

Leadership for a divided world



In the 2020 US election, a record 75,401,434 people and counting turned out to vote the incumbent president out of office. This close and protracted race is a reminder that Trump and his base are far from a peripheral minority.

Trump's rise to power in 2016 signalled a backlash to diversity that all of us around the world still need to reckon with. His presidency was in part a reaction to his Black predecessor and the public perception that so-called 'minorities' have gained too much power in the United States. Trump's rallying cries from "build the wall" to "lock her up" emboldened the racist and misogynistic hatred that had been lurking beneath a veneer of political correctness.

The resistance against diversity could also be seen in the workplace. Famous examples like [James Damore at Google](#) reflect the contempt that some workers feel towards a diversifying labour force. Typically (though not always), the backlash comes from cis-gender straight able-bodied white men who believe they have been left behind in a changing world. They accuse corporate diversity as upending the right order of things when in reality, diversity initiatives have made [very modest improvements](#) on the material conditions of marginalised workers.

My own country of Australia follows trends in the United States and United Kingdom where a growing number of people insist that diversity initiatives in organisations have [disadvantaged white workers](#). With an amnesia of colonisation and a denial of structural racism, [one in three young Australians](#) believe that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are given an unfair advantage by the government.

In the face of such division, can leadership be exercised towards creating a more hospitable world?

In a [new book](#), I confront the ways both political and organisational leadership are by and large about the preservation of prevailing sexual, racial, imperial, and class hierarchies. The 2020 US election was a significant ideological battle, yet neither of the two major party candidates represented radical change.

Like political leaders, organisational leaders are bound within capitalist imperatives of performance, productivity, and profit. The last four decades of leadership theorising have produced endless models from charismatic, visionary, and transformational leadership to authentic, spiritual, and servant leadership. Each new model is touted as the key to employee control and financial success for powerful elites.

Social transformation, or so it seems, is never on the table.

I turn away from the traditional models of leadership in the book and study what leading looks like among those who have historically been marginalised from positions of authority.

I trace what might be described as anti-racist feminist interventions through the complex and varied communities of Black, Indigenous, Latinx/Chicanx, Middle Eastern, and Asian women. The intellectualism, art, and activism of women of colour have developed revolutionary principles for grassroots leadership — principles grounded in solidarity, love, and justice.

Solidarity seeks to build bridges between marginalised people, finding interconnections in our struggles for social justice without presupposing that our experiences of oppression are the same. Popular feminism in our era remains stuck in narrow views of 'equality', where many highly privileged white women pursue positions of leadership for themselves, then perpetuate economic and neocolonial exploitation with their power along with heterosexist, transphobic, racist, and ableist harms.

Solidarity as an ethical and political goal means recognising that we all have a stake in dismantling imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, and patriarchal [systems of oppression](#). Anti-racist feminist leadership is not leadership-as-usual in minority packaging.

How might we then make love the foundation of leadership? Anti-racist feminist movements have redefined love as combining acknowledgment, care, responsibility, and a commitment to human and nonhuman life within the natural environment. This ethic of love is grounded in the need to change the systems of power that enable gender, sexual, racial, and class domination towards a radical engagement with diversity.

Life in the margins has meant that those committed to anti-racist feminist principles have had to develop radical ways to advance the ideals of social justice. Honouring their legacies and learning from their wisdoms may be the first step towards a more hospitable world.

In the wake of the 2020 US election, we cannot be complacent in a false sense of comfort that justice has been won. Trump may be defeated after his first term, but his 70,902,822 voting supporters at the time of this article's writing represent an important cross-section of the most powerful nation in the world — not an aberration. They are no monolith, but we must recognise and take seriously their fear and anger; sentiments that are also felt within the workplace.

Biden's leadership faces enormous challenges in a bitterly divided country. With these battles ahead, we need solidaristic, loving, and redemptive possibilities for leadership more than ever.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on the book [Redeeming Leadership: An Anti-Racist Feminist Intervention](#), Bristol University Press
- The post expresses the views of its author(s), not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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