Un-willing is un-leading: leadership as beastly desire

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In this essay, we associate leadership with desire as understood by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. We start from Jacques Derrida's notion of the sovereign resembling beasts and criminals, contrary to common, elevated accounts of leaders. In the course of the essay, we show that desire is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for enduring charismatic leadership to occur. In other words, to become and remain a leader, the leader has to evince desire not only towards leading and having followers, but also towards desire itself. This second-order desire or 'desirefulness' makes leadership a business of gathering and displaying excess. We exemplify our theoretical treatment with two micro-biographies of contemporary charismatic leaders, Silvio Berlusconi of Italy and Vladimir Putin of Russia. We do this in order to highlight the aspect of leadership that is charismatic, effective and unethical, something that is most often omitted from analyses of leadership. Our findings are twofold: first, we identify a triple hermeneutic of leadership between leader and followers, and second, we understand leadership as being profoundly meta-ethical, defining the boundaries of the social and the ethical.

Keywords: *beast, desire, ethics, leadership, meta-ethics, Silvio Berlusconi, Vladimir Putin*

1 INTRODUCTION

'... all three of them, the animal, the criminal, and the sovereign, are outside the law, at a distance from or above the laws: criminal, beast, and sovereign strangely resemble each other while seeming to be situated at the antipodes, at each other's antipodes.'

Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign* (2011, I:17)

The starting point of our essay is the thinking of Jacques Derrida on sovereignty, and whose notions we apply to understanding leadership. When adapting Derrida to contemporary leadership theory, beasts and leaders appear similar in several respects. For us, it is a clear indication of what societies often refuse to acknowledge: some leaders are beyond what societies deem as good and evil. This is the case even today, despite the fact that contemporary leadership discourse favours completely different, thoroughly 'ethical' archetypes – such as 'servant leadership' (Greenleaf 1977), for instance. In order to understand the role of ethics and leadership more thoroughly, we need to relax the assumption of leaders being subjected to the same ethical criteria as their followers. Thus, in the course of this essay, we delve into the meta-ethics of leadership

through understanding the role that desire plays in it. Our contribution to the shared understanding of leadership is the notion of desire that enables some leaders to be meta-ethical.

We understand leadership as emerging from *the natural phenomenon of human social organization being structured along various forms of 'leaders' and 'followers'*. Thus, we take a rather general stance towards leading and following. By this, we acknowledge the difficulty of drawing definitive conceptual boundaries around such a complex phenomenon – it would hardly be fruitful to do so (Ciulla 2012, p. 512). Thus, we are not closely wedded to any particular discourse on leadership, but, rather, aim at articulating it from a more general, meta-ethical standpoint. When scrutinising the personal conduct of many historical and contemporary charismatic leaders, one cannot help but notice that they are often 'beyond good and evil', in a very Nietzschean (2003) manner. Leaders are not only 'gods' to their followers (Gabriel 1997), but the more elevated their social status, the more symbolised, uncontested and taken-for-granted they appear to be. Thus, the extent of their detachment from the ethical register enhances the veneer of their charisma. In effect, leaders are symbols for their followers (and quite often nothing else) – when their seats are vacated, they *have to be filled*, as Gilles Deleuze (1983, p. 151, quoting from Heidegger 1977, p. 69) suggests:

Why would man have killed God, if not to take his still warm seat? Heidegger remarks, commenting on Nietzsche, 'if God ... has disappeared from his authoritative position in the suprasensory world, then this authoritative place itself is still always preserved ... the empty place demands to be occupied anew and to have the god now vanished from it replaced by something else.'

We could call this need *the symbolic imperative*, according to which leaders are the great reference points around which the social organization develops its decision-making (in association with this, see the discussion on the 'need' for leadership by De Vries et al. 2002). However, noting this symbolic imperative is not a stop but, rather, a start in understanding the nature of leadership – echoing the suggestion that heroic leadership is indeed the space in which leadership operates, not its demise (Grint 2010). In this regard, contextual factors of the social organization in structuring leadership should be taken into account (Ladkin 2011). Although various leader archetypes have appeared in the literature (Alvesson and Spicer 2011; Hatch et al. 2005; Kuronen and Virtaharju 2015), we fail to understand *the contributing factors and mechanism(s) that create the conditions for a highly symbolised (or charismatic) leadership to occur*. There continues to be something 'hidden' in the formation of charisma, especially with regard to commonly shared ethical norms. This is exemplified by the radical difference between mainstream Western ethics and the latitude (some) leaders are permitted in the same context. Putting it bluntly, it seems that some leaders are allowed to be particularly unethical and get away with it.

