



# After the Republic

---

Rhett Gayle

## *Abstract*

*This article discusses views of leadership in the light of the financial crisis. Giving attention to views such as Plato and modern technocratic views, the paper is structured around a discussion of a specific organisation; Manchester: Knowledge Capital (M:KC), an organisation that seems to me to exemplify in practice the ideas about leadership that I am proposing as being a valuable way forward.*

## *Introduction*

**W**E LIVE IN A TIME of great human accomplishment. In spite of that, there is a common perception that humanity is facing crises on a number of fronts, including in the structure of global economic activity. To the extent that this perception is true, these crises can be seen as a failure of leadership. When leadership fails, it is easy to point out the ways in which individual leaders have been short sighted, ill informed or corrupt. There is certainly no shortage of instances to justify such ideas. With systemic problems arising in many different contexts, however, it seems plausible to suggest that it not just a matter of individual leader's failures but also the model of leadership that shapes how leaders function that is not fit for purpose.

In this paper I will explicate some of the assumptions that I think underlay the common model of leadership. My focus will be on the role of a leader as a knower and controller of future events. I will begin with a kind of conceptual archaeology using Plato's discussion of rulership in the Republic as an idealised exemplar of leadership that is needed once humans

become city dwellers. I will then talk about some of the modifications that the invention of science has made to the model that Plato describes. These changes are modifications, rather than a shift to an entirely new model, keeping the notions of a specialised leadership cadre with facility in certain epistemic methods that justify their control of organisations.

I will discuss some of the ways that this model of leadership runs into difficulties in the current environment, an environment characterised by complexity, rapid change and widespread access to knowledge as well as a high degree of global interdependence. I will then look at a possible way forward for thinking about leadership in ways that would better serve contemporary leaders. The last section of the paper will be a return to the philosophical themes of beginning of the paper, with the knowledge gathered on the journey added to the mix.

The paper is structured around a discussion of a specific organisation; Manchester: Knowledge Capital (M:KC), an organisation that seems to me to exemplify in practice the ideas about leadership that I am proposing as being a valuable way forward. Early on I will discuss the structure and goals of M:KC as well as some the problems that they face. This will act as a springboard into the more general discussion of leadership. I will return to M:KC in the concluding section of the paper and discuss their strategies and successes in the context of discussing new models of leadership.

## *Manchester: Knowledge Capital*

I met Cathy Garner, the CEO of Manchester: Knowledge Capital on a snowy day in Preston. I was returning from London to my home outside Carlisle by train. I had spent the previous three days with friends in London engaged in intense discussion of complexity, science and organisations, in particular the work of Ralph Stacey. I had a simple plan, get on the train to Glasgow and get off at the Carlisle station, where my wife would meet me and we would return home. The train stopped in Preston. Time passed and I sat watching the snow and wondering why we were still in Preston. A pleasant voice announced that the train had no driver, so we would have to wait until one arrived. Later it was announced that we could switch to newly arrived train to Edinburgh if that would help. Of course that train also passes through Carlisle, so I changed my plan and switched trains. As I sat down, I noticed that the train to Glasgow was leaving. The voice then announced that the train I was now on had no driver and we were waiting for one. Then they cancelled the train altogether. After some food and standing about I got on another train to Glasgow. Again, we did not leave and I said to the person sitting near me “I know what’s going to happen next. They are going to say that we have no driver and must wait for one.” Moments later I was proved a prophet. We began talking and the confluence of our interests became apparent. We exchanged cards and intentions to stay in touch and that was that. I thought it would be great to do something with her organisation but had no plan on what that might be. Later the call for papers for this conference was circulated and I saw the chance to bring my intention to fruition. I tell this tale because it might plant a seed in the unconscious mind preparatory to remarks that I will make later in the paper about the importance of contemporary leaders recognising the limits of planning and control in their thinking about their roles.

“The M:KC partnership was established in 2003 as a strategic partnership of Greater Manchester universities, local authorities, regional governments, businesses, NHS and key local agencies. The partnership has operated (and continues to operate) primarily at the strategic level, focusing on developing Greater Manchester’s position as a knowledge city and its capacity for innovation.”<sup>1</sup> They are a small company with only 5 staff and 2 administrative support employees.

In the 7 years that the company has been in existence it has accomplished a number of goals, especially in terms of creating cross-institution creative partnerships, developing new initiatives to promote innovation in the Greater Manchester area and improving Manchester’s image as a knowledge city. This improved image, and the accomplishments that underlie it, led to Manchester receiving a global award as for the Most Admired Knowledge City Region in 2009. In 2010 the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts organised an event in London called Driving Innovation in Cities: Learning from Greater Manchester. Here Manchester was held up as the exemplar of how to accomplish this and M:KC was acknowledged in the working paper associated with the event as a driving force in the city’s efforts.

