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Distributed Properties

A New Architecture for Leadership

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Introduction

The question addressed by this article is: 'What is to be done with leadership?' This question represents an extension of what has become an ongoing concern for the future of leadership, which was first articulated in an invited keynote address to BEMAS in 1995 (Gronn, 1996). In that state-of-the-art paper, I synthesized current trends and developments in leadership and considered whether the field was on the cusp of a fundamental rethink—driven mainly by the need to accommodate new organizational change and restructuring imperatives—which would supersede all that had gone before it, and which would alter forever our view of leadership. Implicit, always, in these kinds of speculations about shifts or switches in perspective is the lurking spectre of historicism. There is a cautionary tale here, therefore, for anyone who wishes to make pronouncements about alleged turning points, movements to higher stages, watersheds, paradigm shifts and the like, as any of us who have been spectators of the debate (or furore?) following the publication of Francis Fukuyama's (1992) influential *The End of History and the Last Man* will be aware. I have no wish in what I say now to stumble into the pitfalls of end-ism raised by that particular episode. Rather, my intention is to connect with some of the threads of my 1995 address in an effort to move forward our understanding about the phenomenon of leadership with which we, practitioners and commentators alike, are dealing, because I believe that most of us still labour under serious misapprehensions about its nature. My purpose is to identify some of those deficiencies and then to sketch the framework of what I believe is a much more promising possibility.

One of the developments which I summarized in the 1995 paper was a bifurcation in leadership thinking around two broad polarities: the one, stimulated principally by Bernard Bass's (1985) ideal type of transformational leadership, representing a kind of apogee of individualism, and the other, typified by Elliott Jaques' (1989) managerial leadership, a vigorous reassertion of systemic properties and role structures, but devoid (virtually) of any identifiable sense of agency. In my review (Gronn, 1996: 17) I pointed to some of the more obvious shortcomings in the work of both writers. That said, it has to be conceded that individual or structural perspectives on leadership are not entirely devoid of merit. Thus, work which, on the one hand, permits a better understanding of the psychological and ethical dispositions of leaders is as welcome as, on the other hand, any elucidation of the structural dimensions of the roles and contexts in which various leaders lead. But what I now want to assert is that the way of the future lies with neither

of these perspectives, for the choice posed by these or other similar approaches which privilege agency ahead of structure, or vice versa, rests on a false ontological dualism. The dualism is false because neither constitutive element of social reality, agency nor structure, reduces to the other; rather, the relationship between the two is always one of interplay through time: each element is analytically distinct from, but is ontologically intertwined with, the other. Thus, while an existing social structure is always a precondition for the actions of future cohorts of agents, it also represents the outcome of the purposive, generative (as well as unintended) actions of previous sets of agents and is potentially modifiable by agents yet-to-be-born (Archer, 1995: 66–79).

In answer to the question of what is to be done with leadership, therefore, I shall be bypassing both of these two broad conceptions of leader–follower relations. Instead, I intend to go straight to the heart of the agency–structure interplay and will focus my remarks on activity. Activity is the bridge between agency and structure. The structural patterns taken by various social or organizational formations are activity-dependent, and an analysis of the activities engaged in by particular sets of time-, place-, space- and culture-bound sets of agents permits an understanding of agential–structural relations through the process of structuring. The structuring actions of agents may serve two possible ends: the reproduction or the transformation of existing sets of institutional relations. My point of departure from prevailing conceptions of leadership, particularly those which accord generous dollops of voluntarism to key individuals (acting either within or without formal positional roles), will be to emphasize the centrality of conjoint agency. That is, the satisfactory completion of discretionary tasks is attributable to the concertive labour performed by pluralities of interdependent organization members. Leadership and influence comprise part of that labour within those structured relationships, but I shall argue that the properties displayed by leadership are more likely to take a distributed, rather than a concentrated, form, a claim I have already rehearsed elsewhere (Gronn, 1999a and b).

Unlike some critics in education and beyond who plead for the abandonment of leadership altogether, therefore, I shall be maintaining that leadership can, and should, be salvaged, albeit in a distinctly different form. To achieve this end, I will develop the argument that, if our perspectives of leadership are to continue to serve useful analytical and practical purposes, then they must be grounded in a theory of action. This possibility, I hope to show, requires those of us with an interest in leadership to rethink current organizational practices, and the ontological properties of the activities which aggregate to constitute those practices. The reason is that a distributed view of tasks and activities implies the existence of a new form of the division of labour at the heart of organizational work. Such a development has important implications for traditionally defined individual roles and for crude dualisms such as leader–follower and leadership–followership. For these and other reasons, an attribute like distribution needs to be incorporated into a reconceptualized view of the appropriate unit of analysis if we are to ensure that leadership is to retain its credibility, viability and utility. One promising approach for rethinking leadership which I consider briefly is activity theory (see e.g. Engeström, 1999a). My aim is to show that leadership will retain its relevance provided that it is reconceptualized as part of a model of jointly performed and tool-mediated activity.

The article begins with a brief recapitulation of the shortcomings of prevailing views of leadership, and next considers two recent claims: the first is that leadership should be abandoned because there are other more appropriate factors which can be shown to substitute for it, while the second is that there are, indeed, no other factors which can be

substituted. The article then develops the notion of distribution and appraises some recent approaches to organizational work (including activity theory). Finally, the significance of distributed leadership systems will be spelled out before I consider some of the issues raised by the discussion and their implications for future research.

The Trouble with Existing Dualisms

Of the two broad polarities mentioned above, the individualistic view of leadership dominates the field (and for that reason, and for purposes of economy, I confine most of my discussion to it). This individualism may be typified as naive realism or the belief in the power of one, and it is grounded in the assumption that 'effective performance by an individual, group, or organization is assumed to depend on leadership by an individual with the skills to find the right path and motivate others to take it' (Yukl, 1999: 292). Implicit in this kind of reasoning is a crudely abstracted leader–follower(s) dualism, in which, *inter alia*, leaders are superior to followers, followers depend on leaders and leadership consists in doing something to, for and on behalf of others. Space limitations preclude a detailed consideration of the difficulties with this exaggerated sense of agency attributed to leaders (but see Gronn, 1999c: 1–20), save what in my view are the most serious deficiencies to which it gives rise: an undertheorized view of task performance and accomplishment, and a neglect of the division of labour. These shortcomings were first highlighted in claims about substitutes for leadership.[1]

In an important article, Kerr and Jermier (1978) argued that there was ample (statistical) evidence in numerous studies of a lack of demonstrated leader effects in explaining organizational outcomes. They then showed how a number of typical, hypothetical, organizational outcomes could be accounted for without resort to leadership as the sole or exclusive candidate, causal explanation. At least three other substitute factors made the leadership of a superordinate individual redundant: the personal attributes of organization members (e.g. their self-motivation to perform), organizational processes (e.g. autonomous work group norms) and characteristics inherent in the work itself (e.g its routine or programmed nature). In retrospect, the timing of the publication of this argument proved to be unfortunate. Although the late 1970s yielded a number of remarkably insightful contributions to the field of leadership studies—some of which are discussed below—it was also, for some commentators, something of a 'doom and gloom' period (Hunt, 1999: 133) in which leadership had forfeited any claim to validity or utility as a legitimate area of study. In the 1980s, however, students of leadership discovered organizational culture, so that heroic, neo-charismatic approaches to leadership underwent a resurgence, and the popularity of visionary and transformational leadership soared. In this climate, Kerr and Jermier's substitutes claim was virtually lost from view until its revival in 1997 in a symposium in the *Leadership Quarterly*. After 20 or so years, both authors maintained that their argument about leader substitutes had never been properly addressed by the field (Jermier and Kerr, 1997: 97).

