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Zombie leadership: Dead ideas that still walk among us

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ABSTRACT

Considerable progress has been made in the field of leadership in recent years. However, we argue that this is undermined by a strong residual commitment to an older set of ideas which have been repeatedly debunked but which nevertheless resolutely refuse to die. These, we term *zombie leadership*. Zombie leadership lives on not because it has empirical support but because it flatters and appeals to elites, to the leadership industrial complex that supports them, and also to the anxieties of ordinary people in a world seemingly beyond their control. It is propagated in everyday discourse surrounding leadership but also by the media, popular books, consultants, HR practices, policy makers, and academics who are adept at catering to the tastes of the powerful and telling them what they like to hear. This review paper outlines eight core claims (axioms) of zombie leadership. As well as isolating the problematic metatheory which holds these ideas together, we reflect on ways in which they might finally be laid to rest.

Introduction

In his award-winning book *Zombie Economics*, John Quiggin shows that, although considerable progress that has been made in economic theory and modelling over the last century, the field as a whole has been held back by commitment to an older set of ideas that resolutely refuse to die. This is despite the inadequacy of those ideas having been demonstrated over and over again. Accordingly, in the face of copious evidence that they are mistaken, there is a broad class of policy makers and practitioners who continue to espouse the virtues of such things as trickle-down economics, efficient and self-correcting markets, and unfettered privatization of public assets. Quiggin's core point is that these ideas survive not because they are supported by evidence or by careful, critical thinking but rather because they accord with the interests of particular groups (e.g., venture capitalists, the uber-wealthy, and disciples of neoliberal ideology more generally; Crouch, 2011; Peck, 2010; Stiglitz, 2018). The ideas therefore instantiate what those groups *want* to believe and to make true. Moreover, "being already dead they can absorb all kinds of damage and keep lumbering on towards their targets" (Quiggin, 2012, p.240).

Unfortunately, economics is not the only domain where dead ideas continue to walk amongst us. In this article we focus on another important realm in which zombie ideas abound: the field of *leadership*. Indeed, as with Quiggin's zombie economics, we suggest that dead ideas are particularly prevalent in this field precisely because the stakes are so high. After all, if you control the narrative of leadership you control one of the principal engines through which power and privilege are understood and reproduced — in organizations and in society at large (Gemmill & Oakley, 1992; Pfeffer, 1992).

As with economics, the ideas about leadership that prove particularly hard to kill are those that simplify a knotty social process while at the same time legitimizing the privileges of social elites and the leadership industrial complex that supports them — a complex of self-aggrandizing personal coaching, expensive development programs, and glossy business magazines. As we will see, this legitimization takes at least three forms, all of which can be identified in what one might refer to as a 'Hollywood' narrative of leadership (Kuri & Kaufman, 2020). *First*, this narrative implies that the masses are incapable of looking after themselves and require a hierarchical society with strong leaders at the top in order for social order to emerge and endure (Brown, 2014; Giner, 1976). *Second*, it implies that leaders deserve their exalted position because they are special individuals who have distinctive qualities that set them apart from the masses and with which only certain men are endowed (and even if the equation between men and leadership is not made explicitly, men are generally the prototype; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Hoyt, 2010; Schein, 1973). *Third*, it attributes any success that a group might

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have to the actions of its leader, thus marginalizing other group members in terms of both the responsibility and the acclaim for achieving such success while justifying the flow of attention, esteem, and resources towards that leader and away from their group. In this way, zombie leadership constitutes a powerful cocktail of ideas that removes the masses from the running of society, legitimates the prevailing social hierarchy, and provides those in positions of power with a justification for their sense of superiority that is at the same time both comfortable and comforting.

The goal of the present paper is to bring the claims of *zombie leadership* out into the light in a way that allows empirical science and critical thinking to wrest back control of this narrative. In what follows we pursue this goal, first, by clarifying what leadership broadly and typically *is* — noting that one of the key ways in which zombie leadership is ushered in is through a misspecification of focal processes and phenomena. We then go on to identify eight core axioms of zombie leadership that can be identified in prevailing discourse around these issues. We term these 'axioms' because they are presented as self-evident truths which serve as much to constrain the field of empirical enquiry as to summarize the findings of empirical research. These axioms are summarized in Table 1. For the sake of clarity, we have deliberately phrased them in their strongest form. Certainly, each of them can be (and often is) expressed in a more nuanced and hedged manner through the addition of softening adjectives, qualifying clauses and demulcent footnotes. Accordingly, we suggest that faint-hearted readers may want to nuance our observations by imagining a generous sprinkling of "often"s, "tends to"s and "more or less"es throughout the text. We, however, have largely refrained from inserting these ourselves as our intention is not to soften but to sharpen the argument, to bring obscured assumptions into clear relief and thereby to provoke debate. These claims should therefore be seen as constituting 'ideal types' in the Weberian sense and are intended to map out the defining features of a general phenomenon rather than exhaustively catalogue its specific manifestations (Weber, 1949).

