

KEYWORDS FOR RADICALS

**THE CONTESTED VOCABULARY OF
LATE-CAPITALIST STRUGGLE**

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Keywords for Radicals: The Contested Vocabulary of Late-Capitalist Struggle

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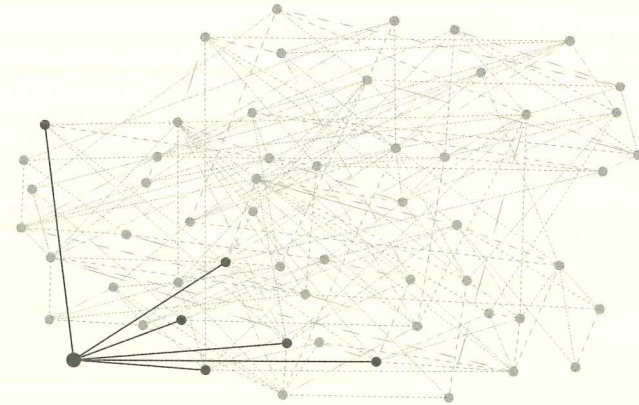
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power” and capacities. From this perspective, the core critique of capitalism is that some own and control the labor power of others and affect the development of their capacity to create and produce in the widest sense. The alternate vision this suggests is a society structured to support the full and mutual development of everyone’s capacities—“mutual” because our respective capacities develop in relation to one another. Realizing this vision requires that we convert the broadly defined “laboring class” into a social force that can figure out how to overcome capitalism’s narrowing of working people’s capacities and contribute instead to developing the capacities to analyze, understand, evaluate, dream, and build structures capable of realizing the most radical version of “*Labor Omnia Vincit*.”

SEE ALSO: Bodies; Care; Class; Gender; Intellectual; Materialism; Reproduction; Rights; Solidarity; Sustainable



LEADERSHIP

Joy James

THE ROOT WORD “LEAD” COMES FROM THE OLD ENGLISH “*lædan*” (“to guide”) and is derived from the Proto-Germanic “**laidā*” (“road, journey”) (*OED*).¹ In the fourteenth century, it came to denote the fact of being “in first place.” Indeed, the word “leader” has always referred to actions at the fore. Not surprisingly, conceptions of the conditions (“-ship”) that define and guide these actions have varied across time and place. As a result, they form the basis of political disagreements about what constitutes true leadership. Among radicals, the tension among

1. In translation, the word “lead” has always been used to render the Latin “*ducere*” (“to lead, consider, regard”) and this association has influenced English usage.

and between leaders and the people they aspire to lead arises at every political scale.

Much of the imagery and analysis that informs contemporary activist conceptions of “leadership” can be traced to the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights Movement and the influence of radical black leadership on social movements during the sixties and seventies. Ella Baker, who helped to found the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in 1960, argued: “Strong people don’t need strong leaders” (Moye 2013; Ransby 2005). Baker’s conception influenced the future leadership of feminist, white student anti-war, and gay liberation collectives, who also adopted SNCC’s multi-racial organizational practices, consensus-building model, and non-elite assumptions regarding community-based leadership (Holsaert et al. 2010). SNCC’s impact continues to find expression today in programs like the Children’s Defence Fund (headed by former SNCC activist Marian Wright Edelman), which runs “freedom schools” to produce “young servant leaders.”

Meanwhile, prestigious colleges and universities funded in part by nineteenth-century magnates with wealth accumulated from the convict lease system now have campus Community Engagement Centers mandated to teach social justice leadership. Because culture produces context for “leadership,” it also diversifies its meanings. In “Reclaiming MLK Day,” Black Lives Matter founders Opal Tometi, Alicia Garza, and Patrisse Cullors-Brignac remark on the significance of context in their description of BLM’s “new layer of leadership.” In their view, “We create much more room for collaboration, for expansion, for building power when we nurture movements that are full of leaders, and allow for all of our identities to inform our work and how we organize. This then allows for leadership to emerge from our intersecting identities, rather than to be organized around one notion of Blackness. Because of this, we resist the urge to consolidate our power and efforts behind one charismatic leader” (Tometi, Garza, and Cullors-Brignac 2015).

Emphasizing “Black love,” BLM organizers describe leadership as a collective phenomenon requiring the diminishment of ego: “When

we center the leadership of the many who exist at the margins, we learn new things about the ways in which state sanctioned violence impacts us all.” Consequently, political prisoners are among those setting the movement’s tone. Wearing T-shirts emblazoned with the proclamation “Assata Taught Me,” organizers invoke the guidance of former Black Panther and Black Liberation Army leader and political fugitive Assata Shakur. In her memoir, Shakur described the need for “a Black revolutionary party, led by Black revolutionary leaders” (1987, 192) capable of both criticism and self-criticism. “My awareness of class difference within the Black community came at an early age,” she wrote. “Although my grandmother had taught me more about being proud and strong than anyone i know, she had a lot of Booker T. Washington, pull yourself up by the bootstraps, ‘talented tenth’ ideas. . . . She was determined that i would become part of Wilmington’s talented tenth—the privileged class—part of the so-called Black bourgeoisie” (1987, 21).

Instead, Shakur’s Black radicalism exemplifies a rejection of the “uplift ideology” associated with W. E. B. Du Bois’ concept of the “talented tenth.” According to Du Bois, “The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races” (Du Bois 1903). Shakur’s rejection of this strategic orientation is apparent in BLM calls for collective leadership. However, although Du Bois radicalized and later repudiated the idea that Black elites could effectively lead oppressed Blacks (Robinson 1983), his conception of Black leadership (which differed greatly from that of Booker T. Washington, who by some accounts was Du Bois’ “nemesis” [Gates 2013]) endures.