Certainly M:KC has not accomplished all that they would like to have in their first 7 years. There have been difficulties with follow through by organisations that they are connected to, and the goal to get young people more interested in science and innovation seems to be still off in the distance somewhere. Nonetheless the thing that struck me when I first began investigating the company is that they are accomplishing anything at all, much less at the high level at which they are succeeding. This reaction is based on the fact that they have none of the traditional tools of organisational leadership that my cultural milieu has led me to think are necessary to be effective. They have no institutional say over the various players with which they interact, so they cannot set outcomes to be met nor can they issue orders to be followed. They do not have any real carrots or sticks, lacking the ability to reward those who cooperate with funding or career advancement. In my first interview with her, Dr. Garner described what she and M:KC are doing as exercising ‘leadership without authority’. I will return to this point later in the paper but first I would like to do some extended cognitive archaeology to bring to consciousness the traditional images of leadership that are in such stark contrast to what M:KC is doing.

## *Tribal Leadership*

At the risk of simplifying the actuality of such matters to the point of parody, there seem to be two images of leadership that emerge when thinking about human organisation before cities. The first is what I sometimes call the Ogg model, which amounts to do what I say or I’ll bash you one. It does not really seem to involve what I will talk about later in terms of leaders as

---

1 “Evaluation of Manchester: Knowledge Capital Final Report”, October 2009, SQWconsulting p. i.

elite knowers but it does have the virtue of being straightforward. This is not really a model for sustainable leadership for two reasons. Ogg does not necessarily have the good of the tribe at heart and Ogg can be as thick as a short plank. The improved version of the Ogg model is the hero who uses his bashing ability against the tribe's enemies. Certainly elements of the Ogg model persist, as do all the various models, into even contemporary experiences of leadership (for example, the unusually high number of tall men who are CEOs).

The next layer is the tribal elder. This is someone or a group of someones who have survived the dangers of the life of the tribe and have seen it all before. They know what's coming so they can help the tribe prepare. The evidence of their wisdom is that they are still around when so many others have died already. Again this model of leadership survives underneath other layers understanding of how to lead humans.

Once we became a city dwelling species, new ways of leading the larger populations and more complex economies that agriculture and urbanisation bring are needed. I will start by using Plato's Republic as a philosophically purified exemplar of how rulership in civilisation worked prior to the changes brought about by science. Notice that both the Ogg model (the leaders are drawn from the warrior class) and the tribal elder model (the leaders are the wise ones, although the selection process is different) are both incorporated into the Platonic model.

## *Leadership in the Republic*

In *The Republic* Plato portrays an ideal city, a city where everyone attends to the business that most suits their talents and where highly educated philosopher/warriors rule in service to the common good. He offers this portrait as a way of explicating the structure of the just person's psychology, but it is also offered as the best way that a city, at least one that has luxuries and hence the need for expansion and war, can be organised. As I have mentioned already, the plan for the city features a small number of people, perhaps as few as one, but usually thought of as a group of some size, who are the leaders. They make the decisions necessary for the thriving of the city as a whole. They are drawn from the warrior class, so they are men (and women) of action but, importantly for the later discussion, they are also highly educated and have been found to possess the virtue of wisdom. The rest of the inhabitants are either members of the merchant class or members of the labouring class. Membership in all the classes is based on talents and disposition, so each is doing the job to which they are the best suited. It would be unjust for members of one class to do the work of another class, so merchants should not be rulers and so forth. Part of the argument is that specialisation is the most productive and excellence-producing way of meeting the needs of the city.

There is a further argument with respect to the specialisation of the ruling class which is that the qualities that make someone a good leader are quite rare and hence only a few people can really do the job well. They need to be educated in a very specific way in order to

do their job, since the job requires these talents be used to their fullest extent, and it is also very easy for a person with their configuration of talents to be led astray.

While the selflessness of the ruling class might strike us as implausible at best and the lack of popular input into the selection of leaders seems somehow unjust to our more apparently democratic sensibilities, the basic outline of Plato's city is familiar to us. Since the rocket fuel of agriculture propelled us out of tribes and into cities, civilisations have been organised in roughly the way Plato describes. There may be more classes (or castes), but there is always specialisation of function and a ruling class. Even democratic Athens, replete with its free citizens and their marvellous creativity, floated on the backs of the more numerous and disenfranchised slaves and women. If we think of Athens and early Rome as a divergence from the pattern of centralised power and class based specialisation, these divergences did not last long and the basic pattern, which Plato describes in its idealised form, returns. It is only recently, historically speaking, that we have consistently maintained patterns other than this one, and there mostly in the domain of government, while our vast business enterprises recapitulate a more Platonic style of organisation, a style we might call the pyramid.

Plato asserts that there are two lies that need to be told and believed in order for a city such as he describes to work. The first lie is that the city is in some literal sense the parent of the citizen. Something like this is necessary to transfer the loyalty that arises in family life to the large group. We see this kind of thing in the way countries are talked about even now, with the American department of Homeland Security and the talk of the motherland and the fatherland in various places around the world. Certainly leaders need the group members to feel some loyalty to the group, otherwise there is only rule by fear, the Ogg model, which in the end fails, or rule by reward, which in the end succumbs to the problem of self interest and there being other bidders for talent and services. Of course this also means that leaders must be focused on the group they are leading and its interests. This is fine until there are problems that cut across groups and require a more global perspective.

The second lie, more relevant to our story, is that the classes and specifically the rulers are in the positions that they are by nature (or divine right). If this lie is believed (by all after the first generation), then it will be much easier for everyone to remain in their place within the structure and the city to avoid the horror of civil war. Again, this strategy or some variant of it seems to occur throughout the various civilisations that we know about, with sun kings and rulers by divine right or royal blood abounding. This is not a particularly appealing strategy for leaders to use to justify their roles in the modern world, although it still has its adherents.

