BETWEEN BOSSES AND BOOSTERS: AN INTRODUCTION TO "LEADERSHIP" AS AN AMERICAN STUDIES SUBJECT

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The study of leadership has become a serious industry in America in the past decade. It shows activities on commercial and academic levels resulting in the publication of hundreds of how-to-become-a-leader guides per year and more than 1,000 degree programs. A four-volume *Encyclopedia of Leadership* seeks to mark the transition of the study of leadership from a specialist hobby to a mature academic discipline. The boom in the interest of leadership is a combination of scholarly specialization and a popular curiosity about celebrities. Many products of this business promise to unravel secrets of success and resemble the popular hero-worship stories of the late nineteenth century in their recasting of faded forms of self-realization. A telling example of this revival is the 1993 reprint of Dale Carnegie's 1937 classic *The Leader in You: How to Win Friends and Influence People*.[1]

While it might strike the critical customer as old platitudes dressed in fresh colors, the current boom in the attention for leadership has also a more serious cause. The increasing complexity of international relations in today's globalized world puts high demands on its leaders. The fates of many people depend on the degree of their success in managing the world's affairs. In the late 1970s pioneer historian James MacGregor Burns issued his call for improvements in leadership and advocated fundamental research in leadership. His guidelines for leadership studies prescribe interdisciplinarity, a focus on the relationship between leaders and followers, a normative definition of good leadership (advancing freedom, justice, and equality), and a distinction between transactional and transformational leadership.[2] This combination of public interest and scholarly aspirations opens up career perspectives for new categories of professionals. While Burns himself made a significant contribution to the field, he could not prevent commercial interests from making inroads into leadership studies. The encyclopedia offers a list of 250 scholarly programs in each of its four volumes, which smacks of a promotional campaign catering for university interests. Leadership sells everywhere. Airport newsstands offer (auto-) biographical books by or on acclaimed business leaders under the motto "you can not argue with success." The serious practitioners have organized the discipline by launching new journals, such as *The Leadership Quarterly* (1990), and new professional organizations such as the International Leadership Association (founded in 1999). Through these institutions, which are

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[1] George Goethals, Georgia J. Sorenson, and James MacGregor Burns, eds., Encyclopedia of Leadership, 4 vols. (New York: Sage Publications, 2004); Roy M. Anker, *Self-Help and Popular Religion in Modern American Culture: An Interpretive Guide* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999).

[2] Goethals, a.o., *Encyclopedia*, 1:xxxiv.

strongly dominated by Americans, debates about leadership have spread across the globe.[3]

Many leadership studies are driven by motives to improve the qualities and performances of leaders or to craft models out of individual cases, but lack a critical examination of the central concepts, of historical settings, and of its usefulness in other cultures. A blend of popular and academic information may lead to timeless practical lessons which disregard the historical context. This may lead to inspirational books such as *Leadership the Eleanor Roosevelt Way: Timeless Strategies from the First Lady of Courage*, which offer advice to use opportunities, but shed little light on Eleanor Roosevelt's specific place in history.[4]

It is tempting to buy into the many rewards of popular leadership products by recycling the life stories of successful historical figures. However, it is even more important to historize this phenomenon. This volume of essays is the result of a meeting of an international group of scholars of American society, who looked critically at the alleged universalism of leadership qualities by contextualizing them in the appropriate historical setting. The book opens with an analysis of the terminology and an exploration of the explanatory power of various leadership concepts. The focus then turns to the promises of "good" leadership to protect democratic processes against political and commercial exploitation. Examples from military academies, state politics, marginal groups, and African American politicians dampen high expectations for new visionary political leadership in the United States. The next section engages literary and artistic perspectives on leadership issues, putting the position of the humanities in shaping ideas about leadership on the agenda. The final group of essays examines how American leadership models were not easily adopted outside the United States after World War II. Their strongest appeal remains in the corporate world.

