

# Leadership – It’s a *System*, Not a Person!

Barbara Kellerman

*Abstract: This article argues that the leadership industry has been beset by a bias. This bias has been directed toward leaders and away from two other variables that equally pertain – and that equally explain the trajectory of human history. The first is followers, or others who are in any way relevant, even if passively. And the second is contexts, within which leaders and followers necessarily are embedded.*

*Together these three parts, each of which is equally important and each of which impinges equally on the other two, make up the leadership system. This article suggests that the approximately forty-year-old leadership industry has paid a heavy price for its obsession with leaders at the expense of whoever/whatever else matters. For the industry has not in any major, measurable way improved the human condition, which is precisely why it should be reconsidered and reconceived.*

Notwithstanding what might appear in this essay to be self-evident, no more than simple common-sense, it needs to be said. Most leadership experts, especially those who are card-carrying members of what I call the leadership industry, continue to fixate on leaders at the expense of other elements equally important to the creation of change.

What exactly is the *leadership industry*? It is my catch-all term for the now countless leadership centers, institutes, programs, courses, seminars, workshops, experiences, trainers, books, blogs, articles, websites, webinars, videos, conferences, consultants, and coaches claiming to teach people – usually for money, generally for big money – how to lead.<sup>1</sup> Teaching people how to lead has become a business, a big business, in which mostly the private sector, but by no means only the private sector, invests big bucks: more than \$50 billion a year is spent globally on leadership development and learning. Clearly the assumption is that leaders can be developed, trained, and taught how to lead or, at least, taught how to lead better than they would without any investment in their learning.

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Of course, there are several other assumptions on which the leadership industry is predicated. They include the belief that leadership can be taught to the many, not just to a select few; the conviction that leadership can be taught, simultaneously, to relatively large numbers of people, in spite of the obvious differences among them; and some sense of certainty that leadership can be taught relatively quickly and easily, in, say, a semester-long course, or an executive program that lasts a couple of weeks. But there is one overweening assumption that dominates the rest: that becoming a leader means that you are becoming something good.

Here the word “good” is used in several different ways. First, the word assumes that leadership training is training someone to be *effective*. Second, it assumes that leadership education is educating someone to be *ethical*. Finally, and most important, it assumes that developing a leader is developing someone *important* and *consequential*, as opposed to them remaining unimportant and inconsequential. Put directly, the leadership industry, in collaboration with other institutions – including corporate America and, yes, academia – has managed to make becoming a leader a mantra. It is presumed a path to money and power; a medium for achievement, both individual and institutional; and a mechanism for creating change, sometimes, though hardly always, in the interest of the common good.

As I have pointed out elsewhere, my own university, Harvard, is an obvious case in point.<sup>2</sup> When Lawrence Summers was inaugurated president in 2001, he asserted that “in this new century, nothing will matter more than the education of future *leaders* and the development of new ideas.” Similarly, nearly every one of Harvard’s graduate schools has the word “leader” or “leadership” in its mission statement. The mission of the Harvard Law School is to “educate

*leaders* who contribute to the development of justice and the well-being of society.” The mission of the Harvard Medical School is to “create and nurture a diverse community of the best people committed to *leadership* in alleviating suffering cause by disease.” The mission of the Harvard Divinity School is to “educate women and men for service as *leaders* in religious life and thought.” And the mission of the Harvard School of Education is to “prepare *leaders* in education and to generate knowledge.” (Italics all mine.) Need I add that the mission statements of the Harvard Kennedy School (of Government) and the Harvard Business School contain more of the same?

This fixation on learning leadership – in particular on learning *how* to lead, as opposed to learning *about* leadership – ripples across American curricula as it does across corporate America. It is by no means confined only to higher education, any more than leadership learning is confined any longer to big business. As suggested, leadership development, education, and training are as prevalent in middle and high schools as they are in institutions of higher education, and they are considered as important in the public and nonprofit sectors as they are in the private one. Moreover, while the leadership industry was conceived in the United States, it is by no means any longer confined to it. The industry has become a global phenomenon, evidenced and invested in Europe and Asia as much as in America.

Of course, some – a select few – had an interest in leadership from the beginning of recorded history. But the leadership industry as mass phenomenon, and as big business involving large sums of money, is only about forty years old. While I will not go into the reasons for its relatively recent inception, I will note that it has come to focus nearly all of its efforts on the education, development, and training of single individuals or, occasionally, teams. In the

main it has become a how-to exercise in which, to all appearances, both seller and buyer assume that being a leader is something that can be learned, and that being a leader is better than being a follower.

