Prologue: A Discussion without End and the Nature of This Inquiry

The central premise of *Discourse on Leadership* can be stated simply: ideas have consequences. They help shape how we view and interact with our world and are reciprocally shaped by the world. Based on that premise, I set out to study the *idea* of leadership. Our perception of leadership – what it is and should be – impacts who we vote for, who we hire and promote, and to whom we grant authority. Who do we turn to in times of turmoil and uncertainty? What are our expectations from those we designate as leaders? Our answers are shaped in significant measure by our understanding of the concept of leadership.

This is *not* a book about leadership in practice. There are no "how-to" lessons here; no frameworks for helping readers become more effective, more authentic, more transformative, more charismatic, or more extraordinary.

What I set out to explore was leadership in discourse: how the concept of leadership has been articulated, studied, and debated by academics as well as practitioners, journalists, and those who sought to influence the thoughts of others. My underlying assumption is that discourse generally and leadership discourse in particular is – and here I quote from Keith Grint – "not so much a reflection of material reality but a construction of it, a particular way of representing the world through language and practice."[1] I sought to understand the ways in which our construction of leadership has evolved over the years; paying particular attention to the social, economic, political, intellectual, and other historical forces that have shaped the discussion. *Discourse on Leadership* brings the discipline of history and the particular concerns of intellectual history to the subject.

Any appraisal of discourse that selects leadership as its focal interest faces an immediate challenge: the topic is broad and the literature is vast. Ralph Stogdill's massive survey of leadership research published first in 1974 famously offered over 6,000 citations. And this was before James MacGregor Burns' seminal 1978 *Leadership* revitalized interest in the field. The journals *Leadership* and *Leadership Quarterly* added to

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the accumulation of knowledge and the richness of discourse. There is a lot, in other words, to cover. For *Discourse on Leadership*, I focused on business organizations as a key arena of activity where understanding and analysis is articulated, debated, and regularly reshaped. I tried not to be overly rigid in that focus, however.

Anyone who has ventured into the field knows that leadership is a broadly interdisciplinary topic. Burns' landmark book approached the subject from the political science perspective. His formulation of transformational leadership, in turn, gave rise to a robust inquiry into leadership as it unfolded within managerial and organizational research. In order to reflect that interdisciplinary spirit, I ventured beyond business into the fields of history, political science, communications, mathematics, sociology, psychology, law, philosophy, cognitive science, literary criticism, economics, anthropology, biology, and even fiction (F. Scott Fitzgerald makes a cameo appearance in Chapter 7). Nonetheless, I always returned to the question: how is leadership conceived within the context of a business organization?

Within that setting, I paid particular attention to *executive* leadership; that is, leadership as exercised by individuals who sit atop an organizational hierarchy. This was not an automatic or obvious choice. There was a time, largely before the publication of Burns' *Leadership*, when the discourse leaned heavily on behaviors of individuals within small groups and actions taken by supervisors of shop floor workers. The 6,000 plus citations in Stogdill's handbook were full of titles such as *The Foreman on the Assembly Line*, "Supervisory Attitudes toward the Legitimacy of Influencing Subordinates," and "Emergent Leadership in Small, Decision-Making Groups." Burns, who had previously penned an acclaimed biography of Franklin Roosevelt, focused on "the statesmen who moved and shook the world."[2] In doing so, he called attention to leadership of large institutions.

Analysis of small-group leadership continued. But a great deal of attention and an overwhelming amount of popular interest concentrated on those folks at the top: executives who could employ hierarchical power in order to achieve results. After the 1984 publication of the best-selling CEO memoir *Iacocca* (it was the best-selling nonfiction book in the United States for two years running), fascination with top executives and their apparent capacity for miraculous turnaround dominated the popular mind and shaped academic inquiry. Although leadership unfolds at multiple levels of an organization, I am offering a focus on the top.

To undertake this critical examination of the leadership discourse, I followed the literature trail wherever it took me. There were some constraints to that journey imposed by issues of translation and accessibility.