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While the research of leadership is strongest in the United States, the use of the word "boss" in the title of this book indicates that the concept of leadership is not intrinsically American. The colloquial term "boss" has a long lineage. Its origin lies in the Dutch word "baas," meaning master, usually of a ship. In 1625 this term entered the English language and it became especially popular in the nineteenth century, when its general meaning of "overseer" came into use as a more specific

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[3]   Michelle C. Bligh and James R. Meindl, "The Cultural Ecology of Leadership: An Analysis of Popular Leadership Books," in David M. Messick and Roderick M. Kramer, eds., *The Psychology of Leadership: New Perspectives and Research* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005), 11-52. Two Dutch examples show the inspiration by sales in America: the famous Dutch soccer icon Johan Cruijff became a leadership model in Pieter Winsemius, *Je gaat het pas zien als je het doorheb. Over Cruijff en leiderschap* (Amsterdam: Balans, 2004). Another striking example of the Netherlands following an American model is the recent publication of a religious leadership journal, carrying the English name *Leadership* and featuring Billy Graham.

[4]   R. Gerber, *Leadership the Eleanor Roosevelt Way: Timeless Strategies from the First Lady of Courage* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002).

reference to the head of a political organization, later called a political machine. "Bosses" streamlined the process of elections and the distribution of favors through patronage. At mid-century the term "Bossism" referred to a system of transactional leaders who tied voters to their interests and often obstructed proposals to reform the democratic process of the U.S. "Boss" William M. Tweed (1823-1878), the leader of the Tammany Hall Democrats in New York City and State, became the prototype of the powerful corrupt politician. His downfall in 1871 after fourteen years of power abuse marked a decisive turn in the level of approval for this type of political leader. At the close of the century investigative journalists exposed the exploits of political bosses nationwide and tarnished the term. The bosses regained some of their reputation in the 1960s, when historical studies emphasized their positive accomplishments in creating a welfare system in a high-risk society. Part of this positive turn was the growing scholarly interest in the leadership qualities of politicians in general and presidents in particular, exemplified by the founding of the Center for the Study of the Presidency in 1965, which has published *Presidential Studies Quarterly* since 1970.

Historian James MacGregor Burns, who made a name by publishing the first political biography of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1956, opened up the study of national political leadership two decades later by making a distinction between transactional and transformational leadership.[5] His approach introduced a new hierarchy of leadership ideals. Transactional leaders try to negotiate a deal, to exchange services for support; they are power brokers whose success can be measured by combining various (self)interests. Transformational leaders try to engage others in order to strengthen their motivation, improve their morality, and equip them for future leadership. This model of leadership puts relationships at its center and is granted much more prestige than the transactional leaders ever had. Since this model includes everyone, from presidents to housewives, this concept democraticizes leadership.[6] While older leadership studies concentrated on transactional power, mainly in politics and business, later studies were interested in influence and the transformative role of leaders, which drew the instant attention of management studies. The tension between these two types of leadership surfaces in many of the essays in this volume.

This short overview of the discipline shows the importance of concepts for the evaluation of leaders and the application of leadership skills. Hence this volume opens with reflections on the literary origins of the term leadership by Joseph Harrington. The contemporary contents of the term is the abstract quality of providing guidance, while originally "leadership" was a definition of a group of people who lead or the act of leading. Harrington shows that in the twentieth century leadership became an art to be mastered, a skill to be learned, a practice to be performed. The evidence can be found in the flourishing business of training programs at all levels, from boy scouts to Ph.D. programs. And so, especially in America, everyone is encouraged to become a leader. Leadership becomes the

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[5]   James MacGregor Burns, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1956) and *Leadership* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978).

[6]   James MacGregor Burns, *Transforming Leadership: The Pursuit of Happiness* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003).

equivalent of "success." The broadening of the appeal of leadership through this democratic turn means a departure from earlier elitist approaches.

Such an elitist content is associated with the term "hegemony." Hegemonic leaders (mainly in business) operate internationally, protect their privacy and are imperialistic. Promoters of leadership programs, in contrast to "hegemons," package their message, according to Harrington to create a democratic, benign impression. However, hidden behind this appearance of neutrality and universalism, leadership can serve the private interests of specific groups. These interest groups may agree on rules that might very well oppose the common good. At this point, Harrington turns around the argument and promotes "hegemony"—in the Gramscian sense of the open contest for material and symbolic power—as the better concept for a democratic society. The emphasis on "neutral leadership" can stifle internal debate and ideological contests. (Mel van Elteren's essay on the transnational leadership class, in the final section of the book, illustrates this point.) For the time being, "leadership" has more followers than "hegemony." Both in times of fiery ideological conflict and in periods of ideological indifference, the call for new leadership grows stronger, because "Angst" causes a desire for swift action by individual leaders. This essay suggests that finding solutions in times of distress may be better advanced by open hegemonic confrontation than by vague promises of the benefits of leadership.