In this essay, we describe the role of desire in the construction of charismatic leadership and how it is manifested in becoming meta-ethical. More precisely, we are intrigued by how 'desirefulness' is often (unconsciously) regarded as an asset in the leader persona, something that defies the common categories of logical and ethical analysis. Thus, we start from the notion of desire as being something that makes leadership charismatic – something regressive and thus detrimental that should be avoided, as some critical commentators have argued (Gemmill and Oakley 1992; Kets de Vries 1987). This, we would like to point out, is a value-laden judgement. In the course of this paper, we highlight and

discuss the leader representations of two well-known but rather unconventional leaders of our time: Silvio Berlusconi and Vladimir Putin.¹

In our treatment of the topic, we understand symbolism as a ‘critical practice’ (Weiskopf and Willmott 2013) of questioning and problematising meaning, orders and semiotic rules-in-use in which subjects (like the beastly, charismatic leaders of our essay) (re) define their relations to themselves and others. The understanding that we apply in our analysis is loosely associated with the semantics of the body (Lingis 1994; Mauss 1935 [2006]; Merleau-Ponty 2002; Rutrof 1997), emphasising the role of the body in the meaning-making process, viewing it as an integral part of the hermeneutic structuring of meaning. We identify and discuss visual representations of leadership and how they are associated with the body of the leader. In sum, we understand leaders through the desire manifested by a leader towards leading (and further, their *desire for desire*), as well as through the followers’ desire to be led.

2 THE LEADER AND THE BEAST

2.1 The body of the leader

Associating the body with the concept of the ‘rhizome’ by Deleuze and Guattari (1980), Horst Rutrof (1997, p. 17) views the semantic force of the body to be expressed in how ‘it forges links and makes sense’ even when facing high levels of syntactic adversity. This view emphasises the role of the body in the meaning-making process, viewing it as an integral part of the hermeneutic (more generally, we see that the construction of leadership should be understood through a variety of registers). Starting from mediaeval monarchs, the body politic and the body natural of the king have been separated (Kantorowicz 1957). Insights established by Kantorowicz are classic in the field; according to this dichotomous (and transcendental) understanding, the natural body of the king is the one that gets ill, is weakened as time goes by, feels hunger like any other human body, and so forth. The body politic, however, is the transcendental body of the sovereign, serving as the symbol of his rule, the one imbued with divine authority. This is the construct that is also the focus of leadership studies.

Taking a closer look at the natural register brings us closer to understanding that leaders are foundationally human despite the appealing and institutionalised epistemic constructs of leadership. By acknowledging the level of unconscious urges of the leader as an individual (for a discussion of the ethical ‘failures’ of leaders, see Ludwig and Longenecker 1993), we may anticipate what motivates the emergence of leadership in the first place. Apart from engaging with the meta-ethics of leadership, we also discuss the embodied nature of leadership, something that has received increased attention of late; see for instance an analysis of the embodied leadership of Theodore Roosevelt (Redekop 2016) or an anti-Cartesian, embodied analysis of leadership in the military context (Fisher and Robbins 2015).

Sverre Spoelstra and René ten Bos (2011) discuss the views of the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek on leadership. They associate leadership with carefully concealing inappropriate or damaging circumstances from the public eye. In this way, the leader will be saved from ruining his or her career – that is, damaging the immaterial, sublime body of the leader (ibid., pp. 193–194). Through the leaders described in this essay, we show that

1. Ultimately, we are intrigued by the foundational questions of humanity; is leadership one of the ‘human universals’, among music, sport, sex, language and intoxication?

this is not always the case. Some leaders earn more ill repute than others. This notion of shame-resistant leaders is consistent with our theoretical view of the meta-ethical nature of certain leaders. In other words, in some cases the sins of a leader body natural do not affect the transcendental and sublime body politic. We explore the leader body, desire and energy through understanding the nature of the media representations (that is, public leadership constructs) of two contemporary, charismatic leaders: Silvio Berlusconi and Vladimir Putin (who also happen to be good friends).

2.2 Followers without organs

The *low* and commonly held notion of ‘beastly desire’ is closely associated with how unconsciously motivated traits are manifested in the leaders of human societies. So beastly is this desire to lead and stay at the helm that it sometimes requires help from the contemporary medical industry. Commenting on Silvio Berlusconi, Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi (2012, p. 67) notes that, in fact, these are older men, seeking ‘help from biotechniques, psycho-chemistry, and pharmacology’. In his analysis, Berardi emphasises the role of energetic strength and how it contributes to the ‘delirium of power’ (ibid., p. 68). What is more, he brings an alternative reading to the question of desire. For him, money buys things, but desire creates them (he also agrees it is not based on lack). Whereas Deleuze and Guattari (1980; 1983) draw a distinction between interest and desire, Berardi sees desire as ‘an enhancer of vision, as a creative activity’ (2012, p. 109). For Deleuze and Guattari, pure desire is at the core of human existence.

