The Sacred in Leadership: Separation, Sacrifice and Silence
Keith Grint

Abstract

In attempting to escape from the clutches of heroic leadership we now seem enthralled by its apparent opposite—distributed leadership: in this post-heroic era we will all be leaders so that none are. This essay suggests that we need to reconsider the nature of leadership if we are to assess alternatives and a critical aspect is its relationship to the sacred. I suggest that the sacred nature of leadership is not so much the elephant in the room but the room itself—the space that allows leadership to work. Leadership embodies three elements of the sacred: the separation between leaders and followers, the sacrifice of leaders and followers, and the way leaders silence the anxiety and resistance of followers. The essay concludes that non-sacred governance systems are plausible but that the effort and responsibility required would politicize the private sphere and render radical alternatives—non-sacred leadership—only viable for short-term, small scale organizations. We need therefore to find ways of engaging with, rather than seeking to avoid, the sacred nature of leadership.

Keywords: leadership, organization, sacred, sacrifice

Introduction

In a world allegedly besieged by financial crises, terrorism and political scandals, the calls for post-heroic leadership have become commonplace (Badarraco 2001; Cleveland 2002; Geva and Torpey 2008; Harris 2009). This alternative seeks to displace an earlier version of organizational control where ‘leaders are heroes—great men (and occasionally women) who rise to the fore in times of crises ... At its heart, the traditional view of leadership is based on assumptions of people’s powerlessness, their lack of personal vision and inability to master the forces of change, deficits which can be remedied only by a few great leaders’ (Senge 1990: 340). This is most evident in discussions of charismatic leadership but my focus here is beyond the specific nature of charisma to the nature of all leadership. The alternatives to charismatic or heroic leadership (for there are several varieties) imply that leadership either is unnecessary (Gemmil and Oakley 1997), or that it can be distributed equally among the collective (Bakunin 1970; Bennett et al. 2003; Buchanan et al. 2007; Kropotkin 2002), or that once the cause of conflict is removed it becomes unnecessary, whether that is private property, as Marx suggested, (cf. Polan 1984), or religion (cf. Froese 2008); or that heroic leadership is the consequence rather than the cause of organization (Draft 2001).
Indeed, the idea that leadership could be an unnecessary aspect of society or organization, or that it should be ‘distributed’, either moderately so leadership is shared or radically so that because everyone is a leader no-one is, has long antecedents in hunter-gatherer societies (Woodburn 1970), and in anarchist theory (Bakunin 1970; Kropotkin 2002; Miller 1984). But examples of radically distributed leadership in large scale or persistent organizations or institutions are notable by their absence (Washington et al. 2008), while examples of the tyranny of the collective are more commonplace (Sinclair 1992).

The recognition that leadership might be, at best, a necessary evil, has prompted some (e.g. Popper 1962) to argue that the critical task is not how to select leaders but how to reject them. For others the issue is not so much ‘leadership’, but what kind of ‘leadership’ and in particular those aspects of leadership relevant to the development of Distributed Leadership in which leadership resides ‘not solely in the individual at the top, but in every person at entry level who in one way or another, acts as a leader’ (Goleman 2002:14). Raelin (2003) attempts to contrast the distributed or leaderful organization with the traditional organization by suggesting that in leaderful organizations leadership is concurrent and collective rather than serial and individual—lots of people are engaged in it rather than just those in formal positions; that leadership is collaborative rather than controlling; that leadership is compassionate rather than dispassionate; and that this generates a community rather than simply an organization. Harris (2009) characterizes this as collective leadership—expertise that is developed by working collaboratively where the ‘leader’ is decentered. The apparent consequences of Distributive Leadership, according to Gronn (2003: 27–50), are threefold: first, ‘concertive action’—or leadership synergy—in which the whole of distributive leadership is greater than the sum of its parts; second, the boundaries of leadership become more porous encouraging many more members of the community to participate in leading their organizations; third, it encourages a reconsideration of what counts as expertise within organizations and expands the degree of knowledge available to the community. In sum, leadership becomes not a property of the formal individual leader but an emergent property of the group, network or community, a point that echoes some of the current work on the relationship between leadership and complexity (Uhl-Bien et al. 2007).

This constitution of leadership as the property of a collective rather than an individual is in direct contrast to the more conventional representation of leaders as saints or gods—the original heroes (Carlyle 1996/1840)—and implies that the quest to displace or redistribute leadership away from its current heroic mode might be extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. For example, the advertising hoarding for the 2007 Royal Academy of Arts exhibition ‘Citizens and Kings: Portraits in the Age of Revolution, 1760–1830’ in London, displayed a copy of Jacques-Louis David’s ‘Death of Marat’—a portrait that Outram (2006: 37) suggested had recalled ‘portrayals of Jesus in the arms of Mary after his Descent from the Cross, imagery that transformed this citizen into a secular saint’. In fact Marat, a failed scientist and leading, if rabid, journalist fed Mme Guillotine with his published lists of the guilty for some considerable time.

Durkheim (1996) would not have been surprised by the sacralization of such a revolutionary icon, for his study of primitive religions had already suggested
that the essential ideas and icons of society were everywhere made sacred so as to represent the collective essence of that society—it's political community—though which ideas and which icons was also essentially malleable. In effect, the French revolution, contrary to the rational principles of the revolutionaries, became a religion even as it displaced the Catholic Church and the monarchy. As Hunt (1988: 31) suggests

Revolutionary religion was not sacred because it rested on revelation, mystery or totems, but because it derived from the ‘political institution’ itself … There was no stable repertory of revolutionary festivals, no one lasting revolutionary cult. Festivals of Federation were succeeded by particular celebrations of events … Altars of the Fatherland gave way to the Cult of Reason, which in turn was replaced by the Cult of the Supreme Being, which in turn was replaced by Theophilanthropy, which in turn gave way to a revived Catholicism.