There are however some parallel truths: that leaders of every stripe are in dispute; that the tireless teaching of leadership has brought us no closer to leadership nirvana than we were previously; that we do not have much better an idea of how to grow good leaders, or of how to stop or at least slow bad leaders, than we did one hundred or even one thousand years ago; that the context is changing in ways that leaders seem unwilling or unable to fully grasp; that followers have become, on the one hand, disappointed and disillusioned and, on the other, entitled, emboldened, and empowered; and, lastly, that notwithstanding the enormous sums of money and time that have been poured into trying to teach people how to lead, over its roughly forty-year history, the leadership industry seems not in any major, meaningful, or measurable way to have improved the human condition.<sup>3</sup> In fact, as the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign would seem to testify, leadership, or at least the strenuous attempt to secure the nation's highest office, has hit a new low.

Which brings us to the question: what is to be done? Is there anything about the leadership industry to which one can reasonably point that could be fixed, improved, or changed so as to make the process of leadership learning richer, fuller, deeper, and therefore more likely to yield more obviously positive results?<sup>4</sup> While I do not for a moment presume to have a cure for what ails it, I argue that the industry's obsession with single individuals, with leaders or would-be leaders at the expense of other elements that similarly pertain, is as misleading as it is misguided.

Leadership is not about the individual man or woman. Leadership is, instead,

a *system* that consists of three parts, each of which is *equally* important, and each of which impinges *equally* on the other two. The first part is the *leader* – and I am not here diminishing, and still less minimizing, the importance of the leader. The second is the *follower* – the “other” whom the leader must engage or, at least, neutralize in order to advance his or her goals. And the third is the *context* or, better, *contexts* – within which both leaders and followers are necessarily situated.

While the leadership industry is a relatively recent phenomenon, our interest in leadership stretches back across human history. In fact, to understand leadership now, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, it is important to put it in historical context. For in the beginning, learning about leadership was, for good and sound reason, all about leaders: single individuals who could, despite being a tiny minority, control the overwhelming majority and, on occasion, single-handedly change history.

It was, I should add, by no means assumed that these all-important leaders would necessarily be good: that is, simultaneously ethical and effective. Plato, one of our early written guides on the subject, wrote about tyrannical leaders: “Such a crop of evils reveals how much more wretched is the existence of the tyrannical man. . . . Not only is he ill governed within himself, but once misfortune removes him from private life and establishes him in the tyrant's place, he must try to control others when he cannot control himself. He is . . . obliged to engage adversaries in never-ending rivalry and discord.”<sup>5</sup> Plato's attention, though, was on leaders, not on followers, for notwithstanding Athenian democracy, ancient Greeks safely assumed that it was the former, not the latter, who held most of the power, most of the authority, and most of the influence. No wonder, then, that our

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thinking about leadership – the leadership literature – was focused for eons on gods and goddesses, sages and princes, philosopher kings and virgin queens.

It took a few thousand years of history for Western political thinkers to persist in presuming that ordinary people had certain rights, rights that were naturally theirs. Previously it was given that the educated and privileged few – generally clergy and/or royalty – would control the many and that this was the natural order of things. Even into the nineteenth century as learned a man as Thomas Carlyle could still write with unmitigated fervor about the heroic leader who alone could and indeed did change the course of history: “Universal history, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones. . . . The soul of the whole world’s history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these.”<sup>6</sup>

Notwithstanding Carlyle, led by the great political philosophers of the Enlightenment, ideas on leadership and, especially, on followership, began dramatically and irrevocably to change. The watershed to which I refer is the gradually growing conviction that leaders have an obligation to share power with their followers. For example, John Locke’s insistence on the right to hold private property; his conception of social contract theory, which argued that governments derive their legitimacy from the consent of the governed; and his assertion that the social contract must apply equally to leader and led all were breakthroughs. Locke, perhaps more than any other political philosopher (with the possible exception of Montesquieu), provided the moral, legal, and philosophical basis for a system of governance based on a reasonably equitable distribution of power between the governors and the governed.<sup>7</sup>

Though one might reasonably point out that participatory democracy was not new altogether – recall the reference to democracy (of a sort) in ancient Athens – this was different. For pursuant to the Enlightenment were the American and French Revolutions, which sealed the idea that in democratic systems, followers have the right not only to share power, but to depose their leaders if they do not merit the privilege of governing. Further, the idea that power and influence were to be shared became enshrined in U.S. constitutional law. Our separation of powers and checks and balances are precisely to preclude the possibility that people in positions of power and authority will accrue too much of one or the other, or even both, for themselves. Not only must no single individual or institution of government be permitted to dominate, but followers – ordinary people – had the right, it was now presumed, to participate in determining their own (political) fortunes.