The literature has been largely, though by no means exclusively, framed by U.S.-based scholars, publishers, and journals, which became a dominant voice as the discourse evolved in the years after the Second World War.[3] A more critical approach to management, organizational, and leadership studies paid close attention to issues of ideology, power, conflicting interests, and competing constructions of performance, while raising questions of epistemology generally absent from traditional social science work. That discourse took root largely but by no means exclusively outside of the United States. I paid close attention to this contribution as well.

I place my work here firmly in the category of history, specifically intellectual history. The point of reference for my approach is John Higham's classic definition of intellectual history as the history of thought. Specifically, intellectual historians ask how and why ideas occur when they do.[4] I abide by Drew Maciag's suggestion that *intellectual* be construed broadly to embrace "such persons [who] produced writing, speeches, sermons, and other *textual* material intended for public consumption."[5] There will be references to scholarly articles and books, but also to newspaper pieces, television appearances, and blogs. As a scholar of U.S. history, my analysis of the discourse occurs largely within the context of that country.

The primary medium through which historians work is narrative. So, I have constructed a story line. Although I review a vast scope of leadership literature, this is not a systematic survey of all of the key writings and categorizations of the field. There are articles and reviews aplenty that have done this quite well. What I am proposing, instead, is a history of the discourse. Therefore, I will turn to the questions posed by Hayden White. "What does it mean to *think historically*, and what are the unique characteristics of a specifically *historical method* of inquiry?"[6]

The Special Problem of Reading the Past

Why should historians, at the outset of their work, even bother to consider the nature of history writing rather than simply getting on with it?[7] The reasons are numerous and persuasive. Stating the author's theory of knowledge informs the reader. How are statements and conclusions contained in the writing to be understood? What stance did the author take toward sources in constructing the interpretation?

Historical writing always involves two separate but interrelated levels of interaction: one between historians and readers, and the other between historians operating in their present tense and the primary object of study situated somewhere in their past tense. These two interactions are related.

The nature of the second discourse – between present and past – should be made clear to enable a transparent dialogue between the author and the reader.

My position is that history – and I am referring here to the output of a historian's work – is *a narrative that is set in the past and offers the opportunity for critical perspective on the present*. With that definition as a base, I can parse the individual components, starting with the *past*.

The Past as "Absent Reality"

Whatever level of interest the historian may have in the present – and worthwhile historical writing always offers a perspective on the present – the primary focus is unequivocally set in the past. The object of the historian's study, noted White, can only be "the sum total of all the *events* (including the interconnections between them) that happened in 'the past.'"[8] That last set of quote marks around "the past" suggests that we are about to enter a territory demanding special and careful consideration.

The discipline of history, wrote M.C. Lemon, "is defined essentially in terms of this special problem requiring knowledge of the past."[9] So, what is the "special problem"? To what extent is that challenge different from the one that faces, say, laboratory scientists where the subject of study can be immediately observed and even recreated? To answer that, we need to start with a consideration of the nature of time.[10]

Historians have a specialized task, which is to construct a memory of the past, first for themselves and then to be offered to others. The most salient point about the past, and the one that endows the study of the past with its special challenges, is that it does not exist. It *did* exist – at least in terms of people, place, and events – but it *does* not currently. It is, in Allan Megill's phrase, an "absent reality."[11]

The past, then, is not experienced in the present; it is recalled in the present. That act of recall does not occur in a vacuum. There is both a personal and a social context to memory. Just as individuals situate and support their own memory, so does the current social context apply a filter to what they "remember."[12] For that reason, it is especially significant to examine the filters on which historians rely in order to interpret the past.

One filter is created by the artifacts, typically recorded documents, which provide the historian with primary sources.[13] To study artifacts from the past is not to experience the past. Artifacts, rather, are "standing proxies" for a time that no longer exists.[14] These proxies are tangible and shareable, but they do not provide an absolute and uncontestable mirror image of the past.