The concept of a ‘body without organs’ (henceforth BwO), introduced by Deleuze in his book *The Logic of Sense* (1990) and developed further in *Anti-Oedipus* (Deleuze and Guattari 1983), originally refers to the writings of the French author Antonin Artaud. Drawing on developmental psychology and the ‘life of intensities-in-motion’ (Smith and Protevi 2013), BwO refers to the underlying reality of a system made of constituent parts – an undifferentiated realm beneath the surface of appearances. Within the confines of this essay, we associate the ‘infant’ used by developmental psychologists (mostly by Daniel N. Stern) with the follower of a charismatic leader. The infant is the one that makes *sense* (literally!) of the *nonsense* that he or she encounters from the moment of birth. Similarly, those ‘intensities-in-motion’ that constitute the flow of leadership stimuli become made-sense-of through the act of (re)interpretation, manifested in the act of followership. Humans have the innate tendency (or should it, in fact, be called *desire*?) to make sense of their surroundings, in their constant and ongoing attempt to connect with their parents and physical surroundings. This is also something that makes leadership possible and could, arguably, be one of the contributing mechanisms of leadership.

Taking the matter to a level beyond the individual, Georges Bataille uses the concepts of economy to describe his theory or model of society. He explains how opposite impulses in an economy require one another not because they are dialectical opposites, but because they only arise as apparent contradictions in the form of one another (Bataille 1991; Mansfield 2008, p. 64). In other words, contradictions arise through the running-on of an impulse to something that is necessarily more than itself. Thus, the ‘need’ for leadership (De Vries et al. 2002) becomes an underlying driver for the leadership to take place in the first place, and it becomes an economic factor. The leader must desire leadership in order to satisfy the need for the followers to consume it. Viewed in this light, the leader is the external source of stimuli, the provider of sensory experience for the follower, who, for his or her part, is the body without organs, the infant that tries to make sense of the world and thus communicate with him/herself through the projection of his/her so-called ‘parent’. The BwO lives in

the realm of the economy of eroticism, the content of which is the representation of the leader body, the mode of which takes place through the act of worship.

For the purposes of our analysis, as well as for Berardi's polemic of the state of contemporary financial capitalism, the eroticising of the visual is a crucial matter. For him, desire 'is diverted from physical contact and invested in the abstract field of simulated seduction, in the infinite space of the image' (Berardi 2012, p. 116). This is a crucial point in his analysis, as it connects desire to the realm of the visual and the leader-beasts. In a sense, it is also a symptom of our time, as lacking even the remote possibility of physical contact with our leaders (in tribal social formations the setting was radically different) leads to our becoming unconsciously attached to the visualisations of leadership – contributing instead to the 'virtualisation' of leadership (Boje and Rhodes 2005). Photographs become erotic precisely because we *do not know* our leaders. This detachment between leaders and their followers creates the possibility of tyranny, as mechanisms of social sanctioning cannot be in place for physically and socially non-existing leaders. Tragically enough, leaders do not 'exist' in the world of their followers. This may lead to a situation in which leaders who are not tightly embedded in any functioning society with transparent and effective means of social sanctioning will inevitably become corrupt. Thus, in a sense, the desire that makes leadership possible is perverted in the age of the image (and the consequent forms of virtual leadership) and followers end up desiring their own oppression. In short, being outside of a society also detaches one from the register of the ethical – the system according to which social rights and wrongs are intuitively and collectively negotiated, in an ongoing manner.² However, in order to tie the threads of leader beasts and followers without organs together, we need to consider the ontology of desire, a discussion on which appears in the section that follows.

2.3 Interest and desire

In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1983) attempted to formulate a purely immanent theory of desire (Smith 2007). In a sense, this concept of desire is based on dramatization. This drama serves the purpose of a leader's existence, while nevertheless remaining in the background of the leader's unconscious motivational system. Politically, this view is akin to *Realpolitik* and aligns well with Nietzsche's (1976, p. 458) view of perspectivism: 'it is precisely facts that do not exist, only interpretations...'. Ultimately, with the term 'desire', Deleuze refers to 'the state of the unconscious drives' (Smith 2007, p. 74). 'Drives', for their part, are the desiring machines – ones that are always regimented by the societies in which they are embedded. The typologies of those systems into which we are embedded are, for Deleuze and Guattari, those of 'primitive territorial societies', 'States', 'capitalism' and 'nomadic war machines' (Smith 2007, p. 71).