Fortunately for our use of Plato to study leadership, he does not merely point out the need to justify different roles in society by some sanctioning ruse. He also goes on to describe the characteristics of a good leader, one that we would think was justified in leading even if we saw through whatever version of the myth of metals our culture offers.

For Plato, what justifies the ideal leader as the being in the role of leader is that they possess wisdom. They are, of course, expected to have the other virtues (courage, moderation and justice) in full measure, but given that, it is wisdom that earns them their place

as decision makers for the whole of the city. They need to be skilled in the art of dialectics, which is not merely being good at argumentation but being able to use the reasoning process to arrive at something which is not merely the logical result of accepted assumptions but a kind of direct perception of the truth. This truth is the essence of whatever is under consideration, beyond the changing appearances and specifics. It is truth in some eternal and unchanging sense. This ability to perceive essential truths, especially the essential truth about what is good, seems to be the foundation of the philosopher's wisdom.

Wisdom is a kind of knowledge, a knowledge of what is really useful. Of course, usefulness must be defined with respect to some end. The end that the leader pursues is the good of the whole and good of each of the parts. The ruler is wise because they see the best way to pursue the good of the whole and the good of each of the parts of the city. They see this by applying their insight into the timeless essence of the good (which we might call the form of the good), to whatever specific situation that demands their attention. They are also helped by their dialectical ability which allows them to see how apparently disparate events and topics are connected at a deeper level.

Another less clearly Platonic way of characterising wisdom, especially in the context of this ability to see how things fit together, is to think of it as a kind of benefit directed pattern recognition, where the patterns and benefits that are recognised are those at the deepest, most general levels of causation and value.

Of course, one of the abilities that a person with this kind of pattern recognition would have is foresight, the ability to anticipate the future. This is another important reason that the ideal leader should lead. They know which actions are best to choose not just because they know what is really valuable but because they know what will result from various choices. Again, they have power because they have a kind of knowledge, knowledge of the future.

## *Scientific Knowing and Leadership*

Obviously much has changed since Plato's time. There are many more humans and much larger, more sophisticated forms of human organisation, both political and economic. It might seem that Plato's vision of the ideal leader is irrelevant, superseded by newer, better ideas. There is certainly change in what we have wanted in a leader contemporarily, as I will discuss in a moment, but there are some important and fundamental similarities. Leaders are still expected to have a kind of knowledge and epistemic methodology that sets them apart. They are decision makers because of the kind of knowers that they are. Included in their special epistemic powers is still the power to see the future, an ability that Plato calls foresight. We might think of it as the ability to make accurate predictions. This ability is essential to what it is to be a good leader, both then and now.

The notion that leadership is a specialised role that should be performed by a select group, and that really only a few people are going to have what it takes to be leaders,

continues to be central to our thinking about leadership. The methods of selection might be democratic in the public arena, but even there it is mostly a matter of picking which leader the majority believe will benefit them the most, rather than some notion that the epistemic powers necessary for good leadership are widely distributed. In the corporate world, the notion of democratic selection by those to be led is much rarer, leaders generally being selected by some meritocratic process much more like the rulers in Plato's city. In either case, the power to act is centralised to a small group that are believed to have the epistemic right stuff, exactly in line with Plato's model. Of course, there are many reasons in practice that leaders are selected but the justification of their status as capable knowers must be available or the choice will be thought of as corrupt or bad. If the rarity of leadership talent is combined with efficiencies of specialisation and the special status of leaders as especially effective knowers, it is as easy to make an argument for the centralisation of decision making in any given context in which leadership is needed now as it was when Plato was writing, perhaps easier.

There are, of course, stark and important differences between then and now in terms of the kind of epistemic expertise that matters for leaders. Plato's philosopher rulers were leaders because they were wise, possessing a kind of holistic knowledge founded on essences which transcended time and sensory experience, the most important of which was the knowledge of the form of the good. This is not how we think about knowledge now, either for leaders or in general. The success of mathematical physics transformed the domain of knowledge and over time this change has in turn changed the kind of knowledge and epistemic expertise that we expect leaders to have.

The success of science encourages the idea the knowledge is objective, that what is known is known with a kind of certainty. Of course, the practice of science is full of uncertainty but as science reaches culture through the medium of engineering successes, it is easy to think of the mathematics as describing knowledge that is certain. The mechanistic world-view, initially thought of as a world composed of atoms and the void, leads thought away from visions of the whole and supports the notion that analysis, especially mathematical or formally logical analysis, is the best approach for understanding the world. One of the corollaries of this new way of thinking about knowledge as objective is that it does not matter what sort of person you were in terms of your ability to know. The ability to see the pattern of the whole and the essence of the good, which of course includes the moral good, is not relevant to scientific knowing. If this is so, and leadership is based on the best kind of knowledge there is, that being scientific knowing, then there is really no room for wisdom as the defining characteristic of the leader.