The second filter is provided by the historian who responds to the tangible traces of the past and relates "findings" to the reader. Historians see the past through one set of clues, then apply the process of selection, highlighting some documents while relegating others to the background in order to create a second set of filters built on their own values.[15]

Historians, in other words, do not mirror the past so much as they act upon it. They construct a version of the past in order to reveal themes, interactions, and meanings.[16] Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey added that, in order to perform that task, the scholar engages in "some form of selective appropriation of past events and characters."[17] The findings presented by the historian do not duplicate or mirror the past. That inability to duplicate the past – I'm not saying *difficulty* but rather *impossibility* – brings us squarely into the debate of how to understand that reconstitution of the past, a reconstruction that unfolds through the structure of narrative.

Narrative Representations

To understand the process by which we engage the past, we can start with the distinction between description and representation, both of which make up key components of any narrative.

Description and representation are different concepts. That was the insight of Frank Ankersmit.[18] The example he used for understanding *description* was the statement, "This cat is black." What makes that statement descriptive is that it references a thing that exists outside of the consciousness of the historian, in this case, a particular cat: *this* cat and not any other cat. Historical description can and should be documented with references to a thing. As a reader, I can view the object myself and ask: Is that cat really black? Perhaps it is deep navy blue or a subtle shade of gray? Hold on a moment, I notice a tinge of green that all previous historians have missed. Differences can and will occur in description, but there is always reference to a tangible object.

Ankersmit offered "the Renaissance is the birth of modernity" as a statement of *representation*. There is no tangible thing here, no cat to examine independently of the historian. "Renaissance," "modernity," and the metaphor of birth are all abstractions. In other words, the reference here is between these constructs and not a thing but another abstraction. We expect historians to tell us how and why they arrived at this particular representation. But we, as readers, doubt – or at least should doubt – that this is the only way to represent the past. As historians, we know that other representations are possible and may be equally plausible.

Now, to leave Ankersmit and turn to my own work, I can be descriptive and note that, in 1978, political scientist James MacGregor Burns published a book on leadership in which he posited a distinction between "transactional" and "transforming" leaders. I can also describe the subsequent management authors who referenced Burns' book and his formulation. This is description. I offer citations which point to tangible objects, particular publications by Noel Tichy and Bernard Bass, for instance. The reader can look at the same things I looked at – the primary artifacts I cite as evidence – and make a determination concerning the validity of my description.

On the other hand, statements such as "transformational leadership created a significant turning point in management dialogue on leadership" and "transformational leadership gained popularity because of the economic turmoil of the late 1970s" are both representations. They are statements made up entirely of abstractions. My intention is not to convince you that these representations are the only possible way to see the past. Rather, my goal is to have you come away thinking that my representations are plausible, coherent, and worth considering. That is the posture I assume throughout *Discourse on Leadership*.

While building on both description and representation, historical narratives contain three core elements:[19]

- *Continuity* creates the boundaries for the story. In the case of *Discourse on Leadership*, the continuity is provided by the focus on expressed ideas concerning leadership in business organizations. Without continuity, there is no story.
- *Change* is equally vital to the construction of a narrative. If the expressed ideas about leadership in 1990 were precisely the same as they were in the 1980s or 1900, there is no historical narrative, just stasis.
- Change occurs through *agency*, which recognizes that the key actors in the narrative – those who have written about leadership – made choices that influenced the plot.

Narrative, in other words, is not a simple stimulus → response connection. Rather, it presents the historian's argument about interconnections, choices, and consequences.

In order to locate continuity, change, and agency, historians apply coherence and meaning to a period of time past. That is the point at which historians, along with their training, social theories, and ideologies both explicit and tacit, do the work of constructing narrative and writing history.[20] Here, we reach another vital junction in our consideration of the nature of narrative construction.

Are historians revealing a coherent narrative as it existed in the past? Or are they imposing a narrative – the process is referred to as *emplotment* – on the past that never really existed? If you accept Henri-Irénée

Marrou's view of the past as "infinitely complex," something as "obscure, confused, multiform, and unintelligible" as the present, then you must conclude that the answer is emplotment, which grows out of the interaction between the historian's imagination in the present and the representation of the past.[21]

My own theory of historical writing, and the underlying perspective of *Discourse on Leadership,* falls within the deconstructionist view advocated by Michel Foucault, Hayden White, Alun Munslow, and others.[22] To appreciate that perspective, we can start with a contrary view, a positivist theory of historical work offered by Richard Evans, a leading scholar of Nazi Germany.