We draw one more distinction from the work of Deleuze and Guattari, the one between desire and interest. An interest is something that one may pursue in a highly rational manner, such as an education, a career and matters of social status. It always remains, however, within the bounds of the current social formation. In such a situation, one's desire is positively aligned with the social formation; one has invested in it (Smith 2007, p. 74). This is in contrast to the common notion of desire that defines itself through lack (such as in popular notions of the Buddhist faith). For Deleuze,

2. This strand of meta-ethical discussion is not elaborated further in this paper. Suffice it to say that leaders are beasts vis-à-vis the society they are supposed to lead.

lack always appears at the level of interest, not of desire, because the very social formation has created the lack one has invested one's interest in. Furthermore, for our part, we see desire as one of the great motivators of the 'will to lead', manifested in all human societies. Let us consider, for example, the following leaders of our time.³

3 TWO LEADERS OF OUR TIME

3.1 Silvio Berlusconi

Silvio Berlusconi was born in Milan, Italy, on October 29, 1936. He was the first child of Luigi, a bank employee, and Rosa Berlusconi, a housewife. His mother took care of the children, including one younger sister and one younger brother along with Silvio. Berlusconi studied law at the Università Statale in Milan, has been married twice, and has fathered five children. His business career began in the construction industry in the late 1960s, as his company built some 4,000 apartments in a residential area near Milan (Carlin 2004). In 1973, he established Telemilano, a cable television company, mainly to provide the television services for his real-estate projects. The company subsequently acquired two other television channels, and four years later, in 1977, it started broadcasting publicly. Berlusconi's first – and most notable – media company, Fininvest, emerged the following year (Day 2015). The Fininvest group currently consists of various branches: commercial television (Mediaset), cinema (Medusa), publishing (Mondadori), sport (AC Milan), pensions, banking and insurance finance (Mediolanum) (Fininvest website 2010). At present, Berlusconi's family controls the group, as his family members constitute half of the board of directors (as at September 2015).

Berlusconi's political career started in the 1990s when he entered the 1994 Italian elections with his newly formed Forza Italia party. The party was heavily supported by Fininvest, which earned the party several derogatory nicknames in a short period of time. At that time, Italy was torn by social and political unrest, and acts of political violence occurred. Berlusconi sensed an opportunity in the turmoil of the early 1990s, and targeted voters with claims of being in search of 'good governance'. However, as prosecutors of a case against Berlusconi's long-time friend and ally Marcello Dell'Utri insist, it was the mafia that organised the bombings in order to spread fear and enable Berlusconi to win the election (Hooper 2010). Moreover, Fininvest was at that time under extensive investigation for being associated with the bribery of politicians. Berlusconi himself has admitted that he was 'forced to enter politics' to avoid imprisonment (Peretz 2011). The election proved a success and Berlusconi was sworn in as Prime Minister in May 1994, appointing the key cabinet posts from among his own party. The government fell in December 1994 after Milanese prosecutors filed a preliminary notice of a criminal investigation against Berlusconi ('Forza Italia Sito Nazionale' 2007). In the election that followed in 1996, centre-left Romano Prodi defeated Berlusconi and his party, sending them into opposition for a period of five years.

Between 2001 and 2006 Berlusconi served his second term as Prime Minister. His rightist coalition prevailed largely due to his promises of wide reforms prior to the

3. Our aim is to highlight the role of desire as a background to the phenomena relating to the superficiality of appearance. Moreover, by discussing leaders that are largely deemed unethical, we show the 'other' side of leadership, which is often – but not always – omitted from the dominant leadership discourse. Leadership theorists prefer to focus on 'good' leadership. This leads to the canonisation of certain leadership types, styles and individuals. By describing the 'bad guys', we shed light on a significant aspect of the totality of the phenomenon of leadership.

elections. Berlusconi would head two cabinets before he presented President Ciampi with a request for the dissolution of his government on April 20, 2005. Berlusconi's right-wing coalition lost the 2006 election by the slightest margin imaginable, only 0.1 percent, to the competing centre-left coalition, again led by Prodi. Berlusconi's comeback would take place in 2008, as the dwindling popularity and abrupt fall of Prodi's government enabled the centre-right coalition to seize the political arena. The turmoil of Italian political culture was manifested during the next few years as verbal scuffles between Berlusconi, his supporters, allies (including former ones) and oppositionists. In the end, Berlusconi was unable to combat the tightening economic situation with due measures. On November 12, 2011 Berlusconi duly tendered his resignation to President Napolitano.

Throughout his political career, rumours have circulated about Berlusconi's links to organised crime. Moreover, his association with conservative circles of Italian society is also documented (Day 2015). For example, in 1978, along with establishing Fininvest, he joined the 'Propaganda Due' (P2) pseudo-masonic lodge (Ginsborg 2003), known for its links to anti-communist operations, corruption and clashes with conservative politicians and members of the security apparatus, as well as for financing 'Dirty War' operations in Latin America in the 1970s. His name was discovered on a list found in Licio Gelli's house, which was raided in association with the Banco Ambrosiano scandal involving the Vatican Bank. As a vehement anti-communist, Berlusconi is known for insulting his adversaries by calling them 'communists'. This is an indication of his deep hatred towards the political left. He has even sued the British liberalist magazine *The Economist* (which he calls *The Econommunist*) for the publication of 'accusations' and 'insults' against him. The conflict was resolved in 2008 when Berlusconi was ordered to cover the legal expenses. For an indication of their current relations, see *The Economist*'s more recent 'The man who screwed an entire country' (*The Economist* 2011).