Of course, “we the people” was not then inclusive. Most obviously, people of color and women were excluded from the original conception, both in Europe and in the United States. But during the nineteenth century, these exclusions began to give way. Pressures from below built up: followers began to press leaders for equal rights, equal to each other’s and to those of leaders. As a result of these various sociopolitical movements, slaves were freed and, in time, women gained rights that eventually came to be considered basic, including the right to be educated, the right to own property, and the right to exercise the franchise.

In the twentieth century, these pressures, and those that were roughly analogous, grew stronger, not only in the West but worldwide. Anticolonial passions, personified by Mahatma Gandhi, became in time global; anti-apartheid protests, personified by Nelson Mandela, became in



time successful; and various other sociopolitical movements – including, in the United States, the antiwar movement, the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, the gay and lesbian rights (and, later, transgender) movement, the disability rights movement, and the animal rights movement, among many others – all signaled the continuing transfer of power and influence from up top to the middle, and even down below. To be clear: these many different movements were not simply social and political abstractions. Their real world consequences included profound changes in relations between leaders and led, shifting power and influence from the former to the latter, never again to revert (at least not in political and organizational democracies). No semblance of a democratic system has been exempt from these trends, not in the public or private sectors – in which, in recent years especially, CEOs have been under something of a siege – and not in any of the many countries that count themselves democracies.

Moreover, in the twenty-first century these trends have accelerated. Changes in culture and technology have added to follower power and detracted from leader power. Until quite recently, someone like me – a professor in an American institution of higher education – would have been addressed by her students with a modicum of respect, as in “Professor Kellerman,” or “Dr. Kellerman.” Now they address me differently, not without respect exactly, but with no obvious evidence of a distinction between my status as a teacher and their status as learners. By calling me “Barbara,” which many, if not most, of them now do (even before we get to know each other), they level the playing field. My students are bringing me down to their level or, if you prefer, raising themselves up to mine. Either way, the gap between us has narrowed, which is another way of saying that my authority has diminished. (The

poet James Merrill recalled that when he taught at Bard in the 1940s, his students called him “Sir,” even though he was fresh out of college, a stripling of twenty-two.)

Similarly, if in the past you went to see a doctor to get a remedy for whatever it was that ailed you, and he (yes, he) told you to swallow one or another red pill, the chances are good that you would have gone ahead and done just that. Now you are likely as not to second guess your physician by going online to corroborate his, or her, ostensibly expert advice. Should what you find online be in opposition, the majority recommending a blue pill not a red one, chances are that you will question your physician, having zero compunction about challenging the person in the position of medical authority. This diminishment of the expert is, in short, endemic. It is in evidence in nearly every area of twenty-first-century life; it has been, moreover, exacerbated by easy access – easy culturally and easy technologically – to the private lives of even the most highly placed individuals. Notwithstanding his persisting popularity, once we knew the coarse details of President Bill Clinton’s relationship with White House intern Monica Lewinsky, neither he, nor, for that matter, American politics or the American presidency, were ever quite the same.

Over the last decade, revolutionary changes in technology – in particular instant, widespread access to information and instant, widespread access to social media – further fueled the changing balance of power between leaders and followers. It used to be that information was a valuable resource, harbored and hoarded by a powerful few. Now it is not; information is cheap and easy to come by, and accessible to almost everyone. Similarly, expression and connection were difficult if not impossible for ordinary people; now they are not. Ordinary people today can express themselves for all

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the world to hear, at least hypothetically; moreover, they can choose to do so anonymously, voicing ideas and opinions that they would not otherwise associate with publicly. Finally, even people without any power, authority, or influence can connect, one to the other, without interference from those with. To be sure, the capacity to connect is not altogether unmitigated, and in some countries (and companies) it is difficult or even impossible. But for countless millions, it has become remarkably unfettered.