Having set out the axioms of zombie leadership we conclude by identifying some of the meta-misunderstandings that underpin its various manifestations and from which it gathers strength. We also reflect on ways in which these might best be tackled. This is an ever more urgent task in a world of rising populism, reduced social engagement, and increasingly alluring authoritarian leadership (Bremmer, 2018; Ekman, & Amnå, 2012; Norris, & Inglehart, 2019; Selvanathan et al., 2022). For all that some elements in our analysis is (at least partly)

Table 1
Axioms of Zombie Leadership.

#		Axiom	Illustrative headline	Key claim	Key problem
1		Leadership is all about leaders	*The Man Who Saved a BBC Orchestra* (Lebrecht, 2023)	Leadership is the preserve of those who occupy formal leadership roles and can be understood by focusing on leaders alone.	Leadership is proved by followership and necessarily requires us to study and understand followers.
2		There are specific qualities that all great leaders 'have'	*3 Top Skills of Great Leaders* (Uta, 2018)	Particular qualities (e.g., intelligence, charisma) equip particular people for leadership.	What matters is whether people are perceived to have these qualities by followers.
3		There are specific things that all great leaders do	*7 Things Leaders Do to Help People Change* (Zenger & Folkman, 2015)	Particular behaviors (e.g., being fair, initiating change) are the hallmark of effective leadership.	Leadership requires behavior to be attuned to the circumstances of the group being led.
4		We all know a great leader when we see one	*I am everybody's leader: Ranil* (Ruskin, 2011)	There is consensus that some leaders are better than others.	There isn't. Consensus is produced by privileging particular perspectives.
5		All leadership is the same	*6 Qualities of Every Natural Born Leader* (Cohen, 2016)	There is an essential 'leadershipness' that can be discerned across all contexts.	There isn't. What leadership looks like changes (and needs to change) with context.
6		Leadership is a special skill limited to special people	*5 Traits That Set Great Leaders Apart From The Pack* (Walburg, 2017)	Leadership is an elite activity that is extraordinary, exclusive and expensive.	Treating leaders as superior to the groups they lead creates problems for those groups.
7		Leadership is always good and it is always good for everyone	*7 Benefits of Effective Leadership for Organisations* (Rosser, 2021)	Leadership is a universal good from which everyone benefits.	It isn't. They don't. Leadership can support inequality and tyranny.
8		People can't cope without leaders	*The Kind of Leadership We All Need Today* (Tavian, 2021)	Everyone needs leadership and leadership is always required for group success.	They don't. Leadership can make groups less effective, especially if it leads followers to disengage.

tongue in cheek, the core mission is therefore deadly earnest. As the US Strategic Command recognized when drawing up their CONOP 8888 plan to tackle a potential zombie apocalypse, this is "not a joke" (United States Strategic Command, 2011, p.1).

The definition of leadership

Within the academic field of leadership there is broad consensus that this this can be defined as the process whereby one or more people motivate one or more other people to contribute to the achievement of collective goals (of any form) by shaping beliefs, values, and understandings in context rather than by exercising stick-and-carrot behavioral control. This is the essence of the definitions of leadership that have been provided in key reference texts for the last thirty or so years (e.g., Goethals et al., 2004; Rost, 2008; Smith, 1995). Notwithstanding the fact that the specifics of leadership are necessarily messy and that its operation can be hard to pin down (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a; Smith et al., 2018), there are some key features of this definition that are worth emphasizing at the outset, primarily as a defense against the assaults that it comes under from zombie leadership.

Of these, four are particularly important (Haslam et al., 2011). The first and most basic is that leadership is not a solo process but one that is grounded in *relationships and connections* between leaders and those they influence (i.e., followers; Avolio, 2007; Kellerman, 2007; McGill & Slocum, 1998; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Relatedly, second, the ultimate proof of leadership is not what leaders are like or do but what their followers do. For without some form of *followership* there can be no leadership (Bennis, 1999; Hollander, 1992). Third, precisely because it is a process of social influence, leadership is more about getting people to *want* to do things than about making them do them (Smith & Smith, 1994). As Turner (2005) puts it, it is less about power *over* followers and more about power *through* them. Thus, followership requires, at minimum, some acceptance of the leader's definition of reality (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Together this means, fourth, that leadership is a group process and ultimately about the activities of *collectives* not just individuals (Platow et al., 2015; Thomas et al., 2013).