One of his most notable businesses – and something he is very passionate about – is the football club AC Milan. Regarding his character and relationship with football, Italian footballer Andrea Pirlo (Pirlo and Alciato 2014, p. 77) notes that Berlusconi is 'theatrical and knows exactly what he wants. It's what makes him such a fantastic president and lover of pure, beautiful football. Winning isn't enough for him'. In fact, whenever the club would win an important match, Berlusconi would 'burst into song, strum along with his mucker Mariano Apicella, tell jokes' (ibid., p. 81). Such devotion and effusive emotion are the building blocks of charisma, a positive kind of energy that makes people follow their leader. In the words of Mario d'Urso (a centre-left politician), in Italy 'it's very difficult to dislike him' – Berlusconi brought both football and Italy's first topless game show into people's homes (Peretz 2011).

Speaking about his leadership style, Pirlo continues (Pirlo and Alciato 2014, p. 78):

It's perhaps difficult to understand, and even harder to explain, but whenever we heard the whir of his helicopter at Milanello, it sparked a positive feeling deep within us. We were like abandoned dogs furiously wagging our tails at the return of our master. Once he was on the ground, he'd speak with the players and soon have us wound up like coiled springs.

As Berlusconi has a 'thing' for music, playing bass and singing himself, occasionally composing his own songs, his leadership style and character could be described as conservative, yet boyishly lavish and exaggerated. He is internationally renowned for gaffes (or intentional public insults) towards people he dislikes, raising both internal and external concerns about the credibility of the Italian political system. Yet he is very well-liked in Italy – not least because of his predilection for beautiful women

(notwithstanding the fact that some of them have been on the young side). A good friend and ally of controversial political figures, George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin among them, Berlusconi does not seem to care about playing by the same set of rules as his European peers. He embodies an alternative to the serious, factual and moral Northern European leadership style. Moreover, he may well be the most prosecuted man in the history of Italy. The trials and allegations with which he is associated include twelve subsections, including ‘abuse of office, defamation, extortion, child sexual abuse, perjury, mafia collusion, false accounting, embezzlement, money laundering, tax fraud, witness tampering, corruption and bribery of police officers, judges and politicians’ (‘Trials and Allegations Involving Silvio Berlusconi’ 2015) – each and every one of which would be enough to tarnish the name of any other politician, let alone *all of them*. Berlusconi’s ability to survive scandal is truly unique.

3.2 Vladimir Putin

Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin was born on October 7, 1952 in Leningrad to a Second World War veteran father, and a mother who was a Siege of Leningrad survivor. Putin’s mother was Russian Orthodox, and duly had her son baptised into the faith. Putin’s grandfather, Spiridon Ivanovich Putin (1879–1965), had worked as a personal chef to Vladimir Lenin, and to Josef Stalin after him. Putin’s two older brothers died young, and Putin was the only remaining child.

His core professional credentials were acquired during his time as an intelligence officer in the KGB, where he served for sixteen years, eventually rising to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. Between 1994 and 1998 he worked as first deputy to the then Mayor of St Petersburg, Anatoli Sobotšak. Putin subsequently took up a post in Yeltsin’s presidential administration, initially in the financial department, headed by Pavel Borodin. From July 1998 to August 1999, Putin served as director of the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB), where he attained both ministerial and military general status. Eventually he was appointed Prime Minister in 1999. When Yeltsin unexpectedly resigned as President in December of the same year, Putin was appointed as his successor and president-in-waiting. Putin was officially elected President in 2000, remained in office until 2008, and was re-elected in 2012 after a second term as Prime Minister from 2008 to 2012.

Due to his background in the intelligence service, Putin understood that one of the keys to success was networking, as well as surrounding himself with an entourage of ‘good friends’. Putin’s popularity is based on economic growth, over which he himself has had no influence (Treisman 2011). The global economic boom, which began in the early 2000s, and the rise in the oil price in particular, had a direct impact on the income level of ordinary Russians. Just as the low oil price and recession in Russia contributed to Yeltsin’s downfall (Whitefield 2005), the Kremlin’s propaganda apparatus gave Putin the credit for Russia’s newfound prosperity. During Putin’s first term (2000–2004), real incomes in Russia rose by a factor of 2.5, while real wages more than tripled. Public-approval ratings confirmed that the Russian people believed they were considerably better off under Putin (Gurieva and Tsyvinski 2010). ‘... Putin is Putin largely because Yeltsin was Yeltsin’, claimed Robert Brannon (2009, p. xiii). This simple yet meaningful statement implies that Putin managed to liberate Russia from the degradation it had endured during Yeltsin’s boozy, stumbling era of uncontrolled privatisation of Soviet-era state corporations. Under Putin, people realised that change was possible: salaries were paid, a flat tax of 13 percent took effect, which helped to alleviate corruption, and Putin himself assumed command of the military forces.