Easy enough to see, then, even in this cursory review, that the history of leadership cannot be understood apart from the history of followership. They are, necessarily, entwined – twinned, even. Clearly, over thousands of years of human history relations between them have shifted: leaders have gotten weaker, and followers have gotten stronger. Therefore, as the history of leadership and followership would seem to attest, for the leadership industry to pre-occupy itself with the one without the other cannot on any reasonable grounds be justified.

Since the inception of the leadership industry several decades ago, it has been divided, if roughly, into two parts. The first is *leadership studies*: the study of leadership as an area of intellectual inquiry. The second, and the more dominant in the industry, is *leadership development*: the practice of teaching or training people how to lead. For a number of reasons, both leadership studies and leadership development have been biased by their fixation on leaders at the expense of followers. This is not to say that followers are ignored altogether. But it is impossible to exaggerate the degree to which followers have been relegated to the margins in both segments of the industry.

Though I will not here detail the multiple reasons for this bias, I will single out three. First, as earlier indicated, it is a func-

tion of the fact that people want to think of themselves as leaders rather than as followers. Though the word “follower” remains the single reasonable antonym of “leader,” the former is associated with being passive rather than active, weak rather than strong, dependent rather than independent, smacking of failure, not success.

Second, our bias is a function of what the late social psychologist Richard Hackman called the “leader attribution error.” Which is to say that we assume the overweening importance of leaders, even when this assumption is demonstrably false. I sometimes ask audiences: “History tells us that Adolf Hitler killed six million Jews. How many Jews did Hitler actually kill?” The answer, it may surprise, is none. To our knowledge, Hitler himself did not murder a single Jew. What he did was issue orders that others – followers – executed. So how is it possible to know the history of Nazi Germany if we understand only its leader? How is it possible to understand what happened in Nazi Germany without understanding Germans in the 1930s and 1940s more generally?

Third, our bias is in consequence of semantic confusion. Not only is the word “follower” burdened by the presumption of weakness, it is further weighed down by the lack of clarity about what exactly it means. In fact, even those few among us who persist in using the word, and who insist that followers are as important as leaders, readily acknowledge that as we ourselves define the word, followers do not always follow. They do not always do – nor *should* they always do – what their leaders tell them to do. In other words, while there is the presumption that leaders ought to lead, there is not the presumption that a follower ought, necessarily, to follow. In fact, followers are typically encouraged *not* to follow in any circumstance in which what the leaders tell them to do manifestly is wrong.

You might think that leadership scholars, if not practitioners, would have conquered the complexities to which I allude. You might think that the study of leadership would be objective, free from the assumption that leaders are more important than followers, or even that leaders can be studied independently of those they necessarily engage. After all, leaders do not exist in a vacuum; by definition, every leader must have at least one follower. Well, you would think wrong. Leadership studies is indistinguishable from the rest of the leadership industry: it functions on the implicit assumption that leaders are more important and therefore more worthy of study than are followers. This in spite of the fact that over time, over the course of human history, and especially in the twenty-first century, followers have played comparatively larger roles, and leaders comparatively smaller ones.

To be sure, to this general rule there have been important exceptions. In fact, several studies of followers and followership have been path-breaking. In the wake of World War II, several social scientists – recognizing the pivotal part played by ordinary men in the Nazi genocide – set out to explore the phenomenon of previously unremarkable men (and women) morphing into mass murderers or, at least, into bystanders, millions of whom stood by while mass murder took place. Stanley Milgram’s 1963 experiment on “obedience to authority” has become perhaps the most famous – infamous, really – social scientific experiment ever conducted.<sup>8</sup> It was followed by Philip Zimbardo’s somewhat similar (and nearly equally infamous) Stanford prison experiment, in which he, like Milgram, showed that ordinary men, in this case ordinary *American* men, could under certain circumstances quickly and easily be brutalized.<sup>9</sup>

Since then there have been only a very small number of leadership scholars who

demonstrably have taken followership as seriously as leadership.<sup>10</sup> Most of these (including me) have imposed an order on followers by making some sort of distinctions among them. After all, followers no more resemble each other than do leaders, so why do we typically lump them together, as if they are one and the same: as, say, American voters or Amazon employees? Moreover, since there are usually many more followers than leaders, deconstructing their numbers by highlighting differences among them turns out to be an important exercise. In the 1960s and 1970s, Harvard Business School professor Abraham Zaleznik distinguished among followers by placing them along two axes: dominance and submission, and activity and passivity. Accordingly, he divided them into four groups: *impulsive subordinates*, *compulsive subordinates*, *masochistic subordinates*, and *withdrawn subordinates*.<sup>11</sup> Years later, in the 1990s, Carnegie Mellon Business School professor Robert Kelley similarly recognized that followers were different from each other, similarly placed them along two different axes, and similarly came up with four different types: *alienated followers*, *exemplary followers*, *passive followers*, and *conformist followers*. Ira Chaleff, whose book *The Courageous Follower* is a staple of the fledgling field of followership, also came up with four follower types or, as he named them, “styles”: *high support*, *low support*, *high challenge*, and *low challenge*.