A *Narrative, Not* The *Narrative*

In offering a "defense of history," Evans proclaimed, "I will look humbly at the past, and say despite them all: it really happened, and we really can, if we are very scrupulous and careful and self-critical, find out how it happened and reach some tenable though always less than final conclusions about what it all meant."[23] He claimed to be addressing *all* history, but he wasn't. He was standing up for a traditional, positivist approach as the only history.

The notion of positivist history is straightforward: a single narrative existed in the past. The task of the historian is, through painstaking and rigorous accumulation, to uncover that narrative. This was the approach taken by the great and influential business history scholar, Alfred Chandler. By amassing enough data and reviewing enough documents, he believed he could arrive at the truth about how American business institutions evolved.[24]

These positivist historians envisioned themselves following what J.H. Hexter referred to as the "reality rule," the commitment to first discover and then reveal "the reality of what happened in the past."[25] The historical narrative can, and should, strive to achieve a mirror image of the past, the argument went, rendering the past in such a way that is as clear and understandable to readers today as it was to those who lived it.[26]

But ask yourself: is the present in which you live really clear and understandable? Does a clear and coherent story line actually exist? And if it is not, what are the chances that it will be rendered clear and understandable to future generations of historians with unequivocal accuracy? Deconstructionist critics of the reality rule mounted a frontal assault on the traditional or positivist approach being advocated by Evans.

Historians who insisted they had discovered "the reality of what happened in the past" were guilty, in Foucault's view, of "transcendental narcissism."[27] The narcissism to which Foucault referred resided in the

claim by the positivist historians – not such a humble claim after all – that with the benefit of both temporal distance and strict adherence to academic rigor, they could divine meaning in an obscure, confused, and infinitely complex past and present it "as it actually happened."[28]

Foucault, along with a host of others – prominently Hayden White, Frank Ankersmit, Louis Mink, Keith Jenkins, Roland Barthes, Alun Munslow, and Albert Mills – insisted that Richard Evans got it wrong. No single, coherent, uncontestable narrative existed in the past. Therefore, none could be constructed in the present. Denying the positivists' assertion that the story is there, waiting to be discovered, Munslow insisted that the goal of the historian is to offer "a plausible and therefore quite acceptable" narrative without claiming it to be *only possible* narrative.[29] Once we embrace the argument that no single reconstruction of the past can be taken as definitive, we as readers can judge narratives on the basis of *plausibility*.

Deconstructionists dismissed the notion that historians exist independently of the history they are writing. They rejected one of the most fundamental premises of the "science" of history: that objectivity is desirable or even possible. The positivist approach maintained that by removing the historian and the values brought to the inquiry, the result would be superior history. Just the opposite was true, wrote Ankersmit. The application of one's values to the historical inquiry "will often be a useful or even indispensable guide on our difficult way to historical truth."[30]

It may seem at this point that the deconstructionist position on history borders on fiction writing.[31] And yes, there was something to the comparison of history to fiction in the deconstructionist view. In fact, that comparison was embraced proudly and openly. Louis Mink was one of the most forceful advocates of the position that history and fiction have much in common as modes of understanding.

Like fiction, history offers readers an "encounter with otherness," resulting in the capacity to share experiences across time.[32] To be effective, the writing of both fiction and history depends on the author's skills and subtlety in imagining stories.[33] In that regard, agreed Munslow, history *is* much like fiction, "an exercise in creative imagination."[34] There is, he and Keith Jenkins wrote, "*no* story, *no* narrative, *no* emplotment or argument in the past per se." Because the past "has in it neither rhyme nor reason," the historian must deploy imagination to offer both rhyme and reason.[35] True detachment is both impossible and undesirable.