In his autobiography, Putin speaks of lowly beginnings in a communal apartment in Leningrad, shared by several families (Putin et al. 2000, p. 208). A blend of orthodox religion and communist rigour sits well with Putin's public persona (Zimmerman 2014), emphasising the heroic survivor myth around his person. In the Russian context, a strong leader must have so-called 'street credibility'. 'Little Volodya', as Putin was known, started school in 1960 and joined the Young Pioneers, quickly rising to the leader of his group. In his youth he also hung out on the streets, where he fared well thanks to his judo skills. He later revealed that it was his athletic prowess which had helped him to break free from the street-gang scene. Apart from sport, he was particularly interested in the German language, as well as Russian history and literature.

In 1970 he was accepted into the Leningrad State University to study law. As a student, he attracted the attention of the KGB and was duly invited to work for them. Putin graduated from the Law Department of Leningrad State University in 1975. His thesis, entitled *The Most Favored Nation Trading Principle in International Law*, later came in for criticism for being heavily plagiarised, but the accusations led nowhere. Plagiarism notwithstanding, after graduating, Putin went on to work in the Second Chief Directorate (counter-intelligence) before being transferred to the First Chief Directorate, where his duties entailed monitoring foreigners and consular officials in Leningrad.

A world-level leader must always have a war to wage (Tsygankov 2012), and Putin is no exception. After 9/11, he strongly supported the US in the so-called war on terror. In so doing, Putin gained the unwavering trust of the Bush regime, despite taking a strong stance against the US-led invasion of Iraq. Putin has also mastered the art of rhetoric and knows how to handle the Russian media sphere, which he *de facto* controls (Roxburgh 2012). He is also known for his crude language – intensifying his speech every now and then with slang expressions common among the *Blatnoi*, a criminal mafia-like organisation in Russia. For example, after the 1999 apartment bombings in Moscow, Prime Minister Putin famously retorted: 'I am tired of answering these questions. Russian aircraft are only attacking terrorist strongholds. We will pursue them everywhere. Excuse my saying so, if we catch them in the toilet, we'll whack them in the outhouse' (Camus 2006, p. 3).

Putin has cultivated an outdoorsy, sporty, macho image in the media, demonstrating his masculinity and fearlessness by engaging in extreme sports and tackling wild animals. For example, in 2007 the tabloid *Komsomolskaya Pravda* published a large photograph of a bare-chested Putin vacationing in the Siberian mountains under the headline: 'Be Like Putin' (Eckel 2007). Before the autumn 2007 Duma elections, Putin appeared in public stripped to the waist, fishing astride a horse (*The Guardian* 2007). Likewise, in August 2008 he is said to have prevented a Siberian tiger from attacking a camera crew by stopping the animal in its tracks with a tranquiliser gun (Glendinning 2008). In September 2012 he is even purported to have jumped aboard a motorised hang glider to lead a flock of endangered Siberian cranes on their migratory flight (Amos 2012).

4 DISCUSSION: THE SILENCE OF THE KINGS

4.1 The triple hermeneutic of desire in leadership

The understanding of leadership through desire opens up avenues of reflection on meta-ethical matters. As noted by Deleuze and Guattari, desire stems from the

Figure 1 The triple hermeneutic of desire in leadership

foundations of the social formation, thus placing it at the deep end of socialisation, in the ‘blueprint’ of society. This also makes it a meta-ethical phenomenon – residing as it does somewhere between nature and culture, with members of society prioritising desire and leadership over transgression of the ethical code. Our additional insight into understanding the limits of leadership is the identification of *the triple hermeneutic of desire in leadership* (see Figure 1).⁴

First, the leader who desires followers enough has the potential to become a leader in actuality. Making a rather banal ‘Derridean’ comparison, first-order desire is something shared between the three characters outside the bounds of the social: the beast desires flesh, the criminal desires forbidden treasures, the leader desires followers (who desire leadership in turn). Consider Silvio Berlusconi or Vladimir Putin for a moment. Berlusconi is a known womaniser, a self-made businessman, and a reaper of fortunes by questionable means. In Italy, Berlusconi is characterised as a ‘master shaman’ or ‘trickster’ who uses mafia connections and methodologies, but who nevertheless possesses an aura of astuteness and good fortune (Shin and Agnew 2008, p. 2). Putin, whose family emerged from simple beginnings, made his career in the Soviet secret service, has allegedly amassed a large fortune outside of his native Russia, and currently serves as the ‘hard-man’ head of the country. What is expected of these men is not respect for democracy, equality and secular values. Quite the contrary. Rather than living according to moralist ideals, they pursue their visions with a display of unrelenting, energetic adherence to achieving their goals – an endeavour in which they succeed. Their *energy* along with a record of *success* are the reasons for their widespread and lasting support and popularity – not because their leadership has been particularly ethical or legitimate.