After years of looking at leaders, I also concluded that looking at followers was not sufficient, but was necessary; I defined them as “subordinates who have less power, authority, and influence than do their superiors and who therefore usually, but not invariably, fall into line.” “Followership,” in turn, I defined as “a relationship (rank) between subordinates and superiors, and a response (behavior) of the former to the latter.”<sup>12</sup> I further developed my own typology based on a single, sim-

ple metric that aligns followers along only a single, simple axis: level of engagement. That is, all followers were divided into five types depending on where they fell along a continuum that ranged from doing absolutely nothing, on the one hand, to being passionately committed and deeply engaged, on the other. The five types of followers are:

*Isolates*: followers who are completely detached. They have no interest in their leaders, nor do they respond to them in any way. Moreover, isolates have no interest in the system in which they are embedded, preferring instead to remain alienated. Their alienation is, however, of consequence. By knowing and doing little or nothing, isolates support the status quo. Albeit passively, they further strengthen leaders who already occupy positions of power.

*Bystanders*: followers who are observant and aware, but who deliberately and consciously stand by and do nothing. They remain disengaged, both from their leaders and from the system within which they reside. In the end, however, as with isolates, bystanders have an impact, usually a significant one. For their withdrawal is, in effect, a declaration of neutrality that amounts to tacit support for the status quo.

*Participants*: followers who are in some way engaged. Sometimes they support their leaders and the groups and organizations of which they are members. Sometimes they do not. In either case, participants care enough to put their money where their mouths are, to invest some of their resources, like money and time, to attempt to gain influence.

*Activists*: followers who are impassioned, who feel strongly about their leaders and act accordingly. Activists are, if you will, the opposite of bystanders. They are similarly aware, but in vivid contrast to those who stand by and do nothing, activists are eager, energetic, and engaged. Precisely

because they are so heavily invested, they work hard, either on behalf of their leaders, or to undermine and even unseat them.

*Diehards*: followers who are prepared to sacrifice whatever it takes for their cause, whether an individual, an idea, or both. Diehards are deeply devoted and completely committed. They will do everything in their power to support or to upend a cause. Diehards are defined by their dedication, including their willingness to risk life and limb on behalf of those in whom they believe and in what they believe to be true.

I do not for a moment assume that my (or anyone else's) typology will be embraced by everyone with an interest in the leader-follower dynamic, either in theory or in practice. I do, however, claim this: First, my typology is like the other typologies; each is a significant attempt to impose some sort of order on the whole – on all followers in all situations. Second, the five types outlined above highlight the mistake we make when we put every follower into a single basket. Again, followers are different from one another, just as leaders are different from one another. Third, the five types make clear that while followers follow most of the time, they do not, at least not necessarily, follow all of the time. Fourth, the five types imply that followers matter when they do something, but that they equally matter when they do nothing. When people are alienated and detached from the systems within which they are situated, there are consequences. Finally, each of the five types makes clear, implicitly if not explicitly, the integral relationship between leaders and followers. The one is wholly dependent on and irrevocably tied to the other, which is why thinking about leadership without thinking about followership is a fool's errand.

These considerations about followership are at least as true of context. It is



not that leadership scholars and practitioners are oblivious to the importance of context altogether. Rather, it is that it is given short shrift. The subject of context is raised; then, typically, it is dropped. Most analyses assume that context is unimportant or, at least, much less important than the individual leader. Moreover, students of leadership – whether of leadership as a subject of study, or of leadership as a practice to be mastered – are simply not taught that contexts, plural, matter. In examining business leadership, for example, the proximate context – in the workplace – matters. As does the more distant context: the industry within which the workplace is situated. Again, a term such as *contextual intelligence* is not entirely unfamiliar, nor is it completely and consistently integrated into the leadership industry. While context is thought relevant, mostly it is thought marginal, not central.