To the extent that we expect leaders to have deep knowledge of what is good, or use the more modern parlance to know about values, this knowledge is really expected to be much like the scientific knowledge of the world as it appears in the world of action. It is abstract and technical, concerned with the domain of the instrumental and importantly the measurable. There are of course still subjective values or preferences that can be discovered by polling or tracking purchases, but the domain of expertise that leaders know about the good remains in *the* scientific sense to be the domain of technique operating on measurable

outcomes. This is not to say that the discourse of morality does not remain in play but it is not the primary coin in a mathematicised technocratic world.

Leaders are still supposed to be able to steer the ship of their organisation reliably into the future. They need to have what Plato calls foresight. The model for this is now the model of hitting a target. Developed during the Second World War to allow anti-aircraft guns to hit fast moving planes, cybernetics, the science of control, has become the underlying metaphor for managerial foresight and effectiveness. A target is specified and the behaviour of the organisation and the individuals in it are adjusted accordingly. The successful prognosticator is one who says I can hit that target and then does.

The process of adjustment of behaviour brings up another aspect of the difference in the kinds of expertise that Platonic leaders and, what I might tentatively call, technocratic leaders are expected to have. Plato thought his leaders would know the kinds of desires that humans have and which of those desires were actually good and worth fulfilling in any given situation. He does not talk about how this knowledge plays into how individuals are led, but we can speculate that the philosopher ruler's knowledge was intended to promote genuine human flourishing, at least if we take other parts of Plato's oeuvre and the writings of his students such as Aristotle seriously. They knew that people wanted money and honour but that the best part of them wanted autonomy and a life that was lived from internal motivation<sup>2</sup>. The knowledge of human inner life and its connection to action is thinner for the technocratic leader and hence more efficient. People are thought to respond predictably to rewards and punishments and so we can build our organisations, from kindergartens to financial corporations on the basis of this knowledge. Combined with a cybernetic notion of leadership as command and control, this knowledge should be adequate to the task of generating action toward hitting the target. This view, taken to its logical extreme by behaviourism, is consistent with the emphasis on abstraction and analysis that I have argued runs throughout the view of leadership that I have been discussing.

In the Republic the leaders stand outside the system of the city in at least one way. They cannot own property, marry or have children which they can raise as their own. This is so that they can focus exclusively on the good of the whole. The modern leader is not separate from the life of the organisation that he governs in the sense of maintaining an austere distance from the concerns of ordinary life, although the differentials in monetary rewards between workers and the leadership class might create another kind of gulf. There is a sense, however, that technocratic leadership sees itself as outside the organisation. Leadership can act on the system by issuing orders and change the behaviour of the system in the same way that an engineer can change the behaviour of a cybernetic controlled machine by issuing orders to it via changes in the software.<sup>3</sup> The engineer is

2 A good summary of the modern work on intrinsic motivation and the failure of the extrinsic motivation model can be found in Pink, D.M., 2010, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, Canongate Books Ltd, 2010.

3 This analysis is dependent on Stacey, 2010, *Complex Responsive Processes in Organizations: Learning and Knowledge Creation*, Routledge.



not part of the system and their control of the system operates in such a way as to assume this independence.

While the model of knowing that I am claiming underlies technocratic leadership is scientific, the model of leadership is not the scientist but the engineer. The engineer is not creating scientific knowledge, they are not researchers, they are people of action, applying scientific knowledge to specific problems to get specific results. The engineer acts, using known laws and properties of the physical world, as well as whatever cybernetic characteristics that the system has, to produce a result that was specified in advance.

In order for the style of leadership under discussion to be applied to the real world, certain assumptions, in addition to ones already discussed, are necessary. For example, in order to use a model based on prediction and control, the organisation has to be thought to not be evolving independently of the intentions and commands of the leadership. The governed must act like a machine in order for the model of leadership to function. Even if there is a move to a more sophisticated way of thinking about organisations like systems thinking, this is still true. The models of causality are more sophisticated but the need for a quasi-mechanistic notion of the organisation remains.

The environment in which the organisation functions must be seen to function in a predictable way. Analytically constructed devices need predictable environments to function as their adaptability is limited by the possibilities that their creators have imagined in advance. One example of this assumption is the use of the Gaussian distribution, the so called bell curve, in the mathematical modelling of various features of the world, from IQ to risk. This curve supposes that the odds of various results varies smoothly and that, while we cannot say with certainty that certain kinds of events will not occur, we can bet as if we do have that kind of certainty<sup>4</sup>.

I discussed the technocratic human view of human nature, specifically the role of extrinsically provided abstract rewards and punishments in motivation. There is a further connected simplifying assumption needed to allow analysis driven command and control leadership to work, which is that the various individuals in the system are functionally equivalent. This approach, treating individuals as identical atoms, allows abstract methods to proceed without concern about concrete local variation.

While I will spend some time on the problems that this family of models of leadership faces, there is no doubt that it has been wildly successful in many respects. It has allowed the coordination of large numbers of people to accomplish ambitious ends, produced great wealth for many and improved living conditions for many more. No doubt even when better approaches have come to dominate there will be many situations where analysis, control and command-oriented leadership will be needed. Nonetheless it seems to me to be the case that there are a number of problems which will prove to be intractable and challenges that will remain unmet if technocratic views of leadership remain the dominant choice for how we think the best leaders function.