Second, followers need leadership, as established elsewhere (De Vries et al. 2002). In ‘desireful’ parlance, followers constitute their lives through a desire to be directed by someone else. This is also the primary contributing mechanism that creates the possibility for leadership in the first place. Moreover, beyond this rather trivial notion,

4. Here, we use ‘hermeneutic’ instead of ‘logic’ or any other term. This is due to our understanding of how the nature of leadership as a social phenomenon requires skills and adaptations of social interpretation or social literacy – in other words, abilities to understand the social phenomenon of leading and following. Thus, it is more fruitful to understand the social as a text that requires hermeneutic interpretation rather than an object of logical analysis.

there is a third hermeneutic at play in the generation of leadership: *followers desire a leader that desires them*. In other words, it is not enough to desire leadership or to be desired, but the crucial point is to be a desiring leader. This is shown in both leaders discussed in this essay. Berlusconi and Putin are leaders that show *their* desire, which makes it easy for their followers to adhere to them. This is directly comparable to the affect between lovers, or children and their parents – those who show affection are loved. We know from the field of developmental psychology that dislocation from parents generates anxiety in an infant. Similarly, leadership should not be separated from followership. Just as children live off the energy given to them by their parents, followers live off the energy bestowed upon them by their leaders.

Leaders that appear on the radar of global public interest tend to be hungry for power and followers. They are embodied leader spectacles. Moreover, people desire to be led, which creates the space for reciprocal desire. From this perspective, it is the communities that generate their leaders (or elevate them to the leading position from within society). This is in stark contrast to the way in which leadership has been traditionally viewed, as if the destinies of societies were the end products of the characters and actions of their ‘great men’ (Carlyle 1841). In practice, we suspect that this process of leadership construction is co-evolutionary; individuals with desires for power are attracted to leading positions, and their desires are catered for by the social organisations they are embedded into. Beyond the desires of leading and following, we see that followers desire a *desiring* leader (or even that the leaders desire the desire to be desired). Thus, it is simplistic to note that leaders desire power and followers. The additional, already established view is that followers also desire to be led by a leader. Our contribution, however, is that a desiring leader is never satisfied but always desires more and more – a leader with an incessant urge to desire – *everything and eternally* (in financial capitalism this would translate into a hedge-fund manager who has no limit to his/her greed). This particular individual is someone who enjoys (near-)libidinal satisfaction from the fulfilment of his/her desire. The room for manoeuvre they are able to create increases to a point at which their status transcends ethics. Thus, it is not enough (in fact, not allowed) to reach one’s objectives: one has to want even *more*, resonating well with what Derrida (2011, I:257) writes about sovereignty:

What is essential and proper to sovereignty is thus not grandeur or height as geometrically measurable, sensible, or intelligible, but excess, hyperbole, 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, the absolutely more, the absolute supplement that exceeds any comparative toward an absolute superlative.

In the animal world, as Alphonso Lingis (1994, p. 135) notes, organs have to be seen: ‘iridescent fins, lizard headcrests, arrays of shimmering plumes, mountain-sheep horns, extravagantly crayoned baboon buttocks’. It seems apparent that this is also the case for human leadership, especially in the light of how certain markers of social status are expected of leaders. In a sense, our position approaches the border of nature and culture; a relationship that has not been touched in the foundationally humanist tradition of ethics and leadership (for a recent book on this, see Ciulla 2014).

4.2 The meta-ethics of leadership

One thing that Derrida (2011) invites us to do with his juxtaposition of the animal, the criminal and the sovereign is to challenge, redefine and deconstruct the ethical basis of

leadership. He invites us to assess the validity of these categories and see that they are, in practice, not separate from each other at all. Rather, they are different expressions or manifestations of the same thing – something beyond social good and evil, making the discussion of leadership in fact one of (meta-)ethics.⁵

Moreover, there is no hierarchy between the categories (*à la* first animal, then criminal, then ..., and so on). They all are outside of the sphere of the social, but in different ways. The animal is ‘innocent’, ‘instinctual’ and ‘natural’, hence outside of society (and ethics). The criminal is ‘ill’, ‘inherently evil’ and ‘socio-politically dislocated’, hence outside of society (and ethics). The sovereign is ‘authoritative’, ‘leading’ and – given the silence on the issue – hence outside of society (and ethics).⁶ Although silence has been discussed vis-à-vis silencing opposition and anxiety (Grint 2010), we have not found any trace of a theoretical discussion on the ‘silence of leadership’. Intuitively, the sovereign–criminal–beast triad might be seen as a hierarchy. We, however, argue that the relationship between leader and followers is a lateral one. Followership lies below the leader and at the same time in-between the different articulations, as it is a construct of, as well as constitutive of, the society in which it is embedded.