If leadership is necessarily connected to the sacred is this why attempts to distribute leadership are so difficult? Is the sacred, then, less the elephant in the room—the thing which dare not be mentioned—and more the room itself—the space within which leadership works? Perhaps the Tao De Ching Verse 11 captures the critical but invisible nature of the missing framework well:

Cut doors and windows for a room;
It is the holes which make it useful.
Therefore profit comes from what is there;
Usefulness from what is not there.1

Another reason why it appears invisible is because there are elements of it that we would rather not face—that is the veritable elephant itself: many of us eat meat but would rather not think about how the meat arrived on our plate; is the sacred nature of leadership the carnivore’s window on the slaughterhouse?

The etymology of the term ‘sacred’ offers clues as to its nature without providing an explanation for it (Collins English Dictionary 2005; Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology 1966). Hence ‘sacred’ comes from the Latin sacer meaning ‘sacred or holy or untouchable’ which itself came from the Latin sancire—‘consecrate, dedicated to a religious purpose, reverenced as holy, secured against violation; to set apart’. Thus one element of the sacred lies in the distance or difference between the sacred and the profane. Sacrilege—which comes from a Latin compound meaning ‘to steal holy things’—transcends this boundary and pollutes the sacred. Indeed, the original meaning of ‘hierarchy’ was Holy Sovereignty: archos means ‘sovereignty or ruler’ and hieros means ‘holy or divine’ in the original Greek. Hierarkhia was a sacral ranking and thus the concept of hierarchy is the sacred organizational space that facilitates god’s (or the priesthood’s) leadership. The Latin sacerdos means ‘priest’ and Sacrifice is derived from a Latin compound meaning ‘to make holy’, thus a second element of the sacred relates to the essential issue of sacrifice by those deemed closest to god—the priesthood: sacrifice is what makes something sacred—it performs leadership. Finally, sacred refers to ‘an attitude of reverence or awe’, ‘a silence in the presence of the divine’. That silence seems to imply two aspects: first, a silencing of the fears of believers as their god, or their god’s representative,
displaces any existential anxieties, or in the Ancient Greek version, where the gods themselves played out the existential fears of mere mortals. Nietzsche’s assessment of the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles in his *The birth of tragedy* also plays into this arena where the relationship between Dionysian passions and Apollonian restraint enables the audience to address the anxiety of life’s tragedy. Here the responsibility for actions is addressed and apportioned. Second, it implies a silencing of the potential opposition to the priesthood—or religious teachers—as non-believers and heretics are ‘silenced’.

The etymology then, suggests that the sacred aspect of leadership involves at least three aspects that pertain to the debate about leadership: ‘setting apart’—the division between the holy and the profane (which leaders in their liminal role have to transcend but with care [Turner 1974]); ‘sacrifice’—the act which makes something holy; and ‘silencing’ by the religious or secular leaders of both followers’ fears and dissent. To that end, attempts to displace leadership through desacrilized collective endeavours without individual leaders appear extraordinarily difficult to procure, for they would need to ensure the removal of this separation between leaders and led—in essence to make all followers the leaders and thus remove the conventional inequality of decision-making; the abolition of sacrifice; and the abandonment of silencing by those in authority so that followers demonstrated responsibility but exhibited no anxiety or dissent. Of course, this is different from attempts to dilute or redistribute leadership away from heroic individuals, but even the latter will require the retention or a radical reconstruction of these three sacred aspects to enable leadership. Let us proceed through this sacred leadership grove by considering in rather more detail the separation, the sacrifice and the silencing.

**Separation**

There is a long historical association between separation, proximity and leadership. Take, for instance, the ‘little touch of Harry in the night’ that settles the English army of Shakespeare’s *Henry V* on the eve of Agincourt: this is considered significant precisely because followers so rarely get close to their leaders, let alone touch them. Of course, many miracles are also associated with the touch of gods or prophets—a practice still allegedly evident in the acts of many religious leaders. But historically it was god’s ‘earthly princes’—the monarchs—that claimed both the ability to cure illness by touch and to have received this gift directly from god. For example, Bloch’s (1989/1924: 228) magisterial account of the association of Western European monarchs with miraculous powers suggests not only that the belief and practice was widespread but that it had been extant since the 11th century, and survived until the 19th century. The King’s Evil, as scrofula was known (a variety of skin diseases associated with tuberculosis), was a common illness in early modern Europe and the King’s cure was equally common—Henry IV of France was said to have touched 1,500 sufferers on one day. Monarchs, of course, commonly legitimated their rule through their links with god, and were therefore only responsible to god, so the assumption that their touch was sacred followed logically from the assumption that their whole being was sacred (Bratton et al. 2005: 108–9).
That gap, defined by distance (physical, symbolic or virtual) and/or difference (material or symbolic, ‘real’ or socially constructed) between leader and led, is often rooted in the apparent charisma of the former. This is especially so in the Weberian sense of ‘a calling’—an apparent destiny or fate that differentiates the mortal from the immortal and which often, and ironically, instantiates the immortality of leaders through their timely death. That is not to say that all leadership is charismatic but rather that all leadership is sacred—symbolically or physically separated from followers, and supported by the mutual attribution of significant differences and by the requirements for rituals of separation and cleanliness, and indeed the rituals through which the division is transcended (Turner 1974).