---

4 Taleb, N., 2007, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, (Penguin Group, p. 128).

## *Some Problems with Technocratic Leadership*

The evidence of shortcomings with the technocratic leadership model is all around us. There are serious environmental and health side effects to our methods of wealth production. Education systems are thought to be in crisis. Resource shortages and epidemics seem to be looming on the horizon. Perhaps all of these problems are being oversold, but they are certainly not non-existent. Further the problem that has brought this conference together, the recent financial crisis, is certainly real and is in a very important sense the result of leadership failures; failures that are not just the failures of specific individuals but are also failures that have their roots deep in the shortcomings of the technocratic model itself.

On the surface it would seem that an activity that is focused on the movement of money would be ideally suited for control by abstract mathematical models. After all money, especially contemporary money, is just a number, a number representing value. Indeed the financial sector in the run up to the crash was full of young people highly educated in mathematical modelling and quantitative methods. They had a clear outcome and an easily measured target to aim at, profit, and there were more than adequate carrots dangling to motivate them onward. This should have been an uncontested win and for awhile it was. At some point in the not too distant past perhaps this conference could have been called "Lessons to be learned from the Success of Mathematical Methods in the Management of Money". Then it blew up, ruining the lives of millions of people who had never, to their knowledge, been involved in the financial markets and who were counting on their leaders to keep their savings and old age safe.

Certainly this was a startling result and one in need of explanation. As I have mentioned above, some want to place the blame on greedy individuals and feckless regulators. Certainly there is plenty of evidence of fraud and fecklessness. Nonetheless the shortcomings of the epistemic model underlying decision making in the financial sector significantly contributed to the problem and understanding how that contribution occurs will show us something about the general problems of the technocratic model of the leader as a knower.

Formal systems, while excellent for their susceptibility to analytic treatment, in principle cannot represent all of reality. No map can fully show the territory. There is always a gap. Economics and quantitative models of economic behaviour were used as if they were not approximations of reality, but reality itself because the predictions that they made were working in the short run and because targets were being met. Other kinds of feedback were excluded from the decision making process by the nature of the tools being used and the success of those tools.

The assumption of the atomic character of the entities being analysed turned out to be wrong. The models were not tuned to reflect the interconnections between actors, and between various instruments. This is a general problem with a method that emphasises analysis; it has a difficult time seeing patterns that involve the whole. Even models that are whole systems oriented fall victim to problems of complexity and computational irreducibility.

The assumption of the ignorability of rare events, or the usefulness of the bell curve, also turned out to be wrong. Occasionally the so-called black swan appears and all hell breaks loose. Everyone has been surprised by the unexpected and everyone knows that optimists are never right forever, but the model said this is working and the money said this is working, so the leaders said carry on.

Even the problem of fraud is exacerbated by the use of abstraction dominated leadership epistemologies. People who want to commit fraud use the formal structure to appear to be engaged in legitimate activity, to be hitting the targets. Jacques Kerviel, who exceeded his authority to make trades, cost the bank he worked for almost 5 billion Euros, while everything was fine on paper, at least until it stopped working. A parallel example in education is the problem of testing, especially multiple choice testing, to judge by the success of not just students but educational institutions. Since the test is how institutions are being judged (and rewarded or punished via money), there is a strong incentive to teach to the test, which dilutes the actual education the students receive. The test is supposed to be a sampling process but is now the point. Of course, there is also evidence that there is actual cheating by teachers and heads of schools to hit their targets.

We might think of the issue of the reliance on formal abstractions to the detriment of perceiving the actuality on the ground as a variant of technocratic leadership, a kind of post-modern analytic method, where making sure things look good on paper is the function of the leader. The methods of science and mathematics are married to the endless textuality and rejection of truth that characterises certain aspects of post-modern epistemology leaving reality to be whatever you can convince people it is, at least until the house of cards collapses.

Technocratic leadership sets great store by efficiency, an emphasis that that falls out as a natural consequence of the epistemic tools that are being used. It seems like it would be hard to argue against the desirability of efficiency, but poor goals pursued efficiently are merely bad results acquired more quickly. Further if the goal of being efficient is combined with the assumptions that centralisation and specialisation are good, monocultures arise. While monocultures fit well with the assumption of uniform agents that makes analysis easy, they lack resilience. In agriculture raising a monoculture crop means that if a disease or pest arises that can kill one of the plants, it spreads to them all. The financial markets pre-crash were pursuing profit very efficiently, the resultant monoculture lacked resilience, because the methods for knowing what was useful were not able to recognise resilience as desirable, and when the black swan began to swim, the whole ecology began to die.

There are some inherent costs built into the model of leadership that I have been examining. As society becomes more complex, and the rate of change continues to accelerate, these costs go up. In terms of the leader's role as a knower, centralisation of decision making means that the more complex the situation becomes, and the more information there is, the higher the cognitive demands that are placed on the leadership. This increases reliance on abstract models with the attendant distortion of the truth. Centralisation, for all of its apparent efficiency, also increases the time delay between events and decisions about events. It might seem that the speed of communication has increased which could act to mitigate

this problem, but the rate of change continues to grow as well. The reliance on centralised decision making also ensures that facts relevant to local situations will be overlooked.