Zombie leadership contrives to get all these things wrong. In the first instance, it does so by reducing leadership to the leader alone. As with a dictator speaking in a darkened amphitheater, zombie leadership casts the analytic spotlight solely on this figure while leaving all else (followers, relationships, collectivity) shrouded in darkness. It then imagines that true leaders go it alone, a prepotent bundle of traits and attributes, propelled by instinct and native guile to pursue their goals and drag everyone along with them. It imagines leaders as solitary heroes who single-handedly drive history-making group success. In the process it reduces group members to mere groupies who idolize the leader for doing what they cannot do for themselves. It imagines too that everyone sees leaders as superheroes and that people are only too happy to acknowledge the leader's superheroic powers because these are something from which they themselves will always benefit.

In Quiggin's (2012) terms, then, zombie leadership is the sum of these "dead ideas that still walk amongst us". But where exactly does it walk? As we will see, as well as being the go-to stuff of organizational policies and communications it is peppered liberally through popular writings, management education, and the media. Nevertheless, there is a significant tranche of academic work that either feeds, legitimizes or tacitly accepts zombie leadership. Indeed, even when it is not aligned with zombie leadership, much of the academic infrastructure offers little by way of effective counterforce to these ideas — in part, because the corporate appeal of zombie leadership brings secondary gains. At the same time, a predilection for positive ('good news') psychology and for research that is conducted 'at a distance' (i.e., without directly engaging with those who are led) allows academics to gloss over the grimmer realities of industrial and social relations while maintaining rose-tinted views about idealized leadership types. Thus, as well as being found in popular leadership books, newspaper articles, and podcasts (Maskor et al., 2022), zombie leadership can also be found when researchers and practitioners bring considerations of leadership to bear on the treatment of other topics (e.g., health, economics, education and social policy; Smyth, 2018). More importantly, zombie leadership is central to everyday treatments of leadership in the news and to an array of seemingly innocuous leadership ephemera that constitute the leadership-related wallpaper of our lives: magazine profiles, political campaigns, policy debates, job references, testimonials, obituaries. As a consequence, wherever we look, we are routinely assailed with headlines inspired by zombie leadership. Examples of these are provided in the second column of Table 1.

Yet aside from its simplifying and legitimizing functions, one further reason why zombie leadership prevails is that the parts of which it is made are much less frightening than the whole. Identifying the key axioms of zombie leadership is therefore a way of laying bare and interrogating these parts. Nevertheless, our ultimate purpose is not simply to catalogue these axioms (something that has been done in more conventional ways many times before; e.g., Alvesson & Spicer, 2014; Collinson et al., 2018; Dugan, 2017; Fischer, 2018; Learmonth & Morrell, 2019). Nor is it principally to provide a detailed rebuttal of these claims. Rather, we seek to provide an integrative overview that allows us more clearly to identify and label the core *metatheory* that underpins all the axioms and that binds them together — so that we might more effectively resist their unremitting onslaught.

Challenges of identification and specification

> *Historically, zombie has meant different things to different people.*
> Jonathan Maberry, *Zombie CSU* (2008, p.12)

The task of pinning down zombie leadership is neither straightforward nor uncontentious. Which ideas are dead? Which are alive? Who nurtures them? These are not easy questions to answer. As Maberry (2008) observes, the forensic science of the living dead is challenging and inexact. In principle, one might seek to resolve these problems of classification by conducting a systematic review of zombie leadership claims in the literature. Alternatively, one might conduct some form of quantitative meta-analysis (e.g., to establish the representativeness of the headlines included in Table 1). There is certainly a place for such analysis (cf. Maskor et al., 2022). However, one cannot count the prevalence of the various claims of zombie leadership without first identifying what the different claims are. As Hacking explains "enumeration demands kinds of things or people to count. Counting is hungry for categories" (2015, p. 280). Our aim here is precisely to identify the different categories that constitute zombie leadership. What we provide is, in effect, the prequel to any subsequent meta-analysis (cf. Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). What is more, as we have just explained, our interest is not so much to separate out these different categories as to demonstrate what they have in common and the underlying assumptions which bind them into a coherent (and hence powerful) overall argument. There is a danger of losing the wood for the trees if we were to limit ourselves to counting different types of tree.