Distancing

These differences—the separation between the profane and the sacred (Douglas 2002)—must be protected through monitoring of the boundary and this may be achieved through preventing direct or unmediated access to the leader, or by the leader embodying different clothing or other signs of difference. Of course, different cultures embody different distancing mechanism, indeed, different notions of acceptable distance (Weinfurt and Moghaddam 2001) but some distancing—whether symbolic or material and whether we are looking at task-oriented or people-oriented leadership (Bratton et al. 2005: 172–7)—appears universal. The causal agent here need not always be the task itself, or the role of the leader(s), because followers are implicitly and necessarily involved in this negotiation of space.

For example, Hitler was noted for the plainness of his uniform which differentiated him from other Nazi leaders—in their heavily bemedalled and ostentatious clothes—but connected him to the ‘common people’—though he could never be ‘one of them’ (Evans 2005: 498). Similarly Gandhi separated himself from the ‘suited’ establishment by wearing the simple clothing of a peasant—though he was clearly never a simple peasant (Chadha 1997). Monarchs have often achieved a similar effect by displaying their wealth and power in more conventional ways—through the performative aspects of clothing, speech and behaviour in much the same way that Veblen (1899) regarded the purpose of conspicuous consumption—as a means of separation. This kind of boundary—often institutionalized through rituals such as ‘never touch the monarch—wait to be touched’ in British society, is sometimes transgressed through the touching of leaders and celebrities as suggested in the royal touch described above, but the touch is both heavily monitored and temporary, or, in the case of leaders such as the monarchs of the Maya people (Coe 2005) or early Japanese Emperors (Shillony 2003), beyond the direct gaze and touch of ordinary people. As such the office of the leader is often sufficient to maintain the boundary—the leader does not have to be charismatic, though as Weber (1978) suggested there may well have been a time when the founding leader was perceived to be charismatic.

The idea that leadership involves some mechanism of ‘distance’ between leader and follower is commonplace. In both the contemporary world of work (Collinson 2005) and the history of military leadership (Grint 2007) the belief that proximate leaders are significantly better than distant leaders is pervasive.
In contrast, Bogardus noted in 1927 that distance enabled rather than disabled leadership, an echo of Machiavelli (1997: 63) who was keen to note that distance was a useful device for preventing followers from perceiving the ‘warts and all’ nature of leaders, for ‘men in general judge more by their eyes than their hands; for everyone can see but few can feel. Everyone sees what you seem to be, few touch upon what you are, and those few dare not to contradict the opinion of the many who have the majesty of the state to defend them.’ This has profound implications for those seeking to become leaders because the ability to control distance, especially to keep others at bay and yourself beyond their gaze, is critical to maintaining the mystique of leadership; as the Wizard of Oz found to his cost after the veil hiding his ‘ordinary’ nature was drawn away.

Distancing is also a device for facilitating the execution of distasteful but necessary tasks by leaders and of generating the space to see the patterns that are all but invisible when very close to followers or the action—an issue Heifetz and Linsky (2002: 65–7) capture well with their metaphor of ‘getting on the balcony’ to see the patterns created by the (organization’s) dancers. This kind of distancing—physical, social or cultural—might also be configured as a critical component of charismatic or heroic leadership, especially in its overly romanticized version (Meindl 1995) and Leader–Member Exchange Theory (LMX) in which leaders bind themselves close to the in-group of followers but distance themselves from the out-group (Graen and Schiemann 1978). Such distancing also provides the necessary gap for charismatics to operate according to Katz and Kahn (1978), for without the gap, the prerequisite magic is simply impossible to conjure up (Antonakis and Atwater 2002)—a point disputed by Shamir (1995). Indeed, while physical distance may be critical, symbolic distance must be much narrower to ensure identification between follower and leader, a prototypical approach explored more fully by Turner et al. (2008).

Nevertheless, Collinson (2005: 241) suggests that the over-concentration on charismatic leaders overlooks the possibility that distance provides significant opportunities for followers to ‘construct alternative, more oppositional identities and workplace counter-cultures that express scepticism about leaders and their distance from followers’. This is particularly apparent in the way that humour is used to distance followers from leaders, though again that can also encourage followers to acquiesce to the leadership of their leaders by a functional venting of their frustration rather than organizing their resistance (Collinson 2002).

Moreover, such distancing enables followers to avoid collective responsibility for organizational outcomes—an issue at the heart of many contemporary attempts to ‘energize’ or ‘mobilize’ employees behind the corporate strategy. But since collectives tend to displace rather than simply disperse responsibility the likely consequence of this aspect of distributed leadership is ‘groupthink’ at best and inertia at worse because to lead implies being held responsible for the consequences. In turn the distancing also enables and legitimizes the greater rewards and access to power resources of individual leaders and enables followers to demand the scapegoating of these same leaders when the situation appears deleterious. Either way, as Durkheim (1973) suggested, followers end up avoiding responsibility.

The separation of leaders and followers also throws into stark relief the nature of inequality that underpins leadership, despite all the obfuscation about
empowerment, distributed, democratic or participative leadership. Indeed, Harter et al. (2006), suggest that this inegalitarianism is both legitimate and necessary, generating mutually beneficial inequality—providing certain safeguards are maintained. That the inequality at the heart of leadership needs to be legitimated—while equality is often regarded as legitimate in and through itself—might also explain why we seem to have a sacred regard for leadership—because it has to be treated as sacred to maintain its legitimacy.