The significance of the substitutes argument is twofold: first, it focuses our attention on what it means to perform and accomplish tasks; and, second, by discounting the causal omniscience of leadership it invites a reconsideration of the connection or relationship between leadership and task performance. On the first point, self-evidently, the tasks confronting organization members vary in status and are usually amply differentiated in most contexts. Thus, relatively straightforward, well-rehearsed operations (e.g. responding to a

customer inquiry, or processing a student's admission application) differ markedly from complex, ill-defined problems (e.g. allocating educational resources under severe financial constraints). Kerr and Jermier are clearly right: tasks in the former case reduce over time to learned and refined routines (and are typically encoded in procedural or operating manuals) which when implemented, on the face of it, require nobody's leadership at all. Here, most employees, for most of the time, appear to know what to do and when to do it, and can be said to act out of habit or, in effect, in a quasi-programmed manner. This example leads to the second point and invites the question of the kinds of circumstances which might necessitate leadership and what form that leadership could be expected to take. In this connection, Robinson (forthcoming: 6) has proposed that leadership is evident 'when ideas expressed in talk or action are recognized by others as capable of progressing tasks or problems which are important to them'. This is a viewpoint entirely consistent with the now widely accepted attributional basis of leadership (see Lord and Maher, 1993), asserting, in essence, that leadership is a phenomenon in the eye of the beholder. Thus, for Robinson, leadership will be manifest in the effect or effects of contributions which yield contributions from others, and which secure the coordination of those contributions and accomplish the tasks in hand.

Before pursuing this valuable lead provided by Robinson, two possible objections have to be considered. The first, which amounts to an extreme version of the substitutes line of reasoning (e.g. Lakomski, 1998), is to assert, not (as Kerr and Jermier, and Robinson do) that leadership in some form counts for at least some of the time in the work of organizations, but that it counts for none of the time. That is, an enduring substitute or alternative explanation can always be found for leadership. On this view, the contributions of some organization members which produce or trigger contributions from other members need not be taken as evidence of leadership, but as evidence of something else: namely, learning. The second objection, a rejection altogether of the substitutes argument, asserts that there is no such thing as a substitute for individual leadership. Instead, what different eras reveal are alternating views about the leadership of individuals represented in either allegedly weak (1970s) or strong (1980s and 1990s) theories. From this perspective, the attraction of the substitutes argument (and even of distributed leadership) among commentators is evidence or a sign of the adoption or dominance of weak leadership theories within the field (Shamir, 1999: 50). These objections are discussed in the next two sections.

Do We Still Need Leadership?

Despite the well-documented and widespread phenomenon of the romance of leadership (Meindl, 1995), anti-leadership proponents emerge periodically. Beginning with Miner (1975: 200), who asserted that leadership had 'outlived its usefulness', a batch of them surfaced in the late 1970s (e.g. Argyris, 1979; Calder, 1977; Pfeffer, 1977) and then were submerged by a kingtide of culturally grounded theories comprising what Bryman (1996) terms the 'new' leadership. But with this new leadership now being subjected to the intense scrutiny of critics—which, in turn, has stimulated equally intense defensiveness on the part of its proponents (e.g. Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999)—anti-leadership arguments have begun to emerge once again, perhaps the most vocal and sophisticated proponent of which, at least in education, has been Lakomski (1998, 1999a and b; Lakomski and Evers, 1999).

Briefly, the claim against leadership put forward by Lakomski (1998: 99) is that there is

no natural entity or essence which can be labelled 'leadership'. This is a similar assertion to the claim advanced previously by Calder (1977: 185–7), which was that it was impossible to identify a universally agreed upon concrete referent for what, essentially, is a lay label of convenience intended to attribute personal potency to someone's observed or reputed behaviour. Despite the best endeavours of commentators to find such a natural object, the most that decades of leadership research has yielded, according to Lakomski (1999b: 6), is: first, a mass of largely inconclusive results; second, an awareness that the determination of leadership effects differs from one organization to another; and, third, the realization that leadership means different things to different people in different contexts (the attributional argument mentioned above). Lakomski (1999a: 36) readily concedes the point about potency—'there is no doubt that there have been, and are, strong individuals who by dint of their abilities and personalities were and are able to have a positive impact on organizations'—yet she suggests that the more appropriate generic object of study is not leadership but effective organizational practice. Thus, if some people do seem to be able to motivate others, to make superior or appropriate judgements and to secure performance beyond expectations, then the really interesting questions for her are: 'How did they learn to do that?' and 'How did leaders learn [to] lead since no-one is born to lead?' (Lakomski, 1998: 100).

Rather than engage in a point-by-point rebuttal of the remainder of Lakomski's agnosticism, I would simply make two brief observations. First, the fact that commentators cannot agree upon a set of behaviour that amounts to leadership, and that their researches have produced inconclusive results, does not constitute an argument for jettisoning the concept altogether. Perhaps these commentators would be advised to rethink their approaches and to continue the search. Second, if, as she claims, contextual factors keep on bobbing up in study after study, then maybe that tendency should caution against anyone maintaining universalist pretensions to knowledge applicability and, instead, invite much closer contextual analyses of leaders and their leadership. My major concern, however, is with Lakomski's abandonment of the study of leadership for the study of learning, for no argument is offered by her for substituting the object of study, it seems to me, other than that leadership appears to 'reduce quite readily to the study of effective administrative practice' (Lakomski, 1999a: 48). But what does it mean to 'reduce'? Is she proposing a simple lexical switch in terms here? And suppose that leadership did reduce in the way she appears to suggest, what would be the justification for her claiming, not merely that leadership (suitably rethought and contextualized in the manner that I have foreshadowed) was just *one* of a number of ingredients making for good practice, but that it was no longer a legitimate ingredient *at all*?