Instead, what we seek to do calls for creative and critical engagement with the literature. The axioms of zombie leadership set out below are therefore ones that reflect our own engagement with the leadership literature as well our discussions with colleagues on these and related issues. This engagement and these discussions give us some confidence in our characterization of zombie leadership, but we also see this characterization as a stimulus for debate not as an end to it. This is a debate we welcome. Indeed, we would argue that if we are to defeat zombie leadership, it is a debate we have to have.

Axioms of zombie leadership

Axiom #1: Leadership is all about leaders

Despite the huge range of popular leadership texts, one feature that most share is a restricted focus on leaders alone — what they know and have learned, their habits, behaviors, and practices, their handling of failure, challenges, and struggles, their personal inspiration, drive, their choices and decisions, and their communication skills (Maskor et al., 2022). And while there may be some discussion of the way those leaders work with teams, those teams themselves will get little of the analytic limelight. As a result, this first axiom offers perhaps the clearest example of the way in which zombie leadership restricts (rather than embraces) empirical enquiry.

The two implicit assumptions that explain this focus are (a) that leadership is the preserve of those who occupy formal leadership roles — the CEO, the President, the general, the coach, and (b) that leadership can be understood by recourse to these leaders alone. So while there is recognition that those lower down the food chain (the department manager, the sergeant, the deputy) may also do leadership their efforts will rarely be celebrated and valorized in the same way (Tourish, 2014). And the efforts of the foot soldiers will barely be celebrated at all.

Moreover, in most applied settings, there is often a clear demarcation point beyond which leadership is seen to be no longer relevant. This is seen most clearly in the fact that leadership development is invariably targeted at those who have achieved a certain level of status and who aspire to have more, and whose aspirations are thought to be appropriate (Kwok & Shen, 2022). Never mind that, as Beer and colleagues (2016) observe, a key reason why leadership training fails is precisely that it generally focuses on individual leaders rather than on the units they are supposed to lead or the relations in which they are involved (see also Kaiser & Curphy, 2013).

This is not to say that people in formal leadership positions never perform leadership and never make a difference to groups. Nevertheless, in any organization, it is often the case that people are more attuned to — and perceive themselves to be more affected by — the leadership of their immediate supervisors than they are to that of distal figures who are generally recognized as 'the leaders'. Speaking to this point, Einola and Alvesson (2021a) found that when they asked junior investment bank professionals about leadership, many had difficulty identifying who their leader was supposed to be and who was actually doing it. And to the extent that they were aware of leadership, they saw this as coming more from their experienced colleagues who provided them with advice and guidance than from higher-ups with formal leadership responsibilities.

Likewise, in an ethnographic study that looked for the locus of leadership in a scientific research unit, Smith and colleagues (2020) found that little of this was done by those with formal leadership (managerial) roles (who were largely absent), but instead that it was done emergently and on the ground by relatively junior scientists who were working closely with other team members to resolve specific problems as they arose. Moreover, it was the unheralded leadership (if that is the right term) of those on the front line that proved critical to the unit's ultimate success.

Accordingly, if one imagines that leadership is only ever about 'leaders' it is clear that one's understanding of this process is only ever going to be very limited (Kellerman, 2016). Consistent with this point, in a longitudinal study of 279 athletes in 18 sporting teams, Fransen and colleagues (2023) found that when team members were asked to reflect on who was doing leadership in their teams they generally indicated that this was being done less by those with formal leadership roles (in particular, coaches) and more by rank-and-file team members who had taken on informal leadership roles (e.g., responsibility for motivating the team or organising social events). And again it was the leadership of these lowly team members that had the most positive impact on the performance of the team and its members' well-being.

Such findings stand in stark contrast to the thrust of zombie leadership that routinely singles out high-profile leaders for attention and valorization. Aside from the empirical problems associated with this restricted gaze, it seems likely that this will also be counterproductive because it cultivates a way of thinking and operating that is in itself both inimical to group success and potentially toxic (Owen, 2006; Owen & Davidson, 2009; Peters & Haslam, 2018; see also Campbell & Campbell, 2009; Kellerman, 2012; Tourish, 2013). This is for at least two interrelated reasons. First, because the tendency to lionize and fetishize leaders can create what Owen and colleagues refer to as *hubris syndrome*. Second, because this syndrome can be part of a broader *leadership trap* in which credit and rewards for group success flow to leaders rather than to followers in ways that feed the ego and narcissism of leaders but dishearten followers and thereby undermine group success (Haslam et al., 2011; see also Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007). This, though, is a trap that those who have drunk the zombie leadership Kool-Aid fall into only too happily.