In *Dusk of Dawn* (2007), Du Bois revisited a historic controversy which revolved around education and competing visions of Black leadership. Rejecting Booker T. Washington’s emphasis on industrial training and accumulation of wealth, Du Bois advocated for liberal arts education: “I knew that without [higher education]

the Negro would have to accept white leadership, and that such leadership could not always be trusted" (35–6). Indeed, Du Bois' "talented tenth" was a direct critique of Washington's strategy but it was not a critique of elitism or sexism.²

There was no question of Booker T. Washington's undisputed leadership of the ten million Negroes in America . . . But there were discrepancies and paradoxes in this leadership. . . . At a time when Negro civil rights called for organized and aggressive defense, he broke down that defense by advising acquiescence or at least no agitation. . . . All this naturally aroused increasing opposition among Negroes. (2007, 36–7)³

These debates and differences continued throughout the twentieth century. Issued by the Black Liberation Army's Coordinating Committee in 1976–77, the section of *A Political Statement from the Black Underground* devoted to "Leadership of the Struggle" recounts how "The problem of leadership has always been a vexing one for Black people. We must break with the old style of leadership forced upon us by the prevailing class standards or we will fail in our struggle. Nonetheless, leadership is important, especially to Black people, and without it we will never triumph in our struggle." Rather than disavowing Black intellectuals on the basis of their upward mobility, however, the authors emphasized the need for more direct, critical action from such figures: "It is past time that Black intellectuals, professionals, and so-called Black scholars assumed a more active role in the leadership of the liberation struggle, instead of laying back theorizing and writing essays in a

2. Henry Lyman Morehouse, a white northerner who headed the American Baptist Home Missionary Society coined the phrase "talented tenth" seven years before Du Bois published his influential essay. Du Bois helped to marginalize anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells from leadership in the NAACP.
3. Interestingly, Du Bois indicates more than once that he did not view himself as a leader. Reflecting on his public controversy with Washington, he wrote: "I was in my imagination a scientist, and neither a leader nor an agitator" (2007, 35).

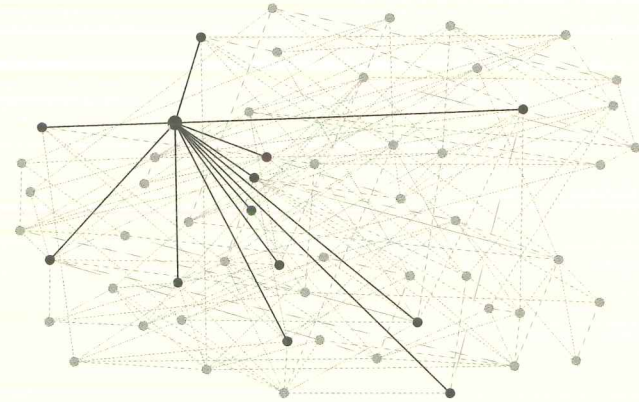
vacuum, or in various Black bourgeois publications" (Coordinating Committee Black Liberation Army 1976/1977).

Despite the popularity of democratized conceptions of leadership, the "talented tenth" model still finds symptomatic expression in leadership from academics, nonprofits and government elites. Similarly, the tensions that mark debates over the role of class in leadership are apparent in contemporary social movements. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon highlighted how these tensions played out during the period of decolonization. "Before independence," he wrote, "the leader, as a rule, personified the aspirations of the people—independence, political freedom, national dignity. But in the aftermath of independence . . . the leader will unmask his inner purpose: to be the CEO of the company of profiteers composed of a national bourgeoisie intent only on getting the most out of the situation" (1967, 112). Fanon's analysis makes clear that tensions concerning movement leadership tend to unfold within a context of state repression—a third conception of "leadership" that, while denounced, nevertheless influences our understanding of leadership qualities.

Conscious that repression is an inevitable response to effective radical leadership, contemporary social movements have adopted democratized conceptions of leadership partly as a survival strategy. Like Black Lives Matter, Occupy Wall Street described itself as "a leaderless (and leaderful) movement"—though it has largely disappeared under the pressure of police surveillance and arrests (Wedes 2014). Anonymous, which emerged in 2003, also abides by a decentralized and democratized leadership structure (Kushner 2014). In 2010, *The Guardian* cited one of the infamous hacktivists explaining that the group has "no central command structure" (Halliday and Arthur). On another occasion, *Salon* quoted former Anonymous activist Gregg Housh, who explained: "There is no leadership. There can't be. That is the point of it all" (Boon 2013). Taken together, OWS, BLM, and Anonymous illustrate that the prevailing radical usage of "leadership" is less concerned with the capacity of rare, great individuals than it is with the agency of ordinary people. Although the implications of this orientation

remain ambiguous, it seems likely that attachment to the promise of “leaderful” movements will shape our political imaginary for years to come.

SEE ALSO: Democracy; Hegemony; Populism; Representation; Vanguard; War



LIBERAL

Robin Marie Averbek

THE ROOTS OF THE TERM “LIBERAL” REACH AS FAR BACK as the thirteenth century, when it was first used to denote a form of freedom specific to individuals with access to financial and personal independence. Moreover, it also took on the meaning of “generous” or “unrestrained,” thereby acquiring connotations that could run in both positive and negative directions. These connotations in turn inflected a political meaning, which—by the eighteenth century—was used to refer to individuals with unorthodox views who sympathized with the Enlightenment project of questioning traditional hierarchies while placing emphasis on the liberty of individual subjects (Williams 1976).