The substitution of learning for leadership proposed by Lakomski looks suspiciously like an attempt to privilege a model of an organization as akin to a cognitive economy: 'it is much more plausible to think of organizations as constituting *networks of distributed cognition*' (Lakomski, 1999b: 9, original emphasis). But why, solely, a cognitive economy? What happens to the notion of a political economy of interests proposed by Barnard (1982: 139–60), for example, who devoted an entire chapter of his classic study, *The Functions of the Executive*, to elucidating the argument that organizations comprised an economy of material incentives and inducements to cooperation? While I would endorse Lakomski's claim that cognition is indeed a distributed property of organizations, and that its distributional form is networked, I would part company with her over the idea that cognition is the sole organizational attribute which is distributed and that learning is all that counts.

Moreover, for reasons that will hopefully become clear shortly, I would argue that in any model of organizations grounded in a notion of distribution, leadership remains an important component. But, first, what is meant by distribution? In order to understand this concept, it is helpful to begin with some assumptions about organizing.

The Idea of Distribution

If, following Weick (1995: 85), the notion of organizing can be seen as an evolving response to the various flows comprising the flux of phenomenological experience, then a minimalist view of an organization is to understand it as an assemblage of individuals or, in Burns' (1996: 1) colourful phrase, 'congeries of persons in more or less autonomous arrays' engaged, continuously through time, in acquired and learned modes of practice. At some point during the evolution of those practices, typically when those involved desire to represent themselves to themselves and to the wider world as a formally constituted membership unit, an emergent process (organizing) begins to harden into an entity (organization). Entitative status entails patterned and reproduced activity-based conduct, enshrining varying degrees of tightly or loosely coupled relations between the agents involved, and this becomes the source of organizational structure. Those relations (as I hope to show) are also tool-mediated. Through time, that emerging and always potentially modifiable organizational structure, in turn, acts back on or shapes the conduct of the agents. This reciprocity expresses the analytical duality of agency and structure referred to earlier. But what are some of the principal components of organizational structure?

Potentially, there is an endless number of sub-elements of structural relations. Extending slightly an earlier summary list (Gronn, 1986: 45–6), the five most significant are: authority, values, interests, personal factors and resources. I include authority because it is always the locus of overall organizational responsibility and legitimacy, and anchors the role system of an organization. Values provide the justifications or ends to which organization members are committed. A particular balance of interests represents the outcome of the relations between, and the material stakes among, the actors as they pursue their various ends. Personal factors frame the willingness or predisposition of members to act in preferred or required ways. Resources, finally, in all of their manifold forms, including the pattern of their utilization and deployment, are the means which facilitate organizational actions, and affect the likelihood of organizational effectiveness, success or failure. Next, suppose that I posit a continuum of the possible formations which might give material expression to, or might be taken by, these constituent components, with a distributed or dispersed form comprising one polarity and a focused or concentrated form making up the other. According to this arrangement, then, the properties of each constituent element, solely or in combination, are relatively distributed or focused. Hence, if we have a set of attributes in mind which tend to be focused, we might talk of there being concentrations or monopolies of power, whereas if something else tends to be distributed then it is more likely to be shared or diffused. Distributed forms may be achieved by any number of modes of allocating the components, but principally by means of stratification, laterality, aggregation, webbing, networking, clustering or randomness. Thus, Jaques's (1989) structural theory of managerial leadership, which is grounded in Stratified Systems Theory (SST) is, like other models based on a notion of hierarchy, one (albeit orthodox) form of a distributed system of leadership. The reason for this is that roles in his SST model are differentiated according to vertical stratification and are intended to be spread over

seven (or sometimes eight) levels according to the principle of subsumption which is the basis of all hierarchies. Subsumption means that each succeeding layer of responsibility subsumes, encapsulates or is superordinate to all of those below it.

At any one point in time in an ongoing trajectory of organizational evolution, therefore, particular organizational forms represent oscillating possibilities or potential differences in the degree of focus or distribution taken by the properties of the components. The critical questions then become ones to do with causality and timing. The first question is: which are the factors that contribute to relatively dispersed or concentrated forms of leadership? The second question is: when is the leadership of organizations likely to take a dispersed or focused form? Both questions are answered in the discussion section of this article. In short, my claim is that a distributed–focused continuum is an evolutionary constant. This position contrasts with the orthodox way in which people tend to represent organizational leadership in their minds, namely, something that is invariably individual and heroically male (Meindl, 1995). My line of argument also contrasts sharply with Shamir's (1999) view that distributed forms represent a difference in kind rather than degree (between two evolutionary possibilities), and that the attention accorded distributed or non-distributed forms arises purely as a consequence of pendulum swings in the popularity of theoretical approaches in different eras. Likewise, the position I am defending is different from the argument of Gee et al. (1996), who also see the property of distribution as representing the hallmark of a different kind of phenomenon, but one which has emerged only in conditions peculiar to the fast capitalism of late modernity. That is, distributed systems are 'a *leitmotif* of late twentieth century life' and arise only because of an 'exponential growth in *variety*, *variability* and *diversity* of all sorts in all areas' (Gee et al., 1996: 51, original emphases). Yet, despite the evolutionary possibility of distribution, discussions of it in respect of leadership are few in number. By far the most popular area of application of the notion of distribution in the study of organizations, and the most advanced area of understanding distributed systems, has been cognition.

Central to the view of socially distributed cognition is the idea that mind and mindfulness are not solely features of the interior mental life of individuals, but are manifest in jointly performed activities and social relations. Distributed mind, therefore, means the pattern of overall activity-based attention between socially positioned actors, and their relations with various representational and computational objects, tools or implements in the performance of tasks. This definition means, in turn, that situations and contexts, and their objects, both structure and mediate thinking. The corollary of a distributed view of mind is that learning—the outcome of task-focused, multi-party cognition—is also socially structured, and is part of the overall system of collective relations between agents, activities and objects. Distributed mind and distributed learning are especially evident in working environments in which decision making is heavily dependent upon the rapid processing of large amounts of information as part of networked, computer-mediated work practices and similarly complex technological artefacts. In these environments—which include the more obvious examples of the flight decks of aircraft carriers (Weick and Roberts, 1993), airline cockpits (Hutchins and Klausen, 1998) and the control rooms of mass transit systems (Heath and Luff, 1998)—individuals perform tasks to some extent autonomously but mostly in concert. That is, the actions which comprise their jointly performed work are either coordinated or programmed to occur either simultaneously— conjointly, in parallel or sequentially—sometimes in circumstances of bodily co-presence, and in others when the actors collaborate but are separated by zones of time, space, place

and culture (Gronn, 1999b). What of leadership? In what way can it be said to be distributed?