Of the motivational sphere of leadership, we ask: what exactly is the purpose or the foundational reason for leadership to occur in the first place? Is there a transcendental ‘being’ (Tarasti 2015) or a teleological objective pursued by all the prospective leaders? Nietzsche would probably say that this is all a work of the ‘will to power’ found in all intellectual beings (1961; 1974; 2003).⁷ For Roberto Assagioli, the strength of the will determines its power, impetus and energy. There must be ‘enough intensity, enough “fire”, to carry out its purpose’ (Assagioli 1984, p. 35). For us, however, leadership is a meta-ethical endeavour that begs the question of *why* leaders are beyond the socially shared ethical. Thus, in a sense, whereas Deleuze and Guattari attempted to create a purely immanent theory of desire (Smith 2007), we raise the question of the possibility of a purely immanent theory of leadership (although we do not propose to resolve or answer it within the bounds of this essay).

In Figure 2, we depict the triangle of sovereignty as defined by Derrida (2011). Our addition to the picture is the sphere of society. In the discussion on leadership ethics, it also becomes the border of the ethical. Amusingly, the meta-ethical defines what is ethical. In other words, not everything is subjected to the same ethical standards in society. Leadership is such a phenomenon – some leaders are persons who manifest the phenomenon of leadership – taking them in practice beyond good and evil. Thus, in a sense, the leaders of a social formation define the ethical landscape of their social formation. That is: criminals, beasts and leaders define the qualitative

5. In this regard, let us consider the military context for a moment. It is customary today to talk about the justification for war, the rules of conduct and legal processes in international war crime tribunals. All in spite of the fact that most people view taking a human life as unethical in the first place! Shifting viewpoints may accommodate this view: as long as violence is meant to secure or further the interests of the common good of society or identity (Sen 2006), it automatically becomes more legitimate.

6. We spent considerable time reflecting on this matter, with no findings other than it seems that leaders are not only beyond the ethical register, but also the mere questioning or articulation of the boundaries of leadership is met with silence, indicating a further ‘beyondness’ concerning the matter. How this is distinct from a conventional taboo remains an open question.

7. Whether leadership is immanent or transcendental remains unanswered. It should be noted that although it does not ‘exist’ in the strict realist sense of the word, suffice it to say for our purposes that it is an object of pursuit.

Figure 2 The defining triad of 'the social ethical'

nature and extent of the ethical system within society – what is outside defines what is inside (Linstead and Thanem 2007).

Considering this, we arrive at something of an understanding of the meta-ethics of leadership. It is not a matter of becoming involved in the register of the ethical, but what is required of a leader goes *beyond* that very register. This is quite the opposite of what the ethical leadership theory states: Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) write that to be truly transformational, or 'authentic', leadership has to be grounded in an ethical basis, otherwise it is '*pseudo-transformational*'. We also remain sceptical of the argument that the failure of the authentic view lies in leaders being 'blinded' by values that align with the interests of others, along 'generally applicable moral requirements' (Price 2003, p. 79). Thus, we arrive at a view in which there is no 'Hitler problem' (Ciulla 1995, p. 13) in the first place. We argue, however, that the failure of the authentic view is deeper than that. Ethics and leadership effectiveness should either be seen in a local ethical context (instead of a general, transcendental one), or leaders should be seen to be beyond good and evil – not subjected to ethical criteria in the first place. This also serves as a comment on the view that leaders might believe that ethical criteria do not apply to themselves (Price 2000). There are leaders who *are de facto not subjected to* the same ethical criteria as their followers. If they are, the extent is much less profound and final than in the case of ordinary followers. This could be called 'ethics light'. Putting it bluntly: just because you can does not mean you should, but a leader may still be able to get away with it. Considering the locality or 'meta' nature of ethical standards sheds new light on the old saying that 'every nation gets the government it deserves' (de Maistre 1860, p. 196).

5 CONCLUSION

In this essay, we have shown how leadership is not only fuelled by desire, but is also a matter of meta-ethics. Both leaders explored in our essay are men who desire, who are desired and who go about their leadership with an energetic display of commitment towards their visions. They are *desireful* and *desirable*, but more importantly, they are beyond good and evil within the social context in which they are embedded. In these contexts (and we would contend more generally as well), excess is the nominator of a successful leader, a winner, someone to be loved. Through these examples, we have shown how leadership is – deep down – a matter of meta-ethics. From the social perspective, the society that elevates someone to be at the helm of things makes its call for sovereignty precisely *because* it wants that someone to be beyond good and evil – above the vice of morality – and the herd instinct in man.

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