Book review

Keith Grint, *The Arts of Leadership* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK 2001) 454 pp.

Keith Grint, *Leadership: Limits and Possibilities* (Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, UK and New York, NY, USA 2005) 192 pp.

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Keith Grint is arguably one of the most innovative and imaginative scholars currently working in the field of leadership studies. A sociologist by training, his scholarship ranges across several other disciplines within the humanities, including *inter alia*: history (particularly military history); social studies of science and technology; philosophy; and literary theory. The scope of Grint's approach to the study of leaders and leadership makes him an obvious candidate for attention in this inaugural issue of *Leadership and the Humanities*, and it is for this reason that I have chosen to review two of his publications here. While Grint has held chairs in several UK business schools, his work is by no means representative of the managerialist orthodoxy that has come to influence, and perhaps even dominate, debates relating to human organization and governance. His is a dissenting voice that eschews the often simple-minded thinking and crude methodological instrumentality which characterizes much business school treatment of the leadership phenomenon. Before offering a critical appraisal of the two Grint volumes, it may be helpful briefly to locate his work in relation to the evolution of leadership as a distinct field of study. His heterodox contribution can only properly be understood, I suggest, as a counterpoint to mainstream approaches.

Leadership studies, *per se*, is a relatively new invention. While it is certainly the case that historians have, since the beginning of recorded history, been attracted to the study of individual leaders and organizational governance wherever manifest in human communities and civilizations, 'leadership studies' as a distinct discipline has existed for barely 60 years. It is associated intimately with the growth of the science of organizational behaviour – being something of an offshoot – which developed primarily in the United States from the middle of the twentieth century onwards. As a subject discipline, it sought to provide answers to questions concerning how best to lead and govern in the context of mid-twentieth-century US institutional and business organizational life. The fashion of the time was to look to science for direction and, accordingly, leadership studies positioned itself as a putative science of individual conduct informed predominantly by psychological theory. Early studies were concerned with the exploration of individual ontology whereby the various personality

traits and characteristics of effective leaders could be established and, most importantly, measured (for example, see Stogdill 1948; 1974). The dominant epistemology of the discipline was positivism, an inheritance that still holds great sway to this day.

Trait theory has largely given way to studies which seek to correlate attributes of the individual leader (qualities, styles or skills) with attributes of a social or organizational context (Tannenbaum and Schmidt 1958; Likert 1961; Fiedler 1967; Hersey and Blanchard 1988). The positivist emphasis, however, still persists and there is much concern within mainstream leadership studies – particularly in the USA – to produce models that hold out the possibility of control and predictability or that represent generalizable principles and can be studied using replicable methods.

Grint's work, by contrast to the mainstream development, is far more rooted in a European intellectual tradition and offers, as it were, something of a non-positivist antidote. The dominant disciplines of psychology, social psychology and economics which typify US approaches are supplanted by social theory, history and philosophy in his far subtler theorization and empirical enquiry into the processes of 'leader' and 'leadership' constitution. This non-positivist sensibility results, I suggest, in a more sophisticated account of the complex processes which are *productive of* leadership enactments. Indeed, according to Grint (2005), leadership must ultimately be approached as an 'essentially contested concept' (*pace* Gallie 1955/56). In other words, leaders and leadership should be approached as socio-material assemblages – a notion that Grint draws from Latourian actor network theory – that lack intrinsic *essence*. In both the books reviewed here, Grint is careful to eschew the idea that there can ever be an uncontested, once-and-for-all-time *definition* of 'leader' or 'leadership', or that such concepts can be unproblematically operationalized within a rational *science* of the subject. Rather, conceptions of leaders and leadership should always be approached as an outcome of historical and present social circumstances. As such, they are always subject to contestation and perpetual revision within any given social milieu. Grint's *constitutive approach*

... is very much a pro-active affair for leaders. It is they who actively shape our interpretation of the environment, the challenges, the goals, the competition, the strategy, and the tactics; they also try and persuade us that their interpretations are both correct – and therefore the truth – and, ironically, not an interpretation but the truth. (Grint 2001, p. 4)

Taking a Foucauldian turn, moreover, Grint observes that 'what counts as true and false is not determined by the essence of the phenomena themselves, because such phenomena are brought into existence only through representation ... the "truth" is determined by the power of the discourse' (*ibid.*, p. 25). And discourses must always be socially and historically situated.

Rather than generate a rational *science* of leadership, therefore, Grint contends that it would be far more fecund and valuable to apply a series of 'arts' to the exploration and social scientific rendering of the phenomenon. He proposes, for example, that: the philosophical arts be applied to the study of leadership 'identity'; the performing arts facilitate insight through the 'theatre of persuasive communication'; fine arts offer a 'studio of strategic vision'; and martial arts a 'dojo of organizational tactics'. This, doubtless, was the impetus underlying his choice of title, *The Arts of Leadership* – a titular repudiation of mainstream scientism and celebration of the possibilities offered by alternative positions within the humanities.