The claim made earlier about an emerging balance between degrees of distribution or focus is not new, for it was first raised early on in the development of leadership studies as a field by Gibb (1954), but lay dormant until its resurrection by Brown and Hosking (1986). Gibb's (1954: 884) claim was that 'leadership is probably best conceived as a group quality, as a set of functions which must be carried out by the group' and that it could either be concentrated, monopolized or focused, on the one hand, or dispersed, shared and distributed, on the other. He then proposed two forms of distribution: the overall numerical frequency of the acts contributed by each group member and 'the multiplicity or pattern of group functions performed'. The first of these conceptions is really an accumulation or aggregation model of distribution, whereas the second is a systemic or holistic perspective. Gibb's former view of distribution is still consistent with a perspective on leadership as comprising individual behaviour in which the totality of leadership acts is the numeral sum of every single contribution. This represents a minimalist view of distribution which encompasses leadership as a shared phenomenon. The second, alternative conception of distribution, on the other hand, requires a reconceptualization of the unit of analysis to encompass conjoint agency and plural member work groupings (see Gronn, 1999a and the discussion below).

Gibb's thinking was remarkably prescient. He was uncomfortable with the idea of the solo leader and adopted an interactional standpoint. He noted, for instance, that the entitative idea of an organization seemed to imply clear and fixed role differentiation, yet, in the importance he attached to formative group and organizational processes, he highlighted the fluidity of circumstances in which there was a 'tendency for leadership to pass from one individual to another as the situation changes' (Gibb, 1954: 902). This was an emergent view of leading, and Gibb developed it by showing how the popular idea of leaders and followers as mutually exclusive categories was grievously mistaken. Instead, he claimed (Gibb, 1968: 252) that 'each of these is but a transient status', so that 'leaders and followers frequently exchange roles and observation has shown that the most active followers often initiate acts of leading'. The important idea was that leaders and followers were to be thought of as collaborators in accomplishing group tasks. Gibb even highlighted studies which showed formally designated leaders to be captive of long-standing traditions and values, and as even having those traditions forced on them, so much so that as leaders they were reactive, and 'forced to follow the behavior of those who in the [experimental] pre-test situation had followed' and who simply 'led the group in the direction it would have taken had [she or] he not been there' (Gibb, 1954: 898). Moreover, leaders 'inevitably embod[ied] many of the qualities of the followers, and the relation between the two may often be so close that it is difficult to determine who influences whom and to what extent'. Indeed, so difficult was it in practice to monitor such influence flows that Gibb suggested official leader designations be jettisoned and that observers concentrate instead on leader behaviour in groups. In this way 'no *a priori* assumptions are made as to the distribution of those functions among members' (Gibb, 1968: 271–2).

For these kinds of reasons, then, leadership is more appropriately understood as a fluid and emergent, rather than as a fixed, phenomenon. This view is perfectly consistent with Robinson's notion that leadership is something which is acknowledged for the purposes of successful problem solving, and that as an attributed status it may endure (from the perspective of those doing the attributing) solely for the duration of a task. From this

possibility it follows that the pay-offs or gains from persisting with traditional, static dualisms entrenched in leader–follower roles are limited.

The Rudiments of a Theory of Action

In this section of the article I consider two implications of the possibility that the constituent components of organizational structuring, especially leadership, are likely to take a distributed form. First, I argue that for commentators distribution requires a new conception of the unit of analysis. This, as is evident from the earlier discussion of distributed mind, is mainly because account has to be taken of various forms of conjoint agency. That is, conjoint agency presages a new division of labour in which the authorship and the scope of the activities to be performed have to be redefined to encompass pluralities of agents whose actions dovetail or mesh to express new patterns of interdependent relations. Second, the abandonment of fixed leader–follower dualisms in favour of the possibility of multiple, emergent, task-focused roles necessitates a reconceptualization of the nature of influence and its relation to activity.

Approaches to Activity

In this section I review the respective merits of two approaches to activity in leadership and management: first, the research of the work-activity school; second, activity theory.

1. Work-Activity: A False Start?   The 'work-activity school' was the name given by Mintzberg (1973: 21), author of the highly influential book *The Nature of Managerial Work,* to an inductive approach to research conducted in a variety of management settings. Central to this approach was the attempt to describe the content and characteristics of the day-to-day work of managers. At the time of its publication, Mintzberg's study was distinctive because, rather than rely as his predecessors had done on data procured from diaries completed by samples of managers, he generated first-hand field reports by shadowing managers while they managed. Mintzberg labelled this field strategy structured observation, rather than participant observation as conventionally understood in anthropology or sociology. This form of observation entailed the collection of what he termed 'structured' and 'anecdotal' data. Anecdotes comprised descriptive background notes on incidents observed, while structured data meant procuring for any observed event three forms of quantifiable information: a chronological record of observed activity patterns, a mail record of incoming and outgoing mail and a contact record of who talked to whom (Mintzberg, 1973: 232–3).

Mintzberg's research was influential in triggering off scores of replication studies over the next two decades or so in a variety of managerial spheres (including education). Given the emphasis of Mintzberg and his followers on description—explicit in the research question for which they became famous: 'What do managers do?'—it seemed possible in the 1970s and 1980s that this work-activity approach might generate an enduring scholarly tradition in an academic discipline long dominated by prescriptive, normative approaches to knowledge. This was not to be, for work-activity and structured observation studies have declined in number and significance. Their original purpose was to track the dynamics and flow of work as experienced by managers. In this regard, Mintzberg was probably the earliest researcher to document the fast-paced and interrupted flow of the work, as captured in his pithy summary of managerial activities as comprising 'brevity, variety and

fragmentation' (Mintzberg, 1973: 51). There were some shortcomings in the structured observational approach of the work-activity school (see Thomas, 1993: 47–55). For present purposes, the most glaring of these was its assumption that the individual, free-standing, solo-performing manager was to be taken as the appropriate unit of analysis. Yet, as Engeström (1999b: 63–4) has pointed out, this mode of representation tends to depict managerial work as a linear or cumulative flow of discrete, task-related, individual actions. Moreover, even ethnographies of managerial work or leadership, according to Engeström, frequently lack a critical developmental dimension, even though they have the added advantage over structured observation studies of being better situated or contextualized, and sometimes provide a psycho-socio-spatial dimension for the reader's understanding. This lacuna occurs because 'there is no room and no language for representing horizontal interactions between various parallel tasks of an actor, or between different actors, or between actors and their artifacts' (Engeström, 1999b: 64).