The historian is not a blank slate but rather an *agent of imagination*; trained in the appropriate techniques, required to make specific reference to verifiable artifacts of the past (description) and then expected to deploy imagination to produce a – not the – narrative (representation).

This is not to say that history and fiction are interchangeable. History, Mink wrote, "is obligated to rest upon evidence of the occurrence in real space and time of what it describes and insofar as it must grow out of a critical assessment of the received materials of history, including the analysis and interpretations of other historians."[36] Fiction has no such obligation. White agreed: "Events have to be taken as given; they are certainly not constructed by the historian" as they might well be by the fiction writer.[37] And Munslow offered his view of what distinguishes good from bad history:

> Hopefully, the narrative in a deconstructionist essay will be coherent and sensible, but it will not be epistemologically self-assured . . . For every history that aims to get at the past as it really happened, there is always another version, which, like the first, is by definition another fiction. As to what constitutes good history, then, it is that it is self-reflexive enough to acknowledge its limits, especially aware that the writing of history is far more precarious and speculative than empiricists usually admit.

Claims of scientifically certifiable truths may be comforting to readers; they are not, however, possible.

"It is probably best," Munslow concluded, "to view historical narratives as propositions about how we *might* represent a past reality, suggestions of *possible* correspondence rather than *the* correspondence." In the realm of science, a proposition represents but the preliminary step on the path to constructing empirical indicators that can then be used to develop testable hypotheses. In the realm of history, such controlled testing is impossible. One can work only to offer alternative propositions. That is why history writing, in the words of Dutch historian Pieter Geyl, is "a discussion without end."[38]

A Critical Perspective

A critical perspective on the present should not be interpreted in a reductionist manner as mere didacticism. Writing intellectual history in the 1930s, Arthur O. Lovejoy concluded his study with a chapter entitled, "The Outcome of the History and Its Moral."[39] Today, insistence of proclaiming a moral would be condemned, and rightly so, as didactic, smacking of arrogance and dogmatism, lacking in the very propositional tentativeness that characterizes deconstructionist history.[40]

The output of historians' work involves an engagement with both the past and the present.[41] It does not follow, however, that the assumption of a critical perspective amounts to teaching a lesson (a moral). Rather, it offers a platform for a diagnostic re-examination followed by learning.

The opportunity for insights offered by the past – by the historian's view of the past – can and should provide perspective on the present. That opportunity is placed in the hands of the reader, not imposed by the historian on the reader.[42]

In their call for a new management and organizational history that would overcome the "morbidity" of traditional approaches, Michael Rowlinson and colleagues suggested that a critical perspective could help explain how the "present order has been constructed," a vital, even necessary first step in the process of reconsideration, change, and improvement.[43] My hope and intention is for this critical examination of the idea of leadership in business organizations to avoid such morbidity and open opportunities to consider paths forward beyond the overuse, misuse, and abuse of the concept.

Management authors – and here I mean academics, consultants, and practitioners alike – often use history, or at least its trappings, to position their findings and advocate for their conclusions. This is not a critical perspective. Their primary focus is on the present; on *their* present. Their use of history includes none of the tools or discipline of history. Their approach to the past and their application of the past to the present are fundamentally flawed.

Embellished Reminiscence

Join me in visiting a piece of "history" employed by a prominent leadership scholar in setting up his argument.[44]

Business organizations today, the writer insisted, are being forced "to reconsider traditional strategies, policies, and routine methods of doing business. As a result, thousands and thousands of managers and executives are being asked to develop new products, new distribution channels, new marketing methods, new manufacturing processes, new financing strategies, and much more. And literally millions of people are being called upon to implement those new ideas." These new pressures of adapting to "an environment of uncertainty caused by intense competitive activity, and then getting others, often many others, to accept a new way of doing things" are placing demands on managers that simply did not exist in the relatively tranquil decades of recent memory.[45]

What assumptions would you make about when this observation was written? Furthermore, to what relatively tranquil decades of the recent past was the author referring?

John Kotter used these words in his introduction to a 1988 leadership book. His thesis was that the unprecedented environmental complexity of the 1980s demanded something more than mere management; it required