In contrast, I have come to consider context *integral to the leadership system*. It is essential to understanding how, when, and why leadership does, or does not, take place. And it is essential to understanding how, in any given situation, leadership is likely best to be exercised.

Of course, I am not the only leadership scholar to emphasize the importance of context. Archie Brown, the editor of this collection, is another. In his most recent book, *The Myth of the Strong Leader*, Brown points to the importance of context, which explains why the leaders he discusses are set in their respective circumstance. “Leadership must be placed in context if it is to be better understood,” Brown writes.<sup>13</sup> He goes on to identify “four different, but interconnected frames of reference for thinking about leadership – the historical, cultural, psychological and institutional.”

For example, Brown shows how difficult were the Russian and Soviet contexts within which Mikhail Gorbachev launched the

radical reforms that became known as perestroika. Russians have traditionally been attracted to the idea of a strong man as their leader – to wit, Vladimir Putin – possessing a firm grip on power that conveys authority and obliges allegiance. Additionally, during the Soviet era there was a system of governance that had a “sophisticated array of rewards for political conformism and a hierarchy of sanctions and punishments for nonconformity and dissent.”<sup>14</sup> Finally, the Communist Party was itself strictly hierarchical. So it was an anomaly when within this particular historical and institutional setting Gorbachev – who alone in the top leadership group had a “more critical view of the condition of Soviet society in the mid-1980s” – became General Secretary of the Communist Party and subsequently President of the Soviet Union. Nothing cultural or contextual had prepared Soviet citizens, or for that matter the Soviet elite, for a man as ready, willing, and able as was Gorbachev to break with previous traditions, practices, and values.

This discrepancy, between the nature of the man and the nature of the context within which he was located, is the most obvious explanation for why his tenure ended badly, certainly for him, and why he is now so widely criticized, belittled even, in his own homeland. Brown writes: “Gorbachev’s style of leadership was at odds with traditional Russian political culture.” Interestingly, notwithstanding this disjuncture, Brown’s conclusion is that Gorbachev was a transformational leader. “It is certainly difficult to think of anyone in the second half of the twentieth century who had a larger (and generally beneficent) impact not only on his own multinational state but also internationally.”<sup>15</sup> Still, the fact remains that Gorbachev did not survive, at least politically, and that his trying to save the state by changing the system ended with both collapsing. Clearly, to undertake pluralizing political change

in the Russian and Soviet contexts was not only a tall order, but was nearly impossible to execute.

In keeping with my newfound emphasis not on leaders, or even on leaders in tandem with followers, but rather on the leadership *system*, I focused my own most recent book on context. Specifically I explored in detail what I call the distal context, in particular the United States of America in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Given that I was struck by how leadership in America is so fraught with frustration, so inordinately laborious to exercise, the question I sought to answer was: how does this particular country at this particular moment impact leadership and followership?<sup>16</sup>

Any reasonable response had to be multifaceted, involving a multiplicity of contextual components, such as, for example, history and ideology, religion and politics, money and technology, class and culture, innovation and competition, and risks and trends. The purpose of my exploration, then, was to answer my own question and, more generally, heighten awareness of leadership as a system in which context is key.

What are some components of context? Here are just six:

- *History*. American revolutionaries were the first to proclaim the old authoritarian order dead and a new democratic order born. Thus was democratic leadership the only sort of leadership ever enshrined in the United States, which is precisely why effective leadership has always been relatively difficult to exercise, and why effective followership has always been relatively easy.
- *Religion*. More Americans than ever before now consider themselves religiously unaffiliated, or affiliated less strongly. Additionally, Americans are more religiously diverse. This makes it more difficult for

leaders, especially political leaders, to draw on religion in America as a tie that binds.

- *Institutions*. In the not so distant past—in the early 1960s—most Americans held American institutions in high esteem. But public trust in institutions has since plummeted. This applies across the board, to private-sector, public-sector, and even non-profit institutions, including the nation's schools and military. No surprise, then, that leaders in America—all leaders—have suffered a similar decline in public approval.

- *Law*. Americans are singularly litigious. This complicates and constrains the lives of leaders for various reasons, including by draining their resources, of which time may be the most valuable. Attending to litigation and to the possibility thereof is an important part of what leaders are now paid to do. Aggressive litigiousness is, not incidentally, in keeping with a culture that has been, since its inception, antiauthority.