As I pointed out (Gronn, 1982, 1984, 1987) in response to the application of work-activity school research designs to the investigation of the work of educational leaders and managers, a shortcoming of the traditional Mintzbergian structured observation approach was that it left substantial dimensions of managerial work performance implicit, tacit, unsaid or invisible. Part of my rebuttal of its proponents in educational administration was that the promise of structured observation—namely that 'through the eyes of the observer . . . the important "invisibles" of principals' administrative behaviors are at last being documented "as they really are" ' (Thomas et al., 1981: 70)—was a claim on which it could not deliver. That is, upon the completion of structured observational studies of educational executives, a substantial proportion of the so-called invisibles of management still remained invisible (e.g. managers' cognitive representations of their tasks). By and large, the popularity of the work-activity school had run its race by the early 1990s, mainly because, while structured observational studies yielded superficially appealing, low-level descriptions of what managers did and how they performed their work, these '[did] not tell us whether what they do is management' (Thomas, 1993: 54).

A more recent and promising approach to the study of the work of leaders and managers is activity theory or, as it is sometimes known, socially distributed activity theory. This aims to take a more holistic perspective on the study of organizational work, which is consistent with the second of Gibb's two understandings of distribution. Central to activity theory is the division of labour (the critically important dimension glossed over by the work-activity school) and it also takes as its unit of analysis the notion of a collectively performed activity system. Moreover, this approach represents an explicit attempt to make visible the dimensions and properties of, and to analyse the internal relations between, the components of activities.

2. Activity Theory: A Fresh Start?   The intellectual roots of activity theory are disparate but find their principal expression in Russian Marxist psychology, particularly in the writings of L.S. Vygotsky (1978) and A.N. Leont'ev (1978, 1981). The most vigorous recent proponent of activity theory has been Engeström (1999a and b). There have been few discussions of activity theory in leadership and management (although see Blackler, 1993), but its attraction for students of leadership is that it offers an entirely new conception of workplace ecology. Activity theory has three particular advantages. First, the components of its activity system model are sufficiently encompassing to rectify the typical contextual gaps and omissions identified previously (see Gronn and Ribbins, 1996) in discussions of

leadership. Second, it provides a thorough analysis of the pragmatics of accomplishing organizational work. Third, an understanding of the contribution of leadership to learning in the workplace is facilitated by the developmental and emergent approach to practice implicit in the activity system model. These points are discussed in turn.

Activity is a vehicle for representing human behaviour in and engagement with the material (i.e. natural and social) world. Flows of activities comprise the constituent elemental stuff of human existence (Leont'ev, 1978: 66). The key components of the model of an activity system are outlined in Figure 1.

The first feature to note is that the relationships between the six components located at equidistant points around the perimeter of the equilateral triangle are always mediated rather than direct. That is, the link between actions of the Subject (S, individual or collective) and the Object (O) of her or his work-oriented, purposive actions is not direct but is mediated through various Instruments (Is): that is, artefacts or tools (including symbols and linguistic systems) which purport to represent experience, accumulated learning or solutions to previously encountered problems. Instead of S > O, then, the relationship is more accurately expressed as S > I > O. This idea of mediation stems from Vygotsky's (1978: 30) contention that in child development 'the path from object to child and from child to object passes through another person', or, as Leont'ev (1978: 59) expresses it: 'equipment mediates activity connecting man (sic) not only with the world of things but also with other people'. Likewise, that same Subject–Object relation occurs within a Community of practice (C) in the form S > C > O; it is subject to various culturally derived Rules (R), expressed as S > R > O, and it is embedded within a Division of Labour (DoL), or S > DoL >O.

But the model does not define an activity *per se*. Rather, it is a template for facilitating the analysis of particular activities. The critical point about the structure of activities is that they always form part of a collective labour process and, as Leont'ev's (1981: 210) example of the hunt indicates, the definition of activity comprises the three elements of motives, actions and operations. Motives express objects (or objectives) which meet needs, and actions fulfil purposes in pursuit of objects:

> When a member of a group performs his labour activity he also does it to satisfy one of his needs. A beater, for example, taking part in a primaeval collective hunt, was stimulated by the need for food or, perhaps, a need for clothing, which the skin of the dead
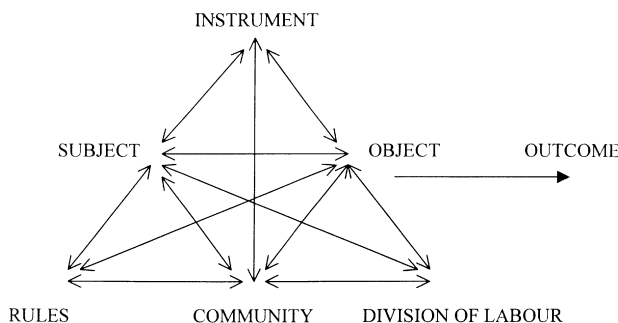

Figure 1. The mediational structure of an activity system (Engeström, 1999b: 66).

animal would meet for him. At what, however, was his activity directly aimed? It may have been directed, for example, at frightening a herd of animals and sending them towards other hunters, hiding in ambush. That, properly speaking, is what should be the result of the activity of this man. And the activity of this individual member of the hunt ends with that. The rest is completed by the other members. This result, i.e. the frightening of game, etc. understandably does not in itself, and may not, lead to satisfaction of the beater's need for food, or the skin of the animal. What the processes of his activity were directed to did not, consequently, coincide with what stimulated them, i.e. did not coincide with the motive of his activity; the two were divided from one another in this instance. Processes, the object and motive of which do not coincide with one another, we shall call 'actions'. We can say, for example, that the beater's activity is the hunt, and the frightening of game his action.

For any activity, operations are the means of facilitating actions and they comprise its content. In this example, they would include the beating of bushes and disturbing of habitat by this particular member of the hunt, and the direct attack on and killing of the game by other members (with, note, no separation into the familiar categories of mental and manual operations being made by Leont'ev).

Although this description concentrates mainly on the actions and activity of one man as a subcomponent of a larger system, Leont'ev's hunt example points up the centrality of the division of labour in human activity. There are two points to note here. First, the actions of each individual only make sense from the perspective of the overall pattern or system of labour relations between them. Thus, 'the beater's action is possible only on condition of his reflecting the link between the expected result of the action performed by him and the end result of the hunt as a whole' (Leont'ev, 1981: 212). Second, in conjoint actions such as those comprising a hunt, the labour relations between individuals are interdependent. Just as the actions of others 'give sense to the object of the beater's action', then so too do the beater's actions 'justify and give sense to the actions of the people who ambush the game', for, 'were it not for the beaters' action, the making of an ambush would be senseless and unjustified' (Leont'ev, 1981: 212–13).

