renunciation.” (1993, p. 297) This ostensibly political turn was only part of a deeper shift in his thinking.

Even before 1976, for instance, Foucault had been “lamenting the inadequacy of his work to date.” (Miller, 1993, p. 285; cf. Philp, 1985, p. 68) To the consternation of erstwhile allies, he was changing direction and modifying his path. (Miller, 1993, p. 287, citing as one example Deleuze, 1990) For this phase, he chose solitude in order to reexamine his work, and the questions he came to address would now look more familiar to scholars in leadership: “How to govern oneself, how to be governed, how to govern others, how to accept the one who is to govern us, how to become the best possible governor, etc.” (Miller, 1993, p. 299, quoting Foucault’s 1979 *Tanner Lectures on Human Values*)

When writing about power, it was not just *state* power that had interested him; in the early 1980s, he was developing a more expansive notion of interpersonal power in which even just one person—regardless of official status—influences the actions of another. (Philp, 1985, p. 74) Here is a scenario remarkably close to definitions used in leadership studies. (see Rost, 1991/1993) In short, Foucault had always been interested in the macro phenomena of power structures, as we have just seen, as well as in the micro phenomena of leadership. Now, however, leading up to his last lectures in 1982–84, his thinking about such topics shifted noticeably.

Not only were the questions he was asking different from the ones that had interested him in public before, there was a different style to his manner of expression. Toward the end, his style became “sharply different . . . limpid, sober, and serene. . . .” (Miller, 1993, p. 34; see also Eribon, 1991, p. 331) David Macey calls his newer writing style “plain.” (1993, p. 467) Eric Paras uses words such as “calm . . . placid . . . slow [and] deliberate. . . .” (2006, p. 13) Gilles Barbedette and Andre Scala mentioned to Foucault during a late interview that, “What strikes the reader of your last books is the writing—clear, pure, smooth, and very different from your habitual style.” (1996, p. 465) And Foucault agreed.

It was, as Miller notes, an inward turn, a turn toward his own liminal experiences with ancient texts and what they implied. (1993, p. 326) Experts in the academy at that time questioned his competence to handle the ancient materials (perhaps with some justification), and his ideological allies expressed alarm at the direction these studies were taking. (Miller, 1993, p. 326) Nevertheless, Foucault immersed himself in Greek and Latin antiquity, especially the first and second century, for an experience that plainly accompanied a change in his worldview.

The lectures that Foucault delivered at the Collège de France from 1981–84 laid out his latest research—work that would unfortunately never appear in the form of a book. (Gros, 2008, pp. 377 & 386) These lectures built upon each other, almost as though they belong to a single chain with slightly different links, different aspects of the same topic. One commentator notes that “there is the very strong impression of being present at the gestation of a line of research. . . .” (Gros, 2008, p. 384)

This turn in Foucault’s thinking explicitly addresses leadership, which is why scholars in leadership studies ought to consider them.