

# Why do unethical leaders thrive, despite all talk to the contrary?



The disappearance of the iron curtain in the early 1990s led many social and political analysts to believe that liberal democracy had prevailed as the “winning” political system of humankind. At the same time, egalitarianism, positivity, and humanism (along with mainstream Western ethics) came to dominate the textbook versions of organisational life and leadership. At the very least, it came to dominate views of how they should be. As of lately, largely the same circles have witnessed the recent rise of “big man” leaders, appalled. These retro leaders are the direct opposite of what the orthodoxy of leadership scholarship has suggested for the past three decades. The question remains: despite all the talk to the contrary, why is it that unethical leaders thrive?

The immediate reaction to this is a moral(ist) one: *this should not be*. But to endeavour beyond that position, one cannot but see that sovereign leadership at the highest level is, empirically speaking, beyond good and evil. Yet, morality exists as a phenomenon. Ethical questions are something society should be concerned with – internally. It is hardly helpful to apply them to sovereign leaders. Despite the relative strength of “shared”, “servant”, and “authentic” leadership discourses, as researchers, we are interested in how things *are*, not how they *should be*. In this vein, yes, Joseph Stalin was a leader. In practice, this means that the academic discussions of best leaders being “servants” to their followers is plainly untrue. To be a leader, one must also become one, and the process may entail some unethical components. Furthermore, it seems that democracy and sovereignty are opposing, rather than complementary forces.

Consider, for a moment, a few well-known, contemporary national leaders: Silvio Berlusconi of Italy, Vladimir Putin of Russia, and most recently, Donald Trump of the United States. Hardly anyone would have either predicted their rise to power in early 1990s, or would describe them as particularly democratic or ethical leaders. Quite the contrary: they are authoritarian, paternalistic, and traditionalist leaders. Their campaign slogans during their bids for power emphasised the need to change the current course of events and replace it with an imagined and better, “retro” future: “good governance” (Berlusconi), “unity and order” (Putin), and “great again” (Trump). In our recent essay, we show that rather than serving their followers, what is relevant instead, is the leaders’ ability to display desire and excess to their followers.

Philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari discuss the differences between interest and desire. We found that it is not *interest* – a rational drive focussing on things such as education, career, and social status that drives leadership. Rather, what marks the leader is *desire* – subliminal and sensuous drive for excess that reaches even erotic heights. This desire can be divided into sub-processes: leader has to desire followers, followers need to reciprocate this, but the leader also has to display desire for desire itself – a genuine taste for excess. This echoes directly the work of Jacques Derrida on sovereignty:

*“What is essential and proper to sovereignty is ... an excess insatiable for the passing of every determinable limit: higher than height, grander than grandeur, etc. It is the more, the more than that counts...”*

This has a direct link to the natural world, and how animal species communicate their superior abilities to their mating partners through an excessive display of signs – fins, horns and buttocks. These excesses hardly hold any functional value, especially if one considers their relative role in the mating game. Thus it is no surprise that even in the human world, excess is the nominator of a successful leader: a winner, someone to be loved. Moreover, leaders are *de facto* meta-ethical: they shape the social sphere of the society, not vice versa. In this way, successful leaders resemble beasts and criminals. This shows also the poverty of mainstream (universalist) ethics. Ethical systems (and articulations of leadership) are locally constructed, but leaders are also meta-ethical. This means that ethics is an in-group phenomenon, but becomes very vague in inter-group relations.

Applied to international politics, this of course means that there are no other sensible approaches than *Realpolitik*. Every nation seeks their own interest, but what makes followers coil around their leaders like serpents, is desire. It may be disappointing to Western citizens having had the possibility to enjoy a relative sense of autonomy – however false that may be – for a considerable amount of time. The fact of the matter, however, is that even if “just because you can does not mean you should”, a leader may (and most likely will) be able to get away with it.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on the author’s paper [Un-willing is un-leading: leadership as beastly desire](#), co-authored with Aki-Mauri Huhtinen, *Leadership and the Humanities*, September 2016.
- The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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