The next point to notice about the model is the fluidity of relations inherent within it. This attribute is represented by the dual-directional arrows which express the interactional relationship between all of the components. The significance of this reciprocity is that it allows for the duality of constraint and enablement in respect of action—as in the structure–agency duality adumbrated earlier in the article. That is, at the same time that all Ss act within particular contexts determined by unique configurations of R, I, C and DoL, the dimensions of R, I, C and DoL and the pattern of the relations are potentially modifiable by the actions of those same Ss. Thus, in the relationship $S<>I<>O$, the degrees of freedom experienced by Ss in respect of potential accomplishments or outcomes are at once circumscribed by the range of existing artefacts, but also potentially widened as new technologies become available. In this way, the universe of possibilities is expanded. These dynamic relations in the model are further enhanced to allow for emergence by the incorporation of Vygotsky's (1978: 84–91) notion of the zone of proximal development. In his discussion of the relationship between the learning and development (or maturation) of children, Vygotsky observed that all learning has a history. As part of that history, the zone of proximal development stands for the space between two levels on a trajectory of development: the actual (or retrospective) and the

potential (or prospective). In the distance between the two levels lies a series of embryonic functions yet to mature, their maturation being contingent upon appropriately structured learning.

Transposed to the activity system model, the zone of proximal development expresses the emergent, evolutionary potential of activity. Thus, the dimensions of the particular arrangement of R, C, I and DoL which obtain for an actor or actors at Time[1] (T^1) may, at T^2 and T^3 etc., form a different configuration. Hence, if we bring to mind the image of a series of activity system triangles randomly positioned in a roughly ordered left–right sequence, then (Engeström, 1999b: 67):

> The zone of proximal development may be depicted as a gray area between actions embedded in the current activity with its historical roots and contradictions, the foreseeable activity in which the contradictions are expansively resolved, and the foreseeable activity in which the contradictions have led to contraction and destruction of opportunities.

The dynamism inherent in Leont'ev's (1978: 50) notion of activity is expressed in his view that activity not only has a structure but 'its own internal transitions and transformations; its own development'. What is not clear from his explanation, nor from Engeström's discussion of Figure 1, however, is what provides an activity system with its dynamism, nor what happens in the case of more open-ended, less well defined and new activities for which actions are less clearly culturally circumscribed and well defined than in the archetypal instance of the hunt. For this reason, in my view, some statement about the connection between influence and action which makes allowance for the non-occurrence as well as the occurrence of activity (and, therefore, its opposite state, inactivity, an eventuality which Leont'ev (1978: 156) appears reluctant to countenance and relegates solely to the human experience of sleep) is necessary to amplify the model.

Leadership and Activity Theory

In discussions in social and political theory of what might be termed the family of power terms, commentators generally see a number of closely related concepts forming a tightly knit cluster. The principal ones include power, influence, authority (discussed in the next section), force, coercion, manipulation and deterrence—although rarely, interestingly, leadership. Each term provides a qualitatively different description of the relations obtaining between nominated sets of agents or actors (role incumbents). I commence with some remarks on power and then influence in which, because most commentators in leadership studies treat the two terms as synonymous (see Gronn, 1999c: 7–8), I conflate leadership and influence.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, at the same time that the so-called 'new' leadership was superseding anti-leadership views, social and political theorists were engaged in a prolonged debate over the locus and form of power in political systems and communities, and their connection with the interests of various parties (for a brief summary see Gronn, 1986: 46–50; Hardy and Clegg, 1999). In regard to the locus of power, the argument mainly concerned whether power was concentrated in one centre, and exercised by an individual or by an elite, or dispersed or decentred among a plurality of elite groups. In respect of the form of power, much of this debate focused initially on the status and legitimacy to be accorded latent, as opposed to manifest, behaviour in the political sphere and whether or

not decision-making procedures could be rigged to stifle the expression (let alone the representation) of interests, or even prevent their formation. From the findings of a number of strategically conducted comparative case studies emerged a recognition that while issues might become public events in some communities, elsewhere they remained non-events. While there was evidence of issue-oriented action (e.g. in respect of air pollution) in community A, therefore, nothing whatsoever transpired in community B. The explanations invoked for these disparities in policies and approaches ranged from overt preventative measures exercised by powerful groups, through self-censorship on the part of the disaffected (because they imputed power and influence to reputed others) to the absence of alternatives and possibilities in the minds of the disaffected (due to effects of their cultural socialization, prior learning, etc.). Thus, in parallel with the claim about possible substitutes for leadership in organizations, there existed a variety of candidate substitute explanations other than the orthodox behavioural view that outcomes were attributable to the decisions of identifiable individuals or groups.

The likelihood that power and influence might be dispersed or concentrated, that they did not have to be manifest or overt, and that their covert and latent forms of expression could result in inaction as well as action, has significant conceptual and empirical implications for organizational leadership. First of all, if leadership is an instance of influence, then, like influence, it need not be expressed in ways that are obvious to the naked eye. Consider the case of anticipated reactions, which was central in the debate just summarized. In circumstances of either the imagined or embodied presence of the members of an organization, suppose that one party surmises how another might respond were she or he to initiate an action. The particular supposition may be based on previous direct experience or on the reputation of the other party. Anticipating a possible negative outcome, perhaps, the first party refrains from doing anything. Ostensibly, then, while no action has occurred, the second party (unbeknownst to her or him, or anyone else) has been influential. That is, covert leadership has produced a significant effect, in this case negation. This example is not unlike the inferential reasoning explanation provided by causal attribution theorists of leadership (e.g. Lord and Maher, 1993: 55).

Second, although the instance just given is clearly an exception, organizational influence is frequently reciprocal. The explanation for this feature lies in the division of labour. Inherent in the division of labour is a duality between specialization and interdependence. That is, tasks are broken down into their detailed specialist components, which are then performed by different individuals. But this fragmentation of effort leaves each worker dependent on others for the completion of an overall task. Paradoxically, then, labour (i.e. Leont'ev's notion of operation) has to be reintegrated at the same time as it is differentiated (Sayer and Walker, 1992: 15–17). Influence is one means of reintegrating work tasks to achieve cooperatively generated outcomes. In Leont'ev's archetype of the hunt, for example, the actions of the beaters and the shooters combine to accomplish the activity and to attain the desired outcome because, even though the actors perform different operations, they depend and rely on and influence one another. But unlike the kinds of organizational activities normally associated with leadership, a hunt is a set-piece, low discretionary level activity in which people are likely to play their appointed roles automatically. Nonetheless, in activities in which there is greater scope for discretion, examples of reciprocally expressed influence abound. In the relations between organizational heads and their immediate subordinates, or between executives and their personal assistants, for example, couplings form in which the extent of the

conjoint agency resulting from the interdependence and mutual influence of the two parties is sufficient to render meaningless any assumptions about leadership being embodied in just one individual (Gronn, 1999a).