- *Technology*. As soon as leaders familiarize themselves with one type of technology, it is likely to be replaced by another type of technology. Moreover, in the realm of technology, leaders are typically surpassed by their followers. They are outclassed, if not out-ranked, by those who are far younger and who, in other contexts, are their subordinates, but here, especially in social media, are much more knowledgeable, much more capable, and much more comfortable.

- *Divisions*. Far from being united, Americans are divided. They are, for example, divided by race and gender; by income and class; and by ideology and geography. Most of these divisions are not new. But for various reasons have recently been exacerbated, with more extremism and less centrism changing the character of the national debate, as they changed the character of the nation's Congress.

Two concluding comments on context. First, though the examples that I provide pertain to America in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the various components of context are fungible, as relevant to the United Kingdom and to the United Arab Emirates as to the United States. Second, while leadership and followership are different now from what they were as recently as five or ten years ago, human nature has not changed during at least the most recent millennia. We are what we were when Shakespeare, or for that matter Confucius and Socrates, walked the earth. It is precisely because of this stability that Machiavelli still matters. But what *has* changed, what *is* radically different now from before, is the context within which leadership takes place. Think of the impact of the printing press on relations between leaders and followers. And then think of the impact of social media on relations between leaders and followers. Clearly context matters – which is precisely why anyone with any interest in the theory of leadership, or in the practice of leadership, underestimates its importance at their peril.

I began this discussion by noting that what I argue might appear to be self-evi-

dent, no more than simple commonsense. However, by pulling the various threads together, by stitching them into a single tapestry or overarching argument, what I have written is, I trust, somewhat new and different. The leadership industry has disappointed; it has not lived up to its initial promise. This is not to say that it has not done anyone any good. Evidently many are persuaded that they have benefited from leadership study or, more likely, from leadership training.

But this has not translated into leadership betterment, at least not on a sufficiently sweeping scale. If the leadership industry has made any contribution at all, it has done so in infinitesimally small and unimpressive ways, and it has not demonstrably enabled us to tackle intractable problems. What I am arguing, then, is that the industry itself needs to be reconsidered and indeed reconceived; that we need to reimagine leadership learning by shedding our obsession with single individuals and adopting instead a more inclusive, systemic perspective. Only by broadening our conception of how change is created will we be able to translate leadership theory into measurably more ethical and effective leadership practice.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> For an extended critique of the leadership industry, see Barbara Kellerman, *The End of Leadership* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 155ff.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>4</sup> I address this question in *The End of Leadership*, especially in chapters seven and eight. The book does not, however, address what I now call the leadership system, at least not directly.

<sup>5</sup> Plato, *Republic* (348 BCE). Excerpt in Barbara Kellerman, *Leadership: Essential Selections on Power, Authority, and Influence* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 25.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (London: Harrap, 1840). Excerpt in Kellerman, *Leadership: Essential Selections*, 57.

<sup>7</sup> Kellerman, *The End of Leadership*, 12.

- <sup>8</sup> Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (New York : Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008).
- <sup>9</sup> United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary, *Corrections: Hearings before Subcommittee No. 3 of the Committee on the Judiciary*, 92nd Congress, 1st session, Part II, “Prisons, Prison Reform, and Prisoners’ Rights: California,” Serial No. 15, October 25, 1971 (statement of Philip G. Zimbardo, “The Power and Pathology of Imprisonment”). Zimbardo’s statement available at <http://pdf.prisonexp.org/congress.pdf>.
- <sup>10</sup> See, for example, Robert Kelley, *The Power of Followership* (New York : Doubleday, 1992); Ira Chaleff, *The Courageous Follower* (San Francisco : Berrett-Koehler, 2009); and Jean Lipman-Blumen, *The Allure of Toxic Leaders* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2005).
- <sup>11</sup> Abraham Zaleznik, “The Dynamics of Subordinacy,” *Harvard Business Review*, May/June 1965, 118.
- <sup>12</sup> Barbara Kellerman, *Followership: How Followers are Creating Change and Changing Leaders* (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard Business School Press, 2010), xix – xx.
- <sup>13</sup> Archie Brown, *The Myth of the Strong Leader: Political Leadership in the Modern Age* (New York : Basic Books, 2014), 25.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.
- <sup>16</sup> Barbara Kellerman, *Hard Times: Leadership in America* (Stanford, Calif : Stanford University Press, 2014).