**Sacrilege and Desacrilizing**

This might also account for the degree of violence used against those with the temerity to challenge leadership, for the sacred can only be maintained if those who act to abuse it—those who commit sacrilege—are severely treated. Hence the gruesome execution meted out to the would-be regicide Damiens as recounted at the beginning of Foucault’s book *Discipline and Punish*. It might also explain the sense of outrage generated, for example, by the cartoons of the prophet Muhammad published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* on 30 September 2005, and regarded as blasphemous by Muslims.

Sacrilege—the transcendence of the separation of the sacred from the profane, indeed, the pollution of the sacred—plays a critical role in the construction of leadership as well as being perceived as an assault upon it. For instance, Gorbachev’s criticisms of the Soviet Communist Party—his sacrilege—opened the flood gates that eventually sank the Soviet Union. Until his very public verbal assaults few had dared to speak ill of the party but once he had given permission for others to engage in critique the communist party’s sacred integrity was irretrievably damaged. As Breslauer (2002: 60) notes, Gorbachev, engaged in a relentless process of public desacrilization and partial destruction of the Brezhnevite political-economic and socio-political orders. By desacrilizing the established political order, he was in effect stripping the apparat and the official classes of immunity from public, systemic criticism and thereby also emboldening the intelligentsia and the masses to believe that such forceful criticism could now be safely advanced in public.

Similarly, it was Khrushchev—a former Stalinist—who first dumbfounded delegates to the 20th Soviet Communist Party Congress on 25 February 1956 with his famous Secret Speech in which he denounced Stalin’s ‘cult of personality’, and accused Stalin of crimes committed during the Great Purges. The same desacrilization effect might be said of Tony Blair, whose denunciation of Clause IV (common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange) at the Labour Party Conference of 1994 began the process of transforming the Labour Party to New Labour. Whether sacrilegious attacks upon previous icons protect the attacker from future assaults is a moot question: Gorbachev certainly did not fair well but others have survived rather better.

So a critical aspect of the sacred is that it necessarily involves a division between the sacred and the profane; there must be a distance between the two for the division to make sense, though of course the precise nature of the division is very flexible and likely to vary with different cultures. In fact, difference, rather than distance, might be a better way of comprehending the importance of distinction here. The physical or symbolic distance between leader and led may
be great or small but the difference between the two might be the key to success. In other words, might it be that where difference is removed, so that there are no leaders because all—or none—are leaders, there is no leadership? This is not to suggest that some organizational forms under certain circumstances cannot persist without leadership but rather that leadership cannot survive without difference. Then the issue is whether that difference is necessarily an element of the sacred. To the outsider or non-believer the difference may seem trivial or non-existent but to the insider or believer the difference may be precisely that which marks out the sacred from the profane. Thus, just as the social identity of the group is manufactured through differentiating itself from ‘the other’ (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Turner et al. 1994) so leaders must maintain sufficient distance or difference to facilitate sacrifice where necessary. That sacrifice may be either of others or the others may sacrifice the leader but either way a degree of distance and differentiation is necessary.

In the case of the leader sacrificing others—physically or symbolically—differentiation facilitates the leader’s emotional detachment necessary for striking the cruel blow that will save the group. Such distancing might also relate to the masculine culture that allegedly pervades much of leadership, in the sense that the emotional distancing of leaders—the ‘loneliness of command’—can be configured as archetypical of men, and radically dissimilar to the more supportive forms of leadership claimed by some to be more typical of women (see Collinson and Hearn 2004; Fletcher 2004). In the case of the followers sacrificing the leader, the differentiation allows the followers to escape the blame for the catastrophe it faces and to heap all the blame upon the (headless) shoulders of the leader—an issue that might reflect the scapegoating of the political elite in the UK as the misuse of ‘expenses’ diverts responsibility for the economic crisis from business to politics. In each case the differentiation is not the thing that dared not be mentioned—the proverbial elephant in the room—but the room itself. Difference is a performative element of leadership, not a trivial embellishment of status. Let us now proceed to consider in more detail the role that such sacrifice plays in the maintenance of the sacred in leadership.

Sacrifice

The use of sacrifice in ancient societies is, of course, as commonplace as it is offensive to many contemporary eyes. While the Aztecs were sacrificing hundreds to their sun god and wearing the skins of their victims (Carrasco 1999), Romans, Ancient Greeks, Celts, Carthaginians, Africans, Asians, and seemingly everyone else, were similarly soaked in human and animal blood to appease their gods, to protect the tribe, to ensure fertility or food supplies, to ensure the dominant tribe did not devastate your land or just to ensure your subjugated followers were kept in line (Lewis 2001). The substitution of one sacrificial victim for another, particularly the substitution of another for the self, has a long history from early Roman times as well as from Carthage, Gallo-British (Wicker-Man), Spain, Borneo and North Africa. In scriptural terms this is probably best represented by the substitution of a ram for Abraham’s son but it has been common practice among the Sudanese Dinka and Nuer to sacrifice a cow at times of strife.
Elsewhere the Ancient Greek tradition of the *pharmakos* involved the ritualized scapegoating—and execution—of human victims (Green 2002: 23–49).