Another direct effect of centralisation of the key epistemic functions of a system on the notion that only a few people really have the intelligence to do the job is that the potential contributions of everyone outside this group are excluded from even coming into being. This is certainly demotivating for the excluded class, even if money is provided to act as motivation. People want to contribute. Further the assumption that only a few have the prerequisites for knowledge creation and decision making may have made sense when information and education was scarce, but not so much now. Further innovation and turbulence ensure that we need to recruit the most intelligence that we can to bring to bear on any large scale problems. Some examples of harnessing intelligence outside the confines of official leadership are the success of Google's 20 percent rule (where employees are required to spend 20% of their time on their own ideas and which has generated more than 50% of Google's products); the vast improvement over the government's action that self-organised action was with respect to helping post-Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and, finally, the poster child for open source projects, Wikipedia.

One context where the problems inherent in centralised, technocratic leadership are starkly obvious is the conduct of war, especially asymmetric war.

The efficiency of the economic and physical systems means their lack of resilience leaves them open to systems disruptions that only need target choke points in the system for huge effects. A cheap and easily manned attack on a single target in an oil pipeline can have massive economic consequences. The slow dance of information gathering, centralised decision making and large scale implementation means that small groups can successfully out-innovate massive well funded organisations. The evolution of IEDs and the hijacking of drone feeds using easily available electronics costing less than £20 are examples of this kind of distributed innovation.

Complaints that strategy in Afghanistan and Iraq ignore variations in local conditions are common from US officers on the ground. Some of the most successful counterinsurgency efforts have been successful because officers on the ground have worked with locals, often in ways that are counter to the policy of strengthening the central government, which is the official counterinsurgency doctrine of the US military. That doctrine fits well with the epistemic models of centralised command and control leadership but frequently fails in reality.

What John Robb calls open source insurgencies<sup>5</sup> are, in one way, an excellent model of non technocratic leadership. They are good at the creation of common purpose across groups that are not connected via command and control reward and punishment hierarchies, something that technocratically led organisations struggle with. They are free to take advantage of emerging opportunities since they do not need to wait for centralised decision

---

5 The discussion of open source insurgency taken from Robb, J., *Brave New War* (John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2007) There is also great ongoing discussion of these issues on Robb's blog Global Guerrillas at <http://globalguerrillas.typepad.com/globalguerrillas/>

making. Insurgents are free to try things and spread the results of their innovations without filling out forms or wondering if this piece of work is meeting the target for this quarter.

Open source insurgencies being composed of various groups, with differing goals and internal structures, are not brought together by a centralised institutional structure. They cooperate to accomplish specific goals in the context of what John Robb calls a plausible promise. This is the big picture goal that everyone who is part of the effort sees as desirable and accomplishable. This is the motivator for signing up and participating. It is not specified in the way objectives are specified in the cybernetic approach to management, but is rather a broad idea the implementation of which is dependent on the evolution of events as the insurgency unfolds. Each group (which could be as small as one individual) can choose how they are going to act in order to bring the desired result about. The success or failure of these attempts is assessed and other groups adopt the successful innovations that are relevant to their tactics. The leadership sets the direction of the metagroup but does not, and in fact, cannot control the actions of those who are actually implementing the direction. So the insurgent model rejects centralised command and control leadership, of either the Platonic or technocratic type.

In Plato the philosopher king must, of course, be focused on the good of the city. The luxurious city, the city in need of hierarchy and rulers, is a city at war, and there are clear boundaries between those on the inside and those on the outside. This idea is repeated in the technocratic model of the leader whose concerns are exclusively with the success of the organisation they are leading. While insurgencies, being a vehicle of war, are structured around some notion of enemies, the boundaries of the organisation are much looser. The groups that form it can come and go, cooperating on some issues and not on others. The leader must focus on the direction and hence the benefit of any of the participating groups without focusing on the good of one group that is theirs exclusively. This change in the way boundaries are thought of, and practised, connects to another feature of the structure of the open source insurgency which Robb identifies, that of the super empowerment of individuals (and groups) by their membership in the insurgency. In the traditional organisation the membership in the organisation primarily acts to amplify the power of the organisation, and receive rewards for their efforts. In the open source insurgency, the members of the organisation are empowered by their participation in the network, so that they are more capable of achieving their own goals by being part of the network than if they were not.

The third feature that Robb sees as key for successful open source insurgencies is systems disruption or *systemspunkt*. The system that the insurgency is attacking has points of high interconnectivity, nodes that efficiently link many other nodes of activity together. This could be any system of connected activity, ranging from networks of energy supply, computer networks, to systems of administration or control. The successful attack aims at destroying or impairing the activity of this key node using minimal resources and then relies on the cascade effect of the system itself to propagate and amplify the damage caused by the attack throughout the system. For the sake of our interests, we might translate damage into the more general notion of change, and note that the power of the *systemspunkt* is get the system itself to propagate change, rather than implementing change by

fiat or by technocratic fiat. In terms of the leader as a knower, the successful user of systemspunkt must have the ability to spot opportunities as they arise and determine that they are in line with the general direction around which the group has coalesced. There is not a kind of precise foresight here nor is there the kind of control that a technocratic leader might want. There might be linear planning associated with the attack itself but there is not an overall plan, there is only an overall strategy. This seems very important in terms of what leaders need to be able to do and what attitudes they need to hold toward collaboration and their own roles in group actions. The leader also is willing to give ideas and innovations away, so that others can act using those ideas and methods, whether they are directly associated with that particular leader or not.