Third, there is an emergent dimension to influence. I have already cited Gibb's work on this point. Emergence means that in the variously connected arrays of persons proposed by Burns (1996: 1), for example, the potential for leadership is present in the flow of activities in which a set of organization members find themselves enmeshed. Thus, a person or persons within this kind of web of relations, an initiator, perhaps—'who, because of certain motivations of her own combined with a certain self-confidence, takes the first step toward change, out of a state of equilibrium in the web' (Burns, 1996: 1)—may succeed in triggering a chain or cycle of multiple interactions which crystallizes into a patterned response over time. One implication of emergence is that, as the actions play themselves out as part of activities, some actors are likely be more influential than others (their actions carry greater consequences for all concerned). It is at these points in time, perhaps, that the task-related leadership recognition process to which Robinson (forthcoming: 6) refers comes into play. Perceptions of some individuals as being more important than others—due to current, previous, imagined or reputed performance—may eventually solidify into an enduring expectation about anticipated consequential behaviour in future activities, but they need not.

Finally, although discussions of leadership are frequently expressed either timelessly or a-temporally, influential actions are inescapably time-bound. This neglect of time is part of the failure adequately to specify the particular contexts for action. There are, of course, different senses of time. Sometimes the influence exerted is purely momentary—as in the instinctive response to an exclamation alerting us to impending danger. But influence also endures. Moreover, there are degrees of endurance. A good illustration is Meindl's (1995) idea of the romance of leadership. This phenomenon provides evidence of the long-term persistence of hardened, culturally shared sets of expectations about the locus of influence. The significance of this enduring dimension of influence is that the consequences of actions may only become apparent after lapses in time. The absence of evidence of immediate causal effects at any point in time, therefore, should not be interpreted as absence of influence or leadership. A useful analogy here is the accumulation of water stains on hard surfaces over time in which the gradual build-up is not necessarily evident to the naked eye while a tap is observed to be dripping. One advantage of Vygotsky's notion of a proximal development zone in this context is that it alerts us to the transformation of activities through time, to the influential actions which contribute to that transformation and to the possible future expansion or contraction of activities (Engeström, 1999b: 67).

Discussion

I turn now to the two earlier questions which were concerned, respectively, with the factors which might explain the emergence of distribution as an organizational phenomenon and those factors which might permit us to hypothesize about the likelihood of leadership being either focused or distributed.

Determinants of Distribution

The first point to note is that some version of distributed leadership has always been in evidence, not merely in the aggregated sense distinguished by Gibb but in his second

holistic sense as well. Apart from the leadership couplings just cited, the more obvious instances are the typical kinds of collaborative decision-making forums common to most educational settings, such as teams or committees. In respect of the activity system model, these two are membership (Ss) units in particular settings and locales (Cs) which, drawing on specialist expertise (DoL) and utilizing various tools—such as regulations, documents, statistics—(Is), endeavour to perform tasks or solve problems (Os). These units operate according to explicit and implicit conventions or codes (Rs). Team and committee deliberations can be expected to manifest all of the evanescent properties of influence distinguished in the previous section of the article. Thus, at different points in the life of these units, different members will exert influence (and therefore leadership). The patterns of influence in evidence may or may not accord with the overall status relations of the members.

But there are also other less obvious instances of distributed forms. Long before the idea of distribution even became part of the lexicon of the field of leadership (with the exception of Gibb), Hodgson et al. (1965) had published a study of the role constellation formed by three senior psychiatric hospital administrators. This conjoint work unit represented more than the aggregated efforts of three self-contained individuals enacting their own particular roles. It evolved from a process of adaptation negotiated between the three men as they intermeshed their personalities while reworking a pre-existing set of relationships following a leadership succession process. Hodgson et al. (1965: 284) describe a constellation as a 'latent substructure', that is, an unspoken and implicit sense of a bonded relationship. This awareness was grounded in the intersubjectively shared knowledge that each constellation member possessed his own unique set of specialist attributes, predisposing each one to rely on the other two. And the fact that each individual's specialist expertise was clearly differentiated from, but still complementary to, that of their colleagues, and that each person trusted his two executive peers, worked to the mutual advantage of all three men and provided a sound grounding for their interdependence. Complementary specialization enabled each man to engage in actions and operations of his own choosing for which he was best fitted within a jointly agreed-upon framework of activities, in pursuit of the interests and well-being of the hospital.

In other less obvious examples, distributed leadership is even manifest in what appear to be the most self-evident and uncontestable instances of stand-alone or focused leadership. In the sphere of politics, consider the cases of tyranny, dictatorships or coups in which a military general takes charge. While the individuals in each case may exercise naked, supreme or virtually untrammelled power, they generally act on behalf of or with the blessing of an army council, a junta or a cell group. They institutionalize new organs of state, thereby creating a new regime of authority that they may seek to manipulate at will but on which they are also heavily dependent. Likewise, in more familiar democratic arrangements, there are often vast networks of specialist advisers, minders and officials that form an apparatus of shared responsibility and influence surrounding heads of state and government. In each of these instances the division of leadership labour, I would argue, can be demonstrated to be shared or dispersed. Why, then, does this attribute appear to be unacknowledged or unnoticed? The reason lies with the word 'head'. As a close reading of Gibb (1968) will show, when people use 'leadership', more often than not they really mean 'headship'. Whereas leadership denotes influence, headship, on the other hand, denotes authority and describes the exercise of authority by the most senior role incumbent in an executive hierarchy. The confusion is caused, therefore, by the slippage

in usage from the person who heads becoming cast as the person who leads. Authority overlays the actual division of labour so that the head individual who exercises overall responsibility becomes vested with a monopoly of influence. Thereafter an expectation solidifies that the chief authority figure or head is also, by definition, *the* leader.

The key component in the activity system which accounts for organizational leadership taking a distributed form, as I have been arguing, is the division of labour, despite the appearance of concentration, as in some of the above examples. The division of labour is the principal driver or generative mechanism for the structuring of work and workplace relations. This is because it defines the overall amount of work originating in the task environment to be performed, and the nature and extent of the specialization into which the totality of that work is subdivided. Yet the acknowledged form taken by the division of labour in a particular context, in respect of the allocated work, will always be determined by the structuring elements distinguished earlier: authority (whose effects we have just witnessed), the values, interests and personalities of the members concerned and the resources at their disposal.

Incidence of Distribution

Given my claim that, appearances to the contrary, leadership invariably takes a distributed form, there are two questions which demand answers. First, why have commentators seemingly only just begun to accord explicit recognition to distributed leadership? Second, has the character of distribution changed over time? And, if so, why?