Yet there is a contemporary assumption that governing—or leadership—can be an innocent activity, or in this context that leadership does not require sacrifice. Here, leadership is associated with facilitating the goals of a community, with generating an uplifting vision and with securing collective progress. For many—for example Bass (1999), Burns (1978), Howell (1988) and Zaleznik (1974)—those ‘leaders’ who engage in activities deemed by the observer to be immoral or unethical—often related to the sacrifice of the other—may be dictators or psychopaths but they are not ‘leaders’. This division enables the purity of leaders to be separated from the profanity of dictators but the separation imposes an ethical framework on leaders who have different, rather than non-existent ethics. There is, then, preciously little evidence that admiring followers of Mao, Stalin, Hitler or Osama bin Laden followed their leaders because they were psychopaths (though that would be a good reason to avoid contradicting them if you were not a loyal follower) and much more evidence that these followers assumed their leaders were ethical; it’s just that their ethics do not match ours and their scapegoats often include us: we were and are their ‘other’. This is important because the nature of the dividing line between the sacred and the profane does not lie in any objective boundary transgression but in the interpretation of those who recognize and guard the boundary. Thus it is not bin Laden’s followers who regard terrorist attacks as profane but those who are attacked. What is the role of scapegoats in these actions?

**Scapegoating**

The ritual necessity of scapegoating forms an essential core of René Girard’s (1972, 1982) work. Girard takes a radical slant on the violence of sacrifice, suggesting that it plays a functional role in dispersing or deflecting the essentially violent nature of human societies; in other words, ritual violence is a necessary escape valve to avoid social anarchy, not an unfortunate consequence of individual deviance or lack of control. For Girard the participants in scapegoating need not, indeed must not, understand the function of their task nor must they fear reprisal—hence the tendency to rationalize the sacrifice or deny it. Moreover, the scapegoat implies a victim who bears the sin or guilt of all but does not require complete innocence, although the etymology does assume this.

For Girard the initial cause is one of mimesis—the desire of all humans to imitate each other—and this appropriation of others eventually leads to expropriation of others, an inevitable rivalry, an aggressive response and a consequential generalized social violence. Girard suggests that humans, across thousands of years, have managed to contain this ‘natural’ propensity to social violence by the sacrifice of individuals. In effect, the primal murder of scapegoats effectively cleanses the community of greater social violence and generates a temporary peace—until the next cycle of mimetic rivalry and violent contagion required the next scapegoat.² Thus the only solution to the Hobbesian ‘war of all against all’ was to narrow the focus down to the ‘war of all against one’. Or, as Danton declared during the French Revolution, ‘Let us be terrible to prevent the people from being so’ (quoted in Burton 2001: 301).
This murder of the scapegoat—the sacred violence against the profane—is originally related to the murder of one of the tribe, but this can be displaced onto ‘the other’ where necessary and convenient. Of course the identity of the victim also changes endlessly; from the annual sacrifice of seven Athenian men and seven maidens to the Minotaur to the persecution of just about every religious and social group in history, sacrifice has proved an endemic feature of leadership. And Kristeva (1998) is surely right, very often it is women who are sacrificed to maintain the leadership of men—as so called ‘honour killings’, for example, usually imply. What is critical about scapegoats, as Burton (2001: 294) suggests, is that they are both part of and separate from ‘us’. This dualism encompasses Girard’s claim that the scapegoat must be ‘one of us’ but yet is somehow different from us. Indeed, leaders are both archetypes and prototypes of the group (Haslam 2001) and yet are somehow differentiated from the group.

Oftentimes, of course, the sacrificer becomes the sacrificed, most notably in terms of monarchs, such as Charles I of England and Louis XVI of France, but also for leaders whose very policy had been to overthrow such people—for example, Robespierre or Cromwell or Trotsky. Indeed, while ironically an opponent of the death penalty, Robespierre insisted in November 1792 that ‘Louis XVI must die because the nation must live’ (quoted in Scurr 2006: 222). Marat, for his part, was convinced that the execution was both a ‘religious festival’ and a necessary ‘cleansing of the stigma [of royalty] of 1300 years’ (quoted in Hunt 1988: 33).

That we associate sacrifice with revolutions is hardly novel; utopian movements of both political and religious forms are steeped in blood letting (Gray 2007) as opponents vie to purify themselves by sacrificing the other (Semelin 2007). This is captured in Robespierre’s speech to the Jacobin club in July 1794—just before he was sacrificed—‘If you forsake me see how calmly I shall drink the hemlock’ (quoted in Scurr 2006: 317). This was not the first time that Robespierre had offered to sacrifice himself for the revolution and he tended to see all those who were guillotined as necessary sacrifices for the greater good—the safety of the people. On 8 June 1794, for example, at the Fête de l’Être Suprême (the celebration of the Supreme Being)—the Jacobin’s secular god—he wore striking yellow trousers and a pale blue coat that to many (half the population of Paris was there) resembled the blue and yellow suicide clothing of Goether’s fictional character Werther (whose suicide allegedly prompted a rush of similar—and similarly clothed—suicides among the European public). It was as if ‘the presentation of his public persona attired in his widely understood sign of impending sacrifice carried the message that the terrorist was to be known as his own victim’ (Blum 1986: 252, quoted in Burton 2001: 55).

In one of General Patton’s more infamous speeches to his American troops, captured well in the film, Patton, he embodies the conventional nature of the sacrifice of the other: ‘Nobody ever won a war by dying for his country. He won by making the other poor dumb bastard die for his country.’ This eminently rational, if crude, articulation of the nature of war captures the nature of sacrifice of the other side. Koenigsberg (2005), in contrast, suggests that we tend to look in the wrong place for explanations of such sacrifices, that is, for example, to assume that Saddam’s psychological incompetence or hubris must explain his blundering into a war that he must have known he could not win. But perhaps
winning was not the point. Koenigsberg suggests instead that this kind of sacrifice—of your own side not the other side—is a required demonstration of loyalty to either a nation, or an ideology or an individual. In other words, sacrifice is a necessary demonstration of loyal followership to the leader.