A similar juxtaposition between two approaches of leadership is offered by the political scientist Bruce Miroff in his evaluation of the explanatory capacity of two competing conceptions of American political leadership: the entrepreneurial model and the democratic model. The first model builds on the rational-choice theory which conceptualizes politics in economic terms, highlighting the innovative activity of interest-maximizing individuals. The second model—usually preferred by academics—concentrates on the interactions and shared purposes of leaders and followers. These models are applications of Burns' transactional-transformational typology in the political realm. The entrepreneurial model takes values as a given, the democratic model has a moral agenda to stimulate certain behavior. Miroff uses these two models not only to describe political behavior, but also to explain political change. By following the careers of Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich he reaches the conclusion that the entrepreneurial leadership model can explain the rise of a politician, but not his or her fall, because it neglects the cultural context in which the political leader operates. It is not surprising that the democratic model of leadership found wider approval in this book than the entrepreneurial one.

If one sector in society claims ability to lead, it is the military, which has its own special place in a democratic society. Historian Ruud Janssens analyses the teaching at military academies and the use of military leadership examples in American culture. His surprising contention is that despite its exemplary roll this sector fails to define its vision of leadership in precise terms and retires to teaching by example and teaching through challenge. The quality of military leaders to act decisively explains why military models are readily adopted in other fields. This alleged easy application is a result of a mixed message that the military wants to reflect the values in society at large and at the same time defend its own particular rules.

The difficulties in reaching a transformative level in regional politics are revealed by JeDon Emenhiser. His analysis of Republican leaders in California in the past forty years confirms the validity of the democratic leadership model. His essay shows how the diversity among the followers and the political styles of political leaders at best lead to advantageous transactions for both, but fail to bring politics to a higher level.

One would expect that the Communist party leaders in the United States were quintessential transformative leaders—after all, they wanted to revolutionize the country—yet they were not successful in their efforts. In fact, historian James G. Ryan reveals that they much better fitted into the transactional category. While in the late 1930s they were briefly able to inspire a following, their subsequent move to loosen their ties with Moscow proved self-defeating. Their transactions—delivery of intelligence in exchange for support—undermined their position. Ryan's protagonist is Earl Browder, secretary-general of the Communist Party USA from the 1930s to the 1950s. His "foreign" ideology tied his hands and prevented him from providing the necessary guidance to build a large constituency. Leaders who were dependent followers themselves could not be effective.

Ryan's marginal leaders resemble the position of Black leaders, [though for a different reason: what was the "other" reason?]. Historian Wilbur C. Rich followed the fate of African American leaders who faced (and still face) a serious dilemma: either join the ruling (white) class, which suggests social progress, but leaves the economic structure unchanged, or adopt a new identity. His colleague Chris Quispel explains how Black mayors carry a double burden when they face the race issue: from without and from within their own communities. The divergent and often conflicting expectations of both groups are difficult to fulfill. He is therefore pessimistic about the chances of African American leaders to succeed. Many of them were elected in hard times without the resources to restore their cities and especially the black neighborhoods in them. They could not provide jobs for their constituencies without alienating their white supporters. Even to be a successful transactional leader proved to be a tough job.

These essays show the tenacity of the very structures that some leaders had hoped to transform. This cultural climate is the theme of Kate Delaney. She investigated presidential museums because these institutions create legacies of leadership in public memory. The exhibits in these museums focus on personality, skills, and visions as indicators of true leadership. The guardians of the Herbert Hoover and Jimmy Carter legacies, for instance, emphasize their rural backgrounds, which prepared them for the presidency. Since they remained single-term presidents their post-presidential achievements were highlighted. Other one-term presidents such as John Adams, John F. Kennedy, and George H.W. Bush are placed in a family tradition of service to expand their significance beyond their presidencies. A third plot is that of the sudden, accidental president, exemplified by Harry S. Truman, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Gerald R. Ford. Each of the museums position the leadership skills of their protagonists in an appropriate context.. In the process they provoke the visitors to compare past accomplishments with present performances of contemporary leaders.