In regard to the first question, all of the indications are that distributed leadership is an idea whose time has come. The term is appearing in discussions of decision making in schools, although mostly only in Gibb's minimalist sense or as a euphemism for collaboration and spreading the burden of decision making (e.g. Clift et al., 1995). Another reason for its appeal may be the dawning realization that the roughly two decades-long preoccupation with visionary champions is flawed, particularly in respect of their demonstrated accomplishment of direct effects on organizational effectiveness (Hallinger and Heck, 1999: 185–6). Another, perhaps, is that organizations and systems are reaping what they have sown. That is, having diminished dramatically the overall number of (especially middle) managers through processes of downsizing and de-layering—with all of the negative consequences of the erosion of culture, loss of collective memory and so on—the justification for traditional manager–managed and leader–follower distinctions begins to weaken. Suddenly, the possibility opens up of all organization members becoming managers (Grey, 1999) and of all followers becoming autonomous leaders (Miller, 1998: 18), a consideration I have discussed elsewhere (Gronn, 1999b). Another, clearly, is the rise in popularity of organizational learning and the learning organization. The attractiveness of these two notions is accounted for less, perhaps, because of any prima facie connection between learning collectively and the notion of distributed cognition, than because of the awareness that the (tacit and codified) knowledge required to solve complex problems is dispersed throughout organizations. Hence, perhaps, the recent rise in the popularity of teams as vehicles for harnessing collective expertise.

The second question is the more difficult of the two. A trite answer would be to say that the character of distribution is likely to alter substantially whenever there are dramatic changes in the division of labour, particularly when the volume and complexity of problems and tasks increase. Despite the enduring attachment of commentators to an individualistic leadership paradigm, as a normative option in such circumstances distributed

organizational leadership has, prima facie, much to commend it. Distribution entails maximizing sources of information, data and judgement, and spreading the detrimental impact of the consequences of miscalculation and risk. Because of the pooling of expertise and sources of advice, it also affords an increased likelihood of detecting errors in judgement and more attention being accorded feedback. These things amount, in short, to an overall widening of the net of intelligence and resourcefulness. But quite apart from what may be the inherent attraction of these features, the division of labour in human service organizations has been changed recently beyond all recognition by the availability of networked electronic communications technology, namely, the tools, artefacts (or Is) of the activity system template. Reliance on networked office computers, for example, now facilitates the transcendence of previously insurmountable barriers of time, place and space by opening up entirely new possibilities for the performance of collaborative work. New arrangements for scheduling and programming tasks simultaneously, sequentially or in parallel with one another by geographically separated work units, for example, have suddenly become tangible options. The inherent advantages of distribution can be realized on a scale and in a form previously not contemplated.

At the same time as the creation of these new possibilities, existing routines and operating procedures cease any longer to provide ready-made answers. The search for new solutions begins as part of the ongoing dialectic between design and adaptation in the workplace. Strauss's (1985: 4) term for these new configurations of tasks is trajectory. The creation and re-creation of task trajectories requires the labour of articulation. Articulation and rearticulation work is central to what it means to manage, and is crucial for resolving the paradox at the heart of the division of labour. That is, coincident with the process of differentiating tasks into their subcomponents is the simultaneous requirement that these be reintegrated by means of coordination and control mechanisms (Sayer and Walker, 1992: 17). Task integration is a precondition of cooperative effort and effective conjoint activity, yet 'none of this work is called into play automatically', remarks Strauss (1985: 5). It is for this reason that proposals that organizations can be reduced to networks of distributed cognition should be treated with caution. Cognition, clearly, is important but not so important that it is a substitute for everything else.

Conclusion

In this article I have sought to revise orthodox thinking about leadership. Building on the early work of Gibb, and in the face of a resurgence of anti-leadership arguments, I have argued for the retention of leadership, but in a form which accords more with the realities of the flow of influence in organizations, and which disentangles it from an any presumed automatic connection with headship. I have discussed the merits of activity theory, as a means of tracking distributed influence and leadership, and have suggested that the activity system model at the heart of this approach forms a helpful and useful bridge between organizational structures and the actions of agents. The particular attraction of activity theory is its model of a work context, principally because of the way this foregrounds the division of labour. Provided leadership commentators and researchers focus their analyses on the actual divisions of labour obtaining in systems and organizations, especially on the ways in which the specialization–integration duality is resolved or plays

itself out, rather than applying traditional stereotypic dualisms like leader–follower(s), then realistic portrayals of leadership should be attainable. This kind of outcome should result in more accurate knowledge of the causal connection between leadership and the outcomes of action, which was the original trigger for the substitutes of leadership argument. It should also generate more realistic hopes for leadership, including a less widespread lay romanticism of the concept, and a revised set of role expectations among future cohorts of aspiring educational leaders.

Those in education who insist that the achievement of sound and effective practice, and ascertaining the factors which contribute to that practice, should be the overriding goals of commentators and practitioners alike are right. My approach, however, has been to show that leadership (albeit in a considerably different form) still has a significant role to play in accomplishing good practice. But if the perspective outlined here is to have an enduring impact then there remains much to be done. Having cast doubt on learning as a sole substitute or replacement for leadership, I have said very little about its connections with leadership (although see Gronn, 1999b). On this point, activity theory has much to contribute to understanding learning and its impact on the division of labour through such processes as visibilization (Engeström, 1999b; Star and Strauss, 1999). I have also relied on a relatively undifferentiated notion of tasks and have tended to treat these as synonymous with problems. Tasks and problems and their connection with the kind of distributed, conjoint agency view of leadership propounded here, needless to say, warrant much closer attention. The disarming implication of my argument for those with a vested interest in defending leadership as the vital ingredient in the success of organizations, however, is that attending to both of these matters of unfinished business entails foregrounding organizational work and labour more and more as the focus of analysis and discussion, with leadership being relegated to a contributory role. On the other hand, the argument of this article will have succeeded provided it demonstrates that removing leadership altogether from the stage is premature.

Note

1. There are, of course, numerous other potentially fatal weaknesses likely to be triggered when an exaggerated sense of agency is attributed to leaders. Grandiosity is one. At the time of writing (late 1999, early 2000), the ruling Liberal–National Coalition government in Victoria has recently been ejected after seven years in office in what was widely tipped to be an unlosable election. The Liberal Party's campaign strategy (based on what its spin doctors believed was the Premier's extraordinarily high public profile and popularity rating) was to embargo all its ministers from public comment, and to confine every policy announcement and public statement to the party leader and Premier, the Hon. J.G. Kennett. The Premier even established his own website (www.jeff.com)—since abolished—and produced radio advertisements with voices exclaiming 'Jeff f****** rules!' and the like. Following a complete electoral debacle (loss of 13 seats and government), the Coalition agreement collapsed, and Kennett has since resigned as premier, party leader and member of state parliament. The subsequent by-election held for the former premier's seat was then won (for the first time ever) by the new minority Labor government with a massive voting swing of about 10.5 per cent. The resignation of the leader of the National Party is imminent, thereby creating another by-election.

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