Leaders of an open source insurgency are not acting as expert knowers operating in a system of hierarchical organised specialists. They are providing ways to amplify the self organising capacities of the various groups that have voluntarily aligned themselves with the network of action that constitutes the insurgency. The purposeful network character and the distribution of the cognitive tasks of leadership allow open source insurgencies to be resilient and innovative in the face of serious uncertainty and well-funded opposition.

There is, however, a basic problem in the insurgency model. Insurgencies are organised to create disruption and chaos, not to provide governance and productive activity. Nonetheless the features of the model of leadership implicit in open source insurgencies are useful for understanding the new kind of leadership that is needed to meet the new challenges that cannot be met by the technocratic model with its Platonic underpinnings.

One good way of easing the transfer of knowledge would be to find an organisation that exemplifies the kind of leadership that I have been discussing, so that it would be possible to get some concrete sense of how this new model of leadership might function outside the context of war. Undoubtedly there are many candidates for possible examination, each with some plausible claim for our attention. In the end I have chosen my object of inquiry by taking advantages of an opportunity as it emerged from the complexity of train travel in the snow.

## *Manchester: Knowledge Capital Redux*

Much earlier in the paper I described M:KC as lacking the traditional resources of organisational leadership. They must lead without authority as Cathy Garner put it. This is exactly the position of leaders who are motivating open source insurgencies. While Dr. Garner does not talk about her organisation in this way, perhaps I could call what the company is doing an innovation insurgency. It is an attempt to effect cultural change, which will in turn effect more change through the promotion and acceleration of innovation. M:KC is acting as a catalyst for this process, so I will call the kind of leadership that is being practised catalyst leadership.

The NESTA report on innovation stated that there were three lessons to be learned from Manchester's success as promoting a culture of innovation<sup>6</sup>: the use of honest information about the strengths and weaknesses of a city, that the effort should cut across administrative boundaries to include a variety of governmental and non-governmental organisations, and that connecting businesses to existing groups engaged in creative activity was key. These lessons can be seen as applications of the principles of catalyst leadership that I discussed in the earlier section on open source insurgency.

The plausible promise of M:KC is that the culture of Manchester will change, becoming more and more innovative and that this will result in economic benefit to the whole area, including, but not limited to, any group that chooses to participate in the effort. For this promise to be plausible there must be a realistic assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the city area in terms of this goal. In their pitch M:KC points out a number of valuable resources that were already in play in the Manchester area, such as the presence of multiple universities. This makes it easier for groups to decide that they want to be involved. It also has the effect of bringing disparate resources together, when they had not been thought of as being together because they were not being administered together, or conceived as potentially having the same broad goal. This is using one of the important powers of catalyst leadership, the power to effectively name. I do not mean by this thinking of good names (although that no doubt helps) but rather by identifying something as a unified activity, it makes it a unified activity, even if there is no one organisation that is doing it. For example, M:KC spearheaded the Manchester is My Planet initiative. This is a response to concerns about global warming. Over one hundred organisations are involved in this ongoing effort, which M:KC is coordinating. By taking all the efforts that various groups are engaged in and naming it something, focus and cooperation are amplified without the need for a centralised command and control structure to be put in place.

The second lesson is that the campaign should cut across organisational boundaries. This is the basic structure that any student of open source insurgencies would recognise. The catalyst leader is not constrained by the organisation of this group or that group but is focused instead on creating opportunities for effective cooperation and success for the whole. In the case of M:KC the whole is the greater Manchester area. In one of our interviews Dr. Garner said that she was able to be effective because she could create a neutral ground where people from different organisations could meet. This creates synergies that empower all of the people in the network. She also noted that she got her knowledge of what was possible not from some cybernetic model of outcomes, but from listening to what the individuals and groups in the network really wanted and seeing how those goals could be aligned. This shows another power, the catalyst leader has the power of universal concern. The leader is trusted and able to catalyse the group because they are concerned with empowering the membership of the group, each in line with their own goals. Since the

---

6 "Driving Innovation in Cities: Learning from Greater Manchester National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts", discussion paper July 2010, p.i,ii available at <http://www.manchesterknowledge.com/filestore/mkc/drivinginnovation-pdf/original/DrivingInnovation.pdf> Learning from Greater Manchester

motivation for action is coming from within each group, people can act on intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation, eliminating the perplexity of how one leads without wielding economic power.

Another power that the catalyst leader can wield is the power of coordinating collaboration. The Manchester is My Planet<sup>7</sup> initiative discussed above is one example of this. M:KC also runs the Innovation Boardroom, which is a group of about 200 people from various organisations, public and private sector, who get together to create solutions and ideas for the future of Manchester. A number of concrete, implemented programs have arisen from the Boardroom, including a Fablab, which is a physical space with a number of high tech tools available to be used to create innovative and then shared technologies. The Fablab is, of course, an example of the super empowerment of the individual by the network that Robb sees as essential to an open source insurgency, here in service of an innovation insurgency instead.