Marietta Messmer shifts the focus to intellectual and educational leadership. Her essay addresses the problem of the declining position of the humanities in the contemporary academe. This loss of prestige is often blamed on the self-destructive "linguistic turn," which made all inquiry subjective by cutting the connection between reality and language and by replacing it by an abstract academic jargon. She uses caricatures of English professors in James Hynes's satire *The Lecturer's Tale* to show that both traditionalists and radicals carry political agenda's, without contributing much to society at large, since both settle for personal gain. They thus endanger the academic liberties of the university. To rescue both the university and the humanities from commercial take-overs, the humanities need to show their ability to raise responsible citizens by critical (moral) reflection. Messmer reports a variety of solutions proposed by academics to solve the crisis and concludes with a plea for academic leadership which has close ties with the non-academic world.

This strategy is exactly what attracts Amanda Gilroy to the popular American series *The West Wing*. She takes this widely acclaimed TV series about presidential leadership as an instrument in the struggle of the humanities to recapture their position as translators of specialist knowledge for the public domain. The show's characters belong both to circles of high and popular culture, represent a variety of disciplines, and help to find relevant solutions to civic problems, while they reach out to a large audiences.

The reception of American models of leadership abroad connects the four final essays. Annick Cizel found a tension between transactional and transformational roles for the United States when it needed to reconsider its approach towards the Third World during the two decades following World War II. By involving citizens, both in America and abroad, in the diplomatic exchange, the State Department became more open to transformative programs and abandoned sheer power wrestling. She argues that the U.S. activities in other countries needed to be more open for dialogue and exchange. While the United States was able to exert its hard power, it shifted to softer, diplomatic instruments.

Giles Scott-Smith concentrates on the concept of leadership which inspired the American State Department to launch its Foreign Leader Program in the 1950s. To his surprise the leadership concept of the State Department remained pragmatic, identifying leaders merely as people of power. The broad recruitment among nationalities was not only meant to create a vast body of influential professionals who would look favorably on American interests and policies, but who could also validate the claim that American values were universal. The lack of real reciprocity underscored this assumption. The participants were toured across United States in expectation of a future transformative role, i.e. bringing their nation closer to U.S. interests, especially in fighting Communism and advancing a free market.

Hans Krabbendam examines the fate of transformative leadership concepts exported from America to private networks in the Netherlands after World War II. America's position of moral superiority met a demand among leading Dutch citizens with a religiously motivated sense of civic responsibility. Initially, the ideals of moral transformation generated much enthusiasm, but after two decades the lack of personal transformation stories, which was at the basis of further changes in

America society, subdued the high expectations from this leadership concept in the Netherlands. Personal inspiration succumbed to traditional structures.

Mel van Elteren unravels the structural dimensions of U.S. world power in corporate globalization in order to explain the paradox of a shrinking U.S. economic power and a growing dominance of U.S. corporate norms and practices in the world of transnational commerce. His explanation is that the process of globalization weakens the power of most national governments over domestic and foreign transnational corporations. Less control by regulatory measures increases the hold of neo-liberal globalization, which is a strong feature of the Anglo-American business mentality. This is not, Van Elteren claims, inherently American, but capitalist. This trend is strongest in the United States, but remains contentious.

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How do these essays contribute to the questions of universal validity and justified moral hope? The moral undertones of the promotion of leadership skills revealed a strong strand in the American tradition of self-help. This industry has widened the appeal of leadership and might therefore increase democratic participation. However, military and business models failed to meet the high expectations of moral improvement and generated tension with academic research. The relative loss of leadership roles by the disciplines of arts and humanities first stimulated self-reflection and then was countered through artistic representations of leadership which embrace humanistic in stead of economic values.

The growth of interest in leadership could only happen after America's presidents began to possess persistent global power and corporations fine-tuned the personal side of their management tools. Both publicly and privately the impact of American leadership models have been felt. Potential foreign leaders have been targeted by American authorities to adopt American viewpoints as part of their cultural diplomacy, even though the contents of the leadership expectations remained implicit. At the same time, the leadership of the nation after World War II could only work through exchange. Private initiatives also showed these outcomes. The absence of high expectations from life-changing moments in the lives of individuals, prevented the transformative model to take root in other cultures.

In conclusion, while the essays in this volume vary too much to simply decide whether the growing emphasis on leadership strengthened or weakened democracy in America, they do show that a fresh perspective on the leadership phenomenon helps us to tell new stories about America's relationship with itself and its surrounding world.