But we do not need to restrict ourselves to physical death to admit that sacrifice still plays a prominent part in leadership, especially in scapegoating of leaders or followers: democratic regimes frequently scapegoat their political leaders for policy failures and CEOs frequently scapegoat a section of their own workforce when problems emerge or are scapegoated by the shareholders. Scapegoats that escape the ultimate sacrifice have traditionally been exiled, shunned, tarred and feathered, had their heads shorn, been demoted, sacked or imprisoned and many of these actions have been preceded by a show trial of some form, so that the sacrifice encompasses the widest possible public arena: the sacrifice must not just be done but be seen to be done. Thus Jack Welch—who turned a $26.8 billion revenue company in 1980 when he took over into a $130 billion revenue enterprise over the course of a 20-year tenure at the helm of General Electric (the precise numbers vary with author)—famously sacrificed the lowest performing 10 per cent of General Electric’s population. The ranking system that divided employees into three distinct segments: the top 20 percent of performers, the middle 70 percent, and the bottom 10 percent (GE’s ‘20–70–10’ system), was always legitimized through its allegedly positive effect on the whole organization (Welch and Welch 2006).

Again, non-blood sacrifice may also be the self-sacrifice of the leader. For example, we may consider the self-sacrifice of Iacocca—who ran Chrysler when it was deeply indebted—on a salary of $1 per annum—though after working for Ford for 32 years he probably did not need to worry too much about an income from Chrysler; nor need Ford’s CEO in 2008, Alan Mulally, who promised to run Ford for $1 a year if Congress would provide a financial bailout in 2009. In effect, the sacrifice of self and others is seen not just as an unfortunate consequence of poor leadership prior to the new CEO’s arrival but also as a manifestation of the new CEO’s ‘good’ leadership. It might also be that an organization is destabilized by leadership and that the resultant chaos—or Miasma as Gabriel (2008) calls it—then legitimates the sacrificial purification of existing members.

Leaders, therefore, have a Faustian pact with their followers, in which the leaders accumulate privileges of power or wealth or whatever is deemed appropriate at the expense of the followers—some of whom may be sacrificed for the collective good. In return the leaders legitimate and secure the goals of followers, but if and when the leaders fail then they must become the sacrificial victims themselves. This legitimates the exchange of power and privileges between leaders and led and divorces the followers from responsibility for collective failure. Precisely what triggers the scapegoating is debateable but there are clear links both to development of a crisis, and equally important, to the role of all the actors involved (leader, followers, press and so on) in the constitution of a ‘situation’ into (or out of) a ‘crisis’ (Grint 2005).

Of course, we all make sacrifices all the time—we sacrifice a lunch break to clear the email backlog, we sacrifice a lie-in on Sunday morning to get the grass cut and so on, but the kind of sacrifice I am referring to here is for the collective
good—however that is defined. Thus our mundane personal sacrifices that do not involve any effect upon the relationship between leaders and followers are not included in this category. Foregoing a cream cake for the good of your health is not the same as sacrificing the baker to improve collective morale. Hence sacrifice is not an unfortunate and embarrassing aspect of some immoral or psychopathic dictator but an essential mechanism for the performance of all forms of leadership. Sacrifice constructs the sacred space without which leadership cannot occur. Let us now turn to the third of our ‘holy trinity’: silence.

Silence

The sacred aspect of silence involves several principles beyond that of providing space for reflection: the silencing of opposition and the silencing of anxiety. The former is a role that is well documented and need not delay us here, whether that relates to the silencing of dissent (Collinson and Ackroyd 2005; Gabriel, 2008) or the silencing of alternative interpretations of leadership to the conventional masculine varieties (Calás and Smircich 1997).

In principle, the notion that leadership is related to the sacred runs directly counter to Existentialism, which operates from the opposite end of the philosophical spectrum: we are not the result of God’s plan but our own conscious free acts (Lawler 2005; Sartre 2003). However, this approach implies that the anxiety generated by the uncertainty and purposelessness of existence is precisely why the burden of responsibility is so great. Were we to believe in fate ordained by a god then the burden of responsibility is lifted from our shoulders since all that we do is already inscribed by whichever god is purported to be responsible. But if all that we do is a result of freewill floating without moral precept derived from god then we appear to be both responsible for our decisions and cast adrift from any foundational moral compass upon which to make these decisions. In fact Sartre remained wedded to a personal moral compass (Ashman 2007) but in the absence of any consensus on which moral compass to follow the vertiginous consequence could be displaced by one of several means: belief in fate, belief in religious faith and belief in leadership are all leading contenders. In all three cases the common bond remains the issue of the sacred. In effect, the anti-essentialism of existentialism poses such a discomforting panorama that the default to the comfort of leadership may not be consciously experienced, let alone overtly challenged. It is into this permanently unstable world that leaders, especially charismatics, step, offering certainty, identity, and absolution from guilt and anxiety to replace—and displace—the moral quagmire and purposeless existence that existentialism reveals. Thus leaders choose to lead and followers choose to follow, and the latter choose to avoid responsibility for leading—though followers may explain their ‘choice’ as foisted upon them by circumstances, fate or whatever serves the same purpose. Absoluteness and absolution are the twin promises of this fabled land and this double Faustian pact. For leaders the pact exchanges privilege and power now for sacrifice later; for followers the pact secures a security blanket against ‘bad faith’—Sartre’s exposure of freedom that underlies even the most desperate decision between two alternative evils. In effect, leadership silences the anxiety of followers.
Erich Fromm (1942) suggested that this fear of freedom was an essential explanation for our almost compulsive submission to authority. For Fromm, modernity had uprooted people from communal relationships with others and it was this intolerable loneliness and consequent weight of responsibility that drove us to seek solace in the protective arms of authority—fascist or democratic—for only that way could we avoid the fear generated by personal responsibility. Here, then, lies a key to the active role of followers in suspending their critical faculties in the presence of leaders, especially but not only charismatic leaders. This miasma of purposelessness and insecurity (Gabriel, 2008), also noted by Kierkegaard, forms a foundation for Sartre’s existentialism (1973). This, in another world, is what Bauman (1993: 78) calls, ‘the unbearable silence of responsibility’.