Axiom #2: There are specific qualities that all great leaders have

In many ways the stereotypic question to pose about leadership is "are leaders born or made" (Boerma et al., 2017; Goldsmith, 2008). Indeed, an online search using the term throws up nearly 500 million results and a large body of furious debate. While the general emphasis tends to be increasingly on how leaders are made, there remains some work which suggests that genetic factors (e.g., height, skin color, physique) and factors which are sometimes understood to be genetic (e.g., intelligence, assertiveness, personality) determine whether someone becomes a leader (e.g., Judge & Cable, 2004; Lindqvist, 2012; MacLaren et al., 2020) — although not necessarily how they perform as leaders (Locke, 2014).

Such academic research is buttressed by a larger body of popular writing which alludes to inheritance. Boris Johnson's (2014) eulogistic treatise on *The Churchill Factor: How One Man Made History* is a stark case in point. For Johnson, Winston Churchill was a "large protruding nail on which destiny snagged her coat" (p.52) and he stresses the importance of Churchill being of 'good stock'. So when Johnson ponders the question "Was he genetically or hormonally endowed with some superior process of internal combustion, or did it arise out of childhood conditioning?" the implied answer is "a bit of both" (p.142).

But all this is ultimately smoke and mirrors. For, as with magic tricks, the controversy serves to capture our attention while the real trick is done elsewhere. That is, whether born or bred, the shared assumption of those on all sides is that leadership comes down to the possession of exceptional qualities. The task of leadership studies is then to distil this essence of greatness — to determine, first, who has it and then, second, what it is.

When it comes to the first of these questions, there is often some degree of consensus. For example, there is a long-standing line of research focused on establishing the relative 'greatness' of U. S. Presidents (Schlesinger, 1997) and different studies generally agree in their rankings (Murphy, 1984).

It is when we get to the second question that things begin to fall apart. What is it that makes great Presidents great? Winter (1987) argues greatness is about motivation, while Rubenzer et al. (2000) suggests that it is all about personality. Reflecting on leaders more generally, the potential list of traits that have been considered relevant here is vast. For Socrates, this was a question of things like courage, learning, and vision (Plato, 1993), while more recent lists of psychological qualities include such things as intelligence, adjustment, extroversion, conscientiousness, and masculinity (Gardner, 1989; Mann, 1959; Rubenzer et al., 2000; Stogdill, 1974). Some have pointed to the importance of modesty and persistence (Collins, 2009) while others claim that openness, sensitivity or humility are key (Jia et al., 2018; Mast et al., 2012; Schein, & Schein, 2018). Indeed, there is probably no positive ability or quality that has not been linked to effective leadership at some point or another.

Yet the longer this list of candidate qualities becomes, the more conscious one becomes of its contradictions. And while debates about their relative merits fuel heated debate and make for an interesting parlor game, they ultimately prove futile. Indeed, perhaps the most promising predictor of effective leadership — intelligence — at best accounts for only around 4% of the variance that needs to be explained (Judge et al., 2004a, 2004b; see also Andersen, 2006; Hoffman et al., 2011).

By contrast, many factors which have nothing to do with the individual leader can account for their ratings of greatness. Simonton (1986) demonstrated that 86% of the variance in the rankings of U.S. Presidents could be accounted for by knowing (a) how long they served in office, (b) for how much of their term the U.S. was at war, (c) whether there was no scandal associated with their presidency, (d) whether they were assassinated and (e) whether they were a war hero (see also Simonton, 2009). Of these, only the last would seem to have anything at all to do with the leader's character or qualities — and even here one can observe both that it is hard to be a war hero if your country is not at war (see also Kenney & Rice, 1988).

A big part of the problem here, as we stressed earlier, is that leadership is always about the *relationship* between any given leader and those who evaluate them. Indeed, the fact that being assassinated — or simply being dead (Steffens et al., 2017; Van Dick et al., 2019) — is a powerful predictor of a leader's charisma and perceived greatness alerts us to the fact that what leaders 'are like' will sometimes not matter at all (Fink et al., 2020; Meindl et al., 1985). This is because, ultimately, the quality of leadership is always in the eye of the beholder (Jacobsen & Bøgh Andersen, 2015; Javidan et al., 2006; Nye & Simonetta, 1996; Schyns & Sanders, 2007). Unless, of course, one is talking about zombie leadership.

Axiom #3: There are specific things that all great leaders do

As the project to identify the traits and qualities of great leaders temporarily stalled in the middle of the last century, many applied researchers changed tack and began to focus less on leaders' psychology and more on their *behavior* (Schriesheim & Bird, 1979). In particular, work inspired by the Ohio State Leadership studies (Schriesheim & Kerr, 1974) suggested that two core classes of behavior were critical for leader success: *consideration* and *initiation of structure* (Judge et al., 2004b). The basic idea, then, is that leaders need to 'look after' those they lead by respecting them and treating them fairly. But at the same time they also need to define — and often redefine — people's roles and responsibilities to ensure they are appropriate for the task ahead of them.