Grint introduces a theoretical schema in *The Arts* which he goes on to develop and elaborate further in *Leadership*. Although leadership is an essentially contestable concept, it can be helpful, he contends, to map processes using a series of questions

relating to the 'who', 'what', 'how' and 'why' of the phenomenon. The later version of the schema found in *Leadership* sees 'why' supplanted by 'where'. Elements of the new nomenclature correspond respectively to leadership as Person (who), Result (what), Position (where) and Process (how). In other words, in historical and contemporary studies of leadership a certain structural *grammar* (my term) seems to inform lay and professional accounts. These, in turn, reflect particular explanatory dispositions, preferences and assumptions. According to some narratives, *who* leaders are makes them leaders, in others it is *what* leaders achieve, *where* they are located, or *how* they get things done that qualifies them as leaders. Forms of explanation can be located within this conceptual alembic; some focusing exclusively on one dimension and others proposing an admixture of the who, what, where and how motives.

My conjecture is that the structure of this schema betrays some classical philosophical influences on Grint's thinking. It strikes me that the who, what, where and how reflect the *quis*, *quibus auxiliis*, *ubi* and *quomodo* elements of classical grammar. These are typical of the motivational elements developed, for instance, in Cicero's *De Inventione* (Kennedy 1972) or Boethius' 'circumstances of action' in *De Topicis Differentis* (Leff 1978) for the purposes of textual exegesis; although the latter grammars each include more than four analytical categories. There is also a family resemblance between Grint's theoretical schema and the grammatical pentad deployed by Kenneth Burke in his social theoretical and literary critiques (Burke 1969a; 1969b). This prompts me to query the slight anomaly that appears in Grint's framework as it evolves from the initial form in the *The Arts* to that found in *Leadership*. Leadership narratives (particularly in the business and political world) often point to the 'visionary' nature of the leaders and their charismatic and persuasive communication skills. Leaders are commonly spoken of as supplying the *why* or 'purpose', to borrow from Burke's pentad, of organized collective action. So my suggestion would be that, rather than drop 'why' (*cur*) in favour of 'where' (*ubi*), the schema could usefully be expanded to include all five structural elements.

While I have focused thus far on aspects of Grint's theoretical schema and interrogation of structures of explanation, it is important to note that in both books the majority of his text is given over to the elaboration of examples which illustrate the constitutive approach he is at pains to advance. The historical analyses often centre around iconic figures or, as Grint frames them, 'extreme leaders', but these accounts are far more than hackneyed heroic portraits of the sort that characterize much writing on 'great leaders'. On the contrary, Grint invariably has an eye toward reflexivity and complexity, taking care to situate his analyses within the sociopolitical and socioeconomic supporting conditions that give rise to the leader or leadership case in question. In this respect, he seems to have taken to heart Tolstoy's injunctions regarding the study of history, 'To study the laws of history we must completely change the subject of our observation, must leave aside kings, ministers, and generals, and study the common, infinitesimally small elements by which the masses are moved' (Tolstoy 1952, p. 470). So while the names of famous and infamous leaders, such as Florence Nightingale, Henry Ford, Horatio Nelson, Adolf Hitler, Martin Luther King and Richard Branson, feature in separate chapters of *The Arts*, their *agency* with respect to historical events is invariably problematized in Grint's treatment, and socio-material dimensions of analysis are introduced to challenge the otherwise iconic status of these 'individuals'. Likewise, in *Leadership* the illustrative cases often work ironically to toy with or upset common-sense interpretations. The reader is educated variously as to the hybrid nature of leadership during the D-Day landings, the parallels between Spartacus's leadership in the Third Servile War and the organization of Nazi death camps, and the hydra-like

networked leadership that characterized both the Civil Rights movement in the USA and the organization of al-Qaeda. There are no sacred cows in Grint's leadership cosmos and just about any established view (Transformational Leadership, Distributed Leadership, etc.) or cherished idea of nobility (Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi) are fair game for his deconstructive analytical gaze.

In the space available, I have only been able to offer a cursory and selective overview of Grint's thinking as represented in the two volumes chosen for review. This fails to capture the laconic wit and serious playfulness with which he engages in his theorization and analysis of leaders and leadership phenomena. I would certainly encourage readers who are unfamiliar with his oeuvre to explore the writings of this heterodox thinker; and either of the books considered here would be worthwhile places to start. Not only are they intrinsically rewarding reads, they are also useful resources for teaching purposes. Grint's work can act as a valuable intellectual irritant to challenge received leadership wisdom and disabuse students of previously held assumptions and prejudices. This is no bad thing in a business school milieu that is increasingly susceptible to facile recipes and easy answers. I often make much in my classes of Grint's opening Socratic remarks in *The Arts*:

In 1986, before I first began to study leadership in a serious manner, my knowledge of it was complete. I knew basically all there was to know ... I should have stopped then, because ever since that time my understanding has decreased in direct proportion to my increased knowledge: in effect, the more I read, the less I understood. (Grint 2001, p. 1)

Such scholastic humility, to my mind at least, is an extremely important value to impart to students of leadership or, for that matter, any other subject.

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