At a more mundane level, the search for purpose is reproduced in the sense-making activities of leaders (Weick 2001), while the denial of responsibility is reproduced in the psychological experiments of Milgram (2001) and Zimbardo (2007). But there is more to sense-making than its literal interpretation because the act of leadership is as much to do with sense-breaking as sense-making. In other words, it is not simply that leaders make sense of the world but that they make particular sense of the world by silencing alternative versions. In effect, sense-making is not an analytic act but an act of power that operates in two dimensions: on the one hand many leaders—though not all—silence followers who reject or resist them; on the other hand, many leaders—though not all—silence the anxiety of followers in and through the provision of safety and security. Here lies the conflict between Hobbes’ *Leviathan* demanding the surrender of power by followers in return for safety (the original theory X) and Rousseau’s *Social Contract*—the understanding that followers are made impotent by Hobbesian institutions and procedures (the original theory Y). It is also important to recognize here that, as Hirschman notes (1970), leaders who silence the Voice of followers, encourage Exit as well as some forms of Loyalty, so the most sophisticated leaders are those who are very careful how dissent is managed (Collinson and Ackroyd 2005).

The derogation of personal responsibility on the part of followers has an equivalence in the ‘extraordinarization of the mundane’ (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2003), in which followers attribute extraordinary importance to what leaders believe are mundane activities; in effect, leaders are attributed with greater sense-making abilities than followers. Both activities lead unerringly to the attribution by followers of a sacred difference between them and their leaders that explains the world. It does not matter that the evidence for cause and effect is marginal at best or that a Halo Effect is at work (Rosenzweig 2007) that deludes us into assuming that first impressions are manifestations of truth; what matters is that followers secure an explanation for events, and thus responsibility can be apportioned, preferably away from them. In this sense the Romance of Leadership (Meindl 1995) is not just about attribution, it’s about the sacred attribution of cause, difference and responsibility, or in the words of Gemmil and Oakley (1997), perhaps leadership really is not just an alienating social myth— but a *necessarily* alienating social myth?

One aspect of this myth through which leaders and followers are relieved of anxiety about their purpose and future relates to the nature of fate. With
uncertainty displaced by absolute conviction, many leaders are imbued with extraordinary levels of confidence that both facilitate enormous risk-taking and convince followers to fall in behind them. Here, for instance, is William Shirer’s first hand account of the 1934 Nuremburg Rally which he covered as an American journalist:

About ten o’clock tonight I got caught in a mob of ten thousand hysterics who jammed the moat in front of Hitler’s hotel shouting: ‘We want our Fuhrer.’ I was a little shocked at their faces, especially those of the women, when Hitler finally appeared on the balcony for a moment. They reminded me of the crazed expressions I saw once in …. Louisiana on the faces of some Holy Rollers …. They looked up at him as if he were a Messiah, their faces transformed into something positively inhuman’ (quoted in Lewis 2003: 7).

As Lewis suggests, the sacred nature of the Nazi Party and its leader are also perfectly encapsulated in Leni Riefenstahl’s 1934 film ‘Triumph of the Will’ with its iconic photography and quasi-religious symbolism. That absolute certainty in his destiny was not something that Hitler always embodied but by the 1920s he was convinced, once stepping out of a serious car crash without injury and telling his aide that there was no need to worry because he was safe until his mission had been completed (Lewis 2003: 10). Lewis relates this kind of traumatic experience to the ‘crucible’ that Bennis and Thomas (2002) insist all such significant leaders pass through—or perish from—and there are lots of historical cases where a single episode does indeed appear to generate extraordinary willpower (Bratton et al. 2005: 211–3). In effect, the belief in destiny generated an assumption of infallibility and—temporarily—immortality until the destiny was fulfilled, and that destiny requires the leader to be different from the common population, to separate themselves from their followers and to silence their fears and anxieties through absolute confidence and conviction in the rightness of their cause.

What these illustrations suggest is that the nagging uncertainty that inhibits most of us from taking the risks associated with leadership—Fromm’s ‘Fear of Freedom’—is silenced by the force of destiny that impels these intrepid individuals. That force—the room not the elephant—silences both their own doubts and those of their followers; it generates a sense-making that relegates alternatives to the realms of traitors, doubters and the frightened. Is there, then, no escape from leadership’s sacrificial stone?

**Conclusion: A Community of Fate?**

The apparent necessity of the sacred element of leadership does not make it essentialist—alternatives are possible but require immense effort, are more likely to prevail in very small communities, and place heavy demands on followers who need to accept responsibility without developing alternative structures of power. Indeed, in this sense such a system requires the abolition of a private sphere altogether and the total politicization of civil society—a model that spurred on many alternative communes in the 1960s and 1970s but not one that ever roused the population as a whole to remodel itself on such a basis
(cf. Levine 1974). We might also consider this in relation to many current attempts to remove the private sphere at work altogether by requiring ever more ‘authenticity’ (Fleming 2009), ever more ‘engagement’, and ever more ‘alignment’: come back Aleksey Stakhanov—the icon of Soviet productivity (Siegelbaum 1990)—you have only your private life to lose!