These ideas have a high degree of face validity and they are emblematic of a large body of research that has pursued a behavioral approach to leadership over the last 50 years (van Quaquebeke & Vogt, 2022). In particular, the idea that leaders need to prove their leadership credentials by enthusiastically redesigning and restructuring their organization at every opportunity can be considered one of the defining ideas of contemporary management (Collins, 2000). This speaks to the more general observation that change is a 'hurrah word' in the organizational lexicon and that being an agent of change is considered by many to be the defining behavioral signature of leadership (Johnson, 2015). In contrast, being focused on achieving stability is considered merely 'management' and widely disparaged (cf. Kotter, 2013).

But leadership — defined as the shaping of understanding that influences group members in ways that moves them towards shared goals — may equally be about relatively stable phenomena. It is as much to do with resolving conflicts, bolstering morale, reproducing culture and ethics, helping newcomers adapt and learn, maintaining standards and resisting fads as it is with initiating great change projects (Alvesson et al, 2017). Moreover, contrary to the idea that being a change champion is a sure-fire recipe for success, it commonly presages failure. In the medical world, for example, Braithwaite and colleagues conclude that "where there are studies, they challenge rather than support restructuring" and that "evidence for this making a difference, let alone demonstrably improving productivity or outcomes, is surprisingly slender" (2005; p.542).

And even if it is not disastrous, leader-driven organizational change is often simply unhelpful. Not least, this is because it is commonly experienced as an exercise in leader gratification and power abuse, or what Driver (2009) refers to as "failed fantasies of self" (see also Blom & Alvesson, 2015a; Higgs, 2009; Kusy & Holloway, 2009; Owen & Davidson, 2009). The core problem here is the syllogistic fallacy of *affirming the consequent* (Gaul, 2018): just because effective leadership involves a particular behavior (e.g., initiation of structure) it does not follow that by engaging in this behavior a person will become an effective leader.

But what of consideration? On the face of it, the idea that leaders should be considerate towards their followers makes a lot of sense. It accords with the literature on procedural justice and particularly Tyler's (2006) work which suggests that listening to people, taking them seriously, and treating them with respect leads them to view authorities as being 'on their side' and hence makes them more likely to heed rules, regulations and laws. But the problem is that 'consideration' is a rather abstract concept, not a specific behavior or set of behaviors. And as soon as one tries to translate it into any specific form of behavior then things become tricky.

Take 'fairness', for instance. One might reasonably imagine that treating people fairly is part of treating them with consideration. But there are several problems here. First, what is assessed as fairness depends on the perceiver: what seems fair to one person looks like discrimination to another (Fischer, 2018; Grint, 2010; Platow & van Knippenberg, 2001). It also depends on who is being perceived: followers are more likely to see the very same leader behavior as fair when it is performed by a leader who is seen to be 'one of us' rather than 'one of them' (i.e., an ingroup member rather than an outgroup member; Lipponen et al., 2005; van Dijke & de Cremer, 2008). On top of that, the fairness of any form of distribution also depends on who things are being distributed between. Giving the same to everyone is often experienced as unfair if some of the beneficiaries are 'them' (i.e., an outgroup) rather than 'us' (i.e., an ingroup; Haslam & Platow, 2001; Platow et al., 2000). If one looks at the behavior of populist leaders, for example, it is clear that they can make a lot of headway by complaining about the equal treatment of immigrants, and that their rabble-rousing often focuses on promises to increase, not reduce, discrimination (Mols & Jetten, 2016; Uysal et al., 2022).

Two interlinked points of general importance arise from these reflections. First, even if we were to agree that leaders need to engage in a particular form of behavior (e.g., showing consideration), the precise actions that constitute this will vary from group to group. What is consideration for one group is unwanted "fuzz" for another (Einola & Alvesson, 2021a). Hence what leaders need to do to garner support must also vary. It therefore remains impossible to reduce leadership success to a simple 'to do' list because the group context is critical.

Second, it turns out that what matters is not so much leadership behavior as followers' *perceptions and assessments* of leadership behavior — and these are often very different things (Alvesson, 2019; Phillips & Lord, 1986). Once again, then, we encounter the problem of concentrating too narrowly on the leader (who they are, what they do etc.) and failing to include the perspective of followers. As we have seen, though, concentrating narrowly on the leader is the bread and butter of zombie leadership.