Another program that was created by interactions in the Innovation Boardroom was Manchester Masters. One of the weaknesses of Manchester identified by the honest assessment is the difficulty of keeping young, talented people in the area. The program gives competitively selected young people paid positions in marketing around the city and at the same time they are given a scholarship to a relevant master's program at one of the local universities. This program utilises the third lesson from the NESTA paper, that of connecting existing resources together to amplify outcomes.

Cathy Garner pointed out, in conversation with me, that one of the problems that M:KC faced was fending off demands that they create some kind of management by objectives set of specified goals for the organisation. This is, of course, antithetical to the kind of flexibility that an organisation engaged in catalyst leadership needs. There are advantages to having a plan. When there is a plan it is easy to know what to do next. Just do whatever is next in the stages of the plan. It also easy for you and others to know when you have succeeded, if you have quantified objectives. When asked about these issues Dr. Garner acknowledged that there are challenges that come with M:KC's approach. Rather than detailed planning, the organisation operates according to a notion of the direction of travel. This allows responsiveness to opportunities while still being able to distinguish opportunities from attractive distractions. There has to be constant knowledge gathering via readings of various kinds and through conversation with the many partners with which M:KC works. Dr. Garner described this as seeing which way the wind is blowing and adjusting accordingly. Fixed plans are fine when and opportunity is spotted and there is a short-term focus on some necessary goal, like acquiring a certain grant or organising a specific event, but would prevent sailing with the wind as needed as the basic strategy. The good catalyst leader does not know what the technocratic leader purports to know but they do know how to sail with the wind, which is they have the power to spot and act on opportunities.

---

7 Discussion of M:KC's projects can be found at <http://www.manchesterknowledge.com/home>



This power is also connected to the third lesson which is connecting existing resources together, especially the appropriate resources. Like attacks in the open source insurgency, the best opportunities are those that utilise the system already in place to amplify the effects of the action.

The catalyst leader allows knowledge production and use to be distributed rather than concentrated in the hands of the leadership cadre. This allows a pattern of interaction and cooperation in which no one has to have a fine grained big picture grasp of what is going on in order for the campaign to effectively move forward. Given the problems with complexity and rapid change that technocratic leadership has, this new way of leading is more effective in addressing the needs of the times. To repeat what I said earlier, this is not to say that models of planning and action informed by cybernetic notions of hitting a target are to be discarded, only that they are merely one tool in the tool kit rather than the paradigm of leadership itself.

### *The Philosopher King Redux: Leading Without Authority*

The major concern of this paper has been to look at leaders as epistemic agents, whose methodologies for producing knowledge are fundamental to how they lead and how effective that leadership is. We might think of the idea of the role of the philosopher as an idealisation of how the ideal knower functions. In Plato, leaders and philosophers are the same group, so it is obvious that leaders are leaders because they have the best knowledge methodology. These roles are usually split in the real world, but nonetheless leadership is still justified in accordance with goodness of the knowledge production methodologies that the leaders employ. These methodologies change over time as the conditions of societies change. In some sense these changes in epistemic methodologies are reflections of changes in the notion of truth and how we come to have knowledge of the truth.

Habermas, in his essay “Philosophy as Stand In and Interpreter”<sup>8</sup> argues that philosophers starting with Kant saw their role as being one arbitrating between the various specialised branches of knowledge. Philosophers, using their specialised knowledge of procedural rationality, sorted various knowledge claims into their appropriate location in the constellation of truth and judged which efforts at knowing met the appropriate standards and, hence, counted as knowledge. As the paradigm of truth that underlays this idea has broken down, Habermas argues that other ideas have emerged. One where philosophers retreat further into a notion of rationality as pure formality and technique becomes the focus, and the other where the whole notion of rationality is rejected and the whole notion of philosophy as a special activity is rejected. Habermas offers a third way forward in which philosophers no longer assign roles nor judge the results of the work of others, but rather act to bring disparate domains together by seeing how they fit together and acting as a

---

8 In Habermas J., *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Polity Press, 1990).

conduit or translator between domains of specialised knowledge creation. This evolution and Habermas' proposed way forward parallel the argument about the role of the leader, the philosopher king that I have offered in this paper. At the core, what the philosopher leader knows is the unity of the city, and hence its good; and in each of the models of leadership this unity and good is known, and hence brought to be in different ways. My argument is that unifying the city as object of knowledge and hence action can no longer best be accomplished by standing outside and operating as if the city were a machine that can be fully understood and commanded. Leaders must now act without certainty or a monopoly on knowledge. Institutional authority no longer suffices. Seeing and knowing the whole cannot be usefully constrained to a specialist class. The catalyst leader, using the powers of naming, coordinating collaboration, sailing with the wind, and universal concern, acts within the conversation that composes the unity of the city, empowering everyone who is willing, to see the whole, and to act accordingly.

---

Rhett Gayle is an instructor in Philosophy at the University of Colorado, Boulder. He is a community leader for philosophy and education for Synthesis, a London think tank. Rhett is currently writing a book on synthesis of philosophical Taoism and the complexity sciences focused on leadership and education.

Email: [Rhett.Gayle@Colorado.EDU](mailto:Rhett.Gayle@Colorado.EDU)

---