In our desperate search for the post-heroic I want to suggest here that we are in danger of an uncritical shifting from the Romance of (Heroic) Leadership (Meindl et al. 1985; Meindl 1995) to the Romance of (Post-Heroic) Collaborative Leadership (Leonard 2007) without examining the nature of leadership. In particular, is leadership—of whatever variety—closed off from radical alternatives not because of its relationship to capitalism, or patriarchy, or ethnicity or any other variable but because it is so closely related to the realm of the sacred? Thus post-heroic alternatives remain unviable (except in organizations that are very small scale or short term) because they would undermine the sacred nature of leadership and that, in turn, would destabilize the ability of an organization to function. In effect, the only way to desacrilize individual (heroic) leadership is to resacralize collective (post-heroic) leadership to the point where the private sphere is removed; where the militant agent displaces the inactive agent. In turn, this means that we might need to rethink how we constitute the relationship between leadership and the sacred rather than try and eliminate this relationship. Moreover, this is not to suggest that leadership is either heroic or post-heroic, individual or collective; we are not dealing with binaries here but some degree of the sacred is probably inevitable and therefore we need to consider not how to revoke the sacred leadership of individuals (and I use the plural of individual as distinct from the collective—‘group’ purposely) but how to bind those individuals closer to the communities they lead without requiring the community to strangle individualism.

In other words, if de-sacrilized or non-sacred collective action is impossible then, paradoxically, wishing away the sacred aspects of leadership in the sense of separation, sacrifice and silence, does not so much remove the (leadership) elephant from the room as remove the room, thus removing the possibility of decision-making altogether by disabling leadership. If leadership is as much an enemy of progress as a friend then, as Sun Tzu never actually said—but should have—we should hold our friends close and our enemies even closer.

I would like to thank Peter Case, Robert French, Yiannis Gabriel, Brad Jackson, Doris Jepson, Sally Riad, Peter Simpson, Andre Spicer and various members of conferences and seminars at Auckland, Cranfield and Warwick Universities for their helpful comments and suggestions on presentations of this material. I would also like to acknowledge: David Courpasson and the three anonymous referees for their suggestions and critique; Lesley Prince for a lively Xmas discussion on the merits of anarchism; and most importantly Gillian Stamp for her clear and patient attempts to iron out some of the problems with the article and to enlighten me on the value of anthropology. Thanks finally to Kris Grint for help with the French sources.

Notes

1 Thanks to Gillian Stamp for reminding me of this verse.
2 For Girard the self-sacrifice of Jesus effectively ended this ‘necessary’ cycle. See Fleming’s 2004 review.
3 As Werther writes in his suicide note to his beloved Charlotte—now married and beyond him, ‘I wish, Charlotte, to be buried in the dress I wear at present: it has been rendered sacred by your touch.’
References

Alvesson, M., and S. Sveningsson

Antonakis, J., and L. Atwater

Ashman, I.

Badarraco, J.

Bakunin, M.

Bass, B. M.

Bauman, Z.

Bennett, N., C. Wise, P. Woods, and J. A. Harvey
2003 Distributed leadership. Nottingham: NCSL.

Bennis, W. G., and R. J. Thomas

Bloch, M.

Blum, C.

Bogardus, E. S.

Bratton, J., K. Grint, and D. Nelson

Breslauer, G. W.
2002 Gorbachev and Yeltsin as Leaders. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Buchanan, D. A., R. Addicott, L. Fitzgerald, E. Fertlie, and J. Baeza

Burns, J. M.

Burton, R. D. E.

Calas, M. B., and L. Smircich

Carlyle, T.

Carrasco, D.

Chada, Y.

Cleveland H.

Coe, M. D.

Collinson D. L.

Collinson, D.

Collinson D., and S. Ackroyd

Collinson, D., and J. Hearn

Draft, W.
Howell, J. M.

Hunt, L.

Katz, D., and R. L. Kahn
1978 The social psychology of organizations. New York: Wiley.

Koenigsberg, R.

Kristeva, J.

Kropotkin, P.

Lawler, J.

Leonard, P.

Levine, C.

Lewis, B. R.

Lewis, D.

Machiavelli, N.

Meindl, J. R., S. B. Ehrlich, and J. M. Dukerich

Meindl, J. R.

Milgram, S.

Miller, D.

Nietzsche, F.

Outram, D.
2006 ‘When the personal became the political’. Royal Academy of the Arts Magazine 93/winter: 36–41.

Polan, A. J.

Popper, K.

Raelin, J.

Rosenzweig, P. M.

Sartre, J.-P.

Sartre, J.-P.

Scurr, R.

Semelin, J.
Keith Grint

Keith Grint is Professor of Public Leadership and Management at Warwick Business School. He has held Chairs at Cranfield University and Lancaster University and was Director of Research at the Said Business School and Fellow in Organizational Behaviour, Templeton College, University of Oxford. He is a founding co-editor of the journal Leadership, published by SAGE (http://lea.sagepub.com/) and founding co-organizer of the International Conference on Researching Leadership.

Address: Institute of Governance and Public Management, Warwick Business School, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, UK.

Email: Keith.Grint@wbs.ac.uk