Axiom #4: We all know a great leader when we see one

Axioms #2 and #3 alert us to the fact that when it comes to understanding the nature of effective leadership, followers' perceptions are all important. Without engaging with any of the nuances that the discussion in previous sections might have alerted us to, this is a point that zombie leadership takes in its stride by imagining that, when push comes

to shove, we will all know great leadership when we see it. Indeed, the fact that ratings of US Presidents reveal a high degree of consensus is commonly taken as evidence that there is indeed a single universal truth to be captured here.

On closer inspection, though, this idea proves chimerical. For the consensus in leader appraisal generally turns out to be a product of shared identity among those doing the appraising. In the case of ratings of U.S. Presidents, we can start to see this if we unpack *whose* truth it is that the research captures. In the surveys that we discussed above, the consensus existed specifically amongst a rather homogenous group: historians at prestigious American universities. Would the same consensus have emerged if the methodology had taken stock of the views of Black and White Americans, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, or historians who were Russian and Chinese?

The simple answer to such questions is 'no'. For example, in a survey of both academics and the general public, Uscinski and Simon (2011) found that the (Democrat-leaning) academics tended to have an inflated view of the greatness of Democratic presidents but a diminished appreciation of the greatness of Republican ones (see also Felzenberg, 2003). Nichols (2012) showed that there is also a cultural and temporal dimension to perceived Presidential greatness such that this is more likely to be recognized where the values and approach that a leader championed — and that they have come to be known for — are consonant with the broad cultural tastes that prevail at the point in time where their leadership is appraised.

Whether we recognize and celebrate a given leader's leadership thus depends very much on whether we perceive them as having achieved things *we* value and as embodying values *we* subscribe to. In other words, we applaud those leaders who 'do it for us' (Haslam et al., 2001; Steffens et al., 2014). Where perceivers all have the same understanding of who 'us' is (e.g., which values constitute American identity) there will typically be a high degree of consensus in their judgements (e.g., about who is a great American President). However, where people have a different sense of who they are (and hence of collective values) and where this sense varies over time, they will evaluate leaders very differently. As an extreme example of this point, one would hardly expect partisan citizens of nations that are at war (e.g., Russians and Ukrainians today) to agree about the relative greatness of their countries' leaders. Clearly too, the signature of the response to populist leaders like Trump, Johnson and Bolsonaro is not consensus but its very opposite.

Accordingly, where perceivers agree about a leader's greatness this is not a straightforward manifestation of that leader's inherent caliber that those perceivers are attuned to detect. Rather it is something that is *achieved* by structuring the appraisal process around shared criteria which produce consensus. One obvious way in which society contrives to do this is by only qualifying members of *particular* communities — with particular group interests — to serve as experts (Rifkin & Martin, 1997). Although this will often give rise to the appearance of a shared reality and helps to give particular understandings of leadership academic respectability and social force, it is nevertheless a social construction that tells us a lot about whose voice counts and whose is ignored in society. And when it comes to zombie leadership it is clear that only one voice counts — the voice of the powerful.

Axiom #5: All leadership is the same

The importance of followers' perceptions has been emphasized by a host of leadership scholars (e.g., Billsberry & Meisel, 2009; Lin et al., 2017; Lord & Maher, 1991; Nye & Simonetta, 1996; Salam et al., 1997). Nevertheless, many leadership researchers and commentators still cling on to the view that once the importance of social perspective has been factored in and various other biases have been factored out it is possible to cut to the core of 'what leadership really is' and that, when we do, everyone will comprehend and appreciate this essential *leadershipness*. So, yes, Republicans and Democrats (and experts and lay people) may disagree about how good a leader Nixon or Carter was, but surely everyone can agree that there is something about Lincoln or Churchill that represents the essence of what good leadership is?

As we have already suggested, where consensus around such things exists this can generally be understood as a marker of the breadth of the communities of perceivers who are appraising a particular leader at any given point in time. In the case of Lincoln, for example, consensus can be seen to reflect the fact that from today's vantage point Lincoln is seen to stand above partisan politics and to be an emblematic *American* President. In his time, though (in the context of the U.S. Civil War and indeed until quite recently), Lincoln was a deeply divisive figure (Richardson, 2009; Schwartz, 1997, 2003).

Far from being a free-floating and abstract process, leadership thus always has a very specific meaning that is tied to both time and space (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003c). In the most basic terms this is because leaders themselves are never just leaders in the abstract. They are always leaders of some *specific* group or collective at a *specific* point in time (e.g., a nation, a political party, a corporation, a football team; Haslam & Reicher, 2016). Accordingly, as the definition of leadership with which we started makes clear, the efficacy of leadership is always tied to — and only realized in the context of — a specific instantiation of the group that is being led.

Amongst other things, this explains the contradiction in the demand for leadership qualities and behaviors that we observed when discussing Axioms #2 and #3. It is for this reason too that leadership is not something that can be distilled and bottled for the benefit of all people for all time. What is inspirational and uplifting for some will be annoying and demotivating for others (Spicer, 2020). The form and content of leadership will always change, *and need to change*, to reflect the nature of the group being led — its norms, and values, its history and culture, its goals and aspirations. This also explains why a key task of leadership is not only to understand these things but also to actively shape them (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996, 2001; Reicher et al., 2005). It is also the reason why, wherever one looks — whether across groups or within a single group — upon close inspection leadership hardly ever looks the same when it emerges in different places and is generally very "messy" (Blom & Alvesson, 2015b, p.978).

Zombie leadership, though, is oblivious to the flows and demands of history, culture and context. It treats leadership as something akin to a magic incantation – something that, repeated precisely, produces the same wondrous results wherever and whenever it is used. You once led a football team? Abracadabra, of course you can lead our business (Bailey, 2012). You once ran a business? Abracadabra, you can now lead our country (Giuliani, 2002; Trump & Schwartz, 2009). Despite plenty of evidence that leadership skills are not transferable in this way (e.g., Goodall & Pogrebna, 2015; Lord & Hall, 2005; Mumford et al., 2007), in the magical fantasy land cum horror movie of zombie leadership such evidence counts for little.

Axiom #6: Leadership is a special skill limited to special people

Although it is sometimes said that — potentially at least — leadership is done everywhere and by almost everyone (e.g., Kouzes & Posner, 2007), the dominant view remains that the leadership that really counts is the preserve of a very few in high office. In the spirit of Heraclitus (who suggested that "one man is [worth] ten thousand if he is the best"; cited in Harter, 2008, p. 69), leadership is thought to be an elite activity practiced by those precious few people who have god-like skills, abilities and talents (Carlyle, 1840; McGill & Slocum, 1998).

As a range of commentators have observed, this view has had a range of far-reaching consequences. Three of these are especially problematic. First, it has fueled immense inequality of esteem and reward between high-level leaders and those they lead. The dimensions of this are well documented, but as just one indicator of this, consider the fact that in the middle of last century, US CEOs earned about 20 times the amount of the typical worker but that since then, CEOs have enjoyed such enormous

pay rises, and workers such paltry ones (Amis et al., 2020; Bivens & Kandra, 2022; Gabaix & Landier, 2008) that, today, the CEOs of leading U.S. companies today earn an average of $27.8 m a year — 400 times more than the wage of the average worker (Berger, 2022).

Second, akin to the creed of trickle-down economics (Quiggin, 2012; Stiglitz, 2018) this inequality has itself come to be justified by a language of *trickle-down leadership* which argues that organizations and institutions need to go in search of top talent (and be prepared to pay handsomely for it) in order to reap the benefits that flow down to everyone else in the organization (Gladwell, 2002). This approach has become the orthodoxy not only in business but also in fields such as sport (Bloom, 1999; Quirk & Fort, 1997), public administration (Berman et al., 2021), and academia (Smyth, 2017).

Finally, third, the belief that leadership is only for the few has engendered a sense of *grandiosity* among both leaders and those in the leadership industry (Alvesson & Gabriel, 2016; Westerman et al., 2012). Together they have cultivated a fantasy that leadership is the stuff of big statements, glamorous events, elite qualifications, and showcase awards — not the humdrum stuff of listening to people's problems, helping out, meeting deadlines, and creating a positive atmosphere (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003b; Lipman-Blumen, 2005).

Yet, frustrating as these three things may be, one could argue that they are a price worth paying if they lead to effective leadership that brings benefits to all. But they don't. Mountains of research supports this conclusion. Steffens et al. (2020), for instance, show that as high CEO pay increases the inequality between CEOs and ordinary organizational members this makes those members less enthusiastic about their leaders, less inspired by their leadership, and less motivated to work towards their goals. More generally, putting leaders and their leadership on a pedestal will often undermine their effectiveness because it creates a sense of psychological distance between those at the top and the rank-and-file team members they are trying to lead (Hollander, 1995). In the process it makes those team members reluctant to do the hard work — the mundane forms of *trickle-up* leadership — required to bring any leader's vision to fruition (Fulmer & Ostroff, 2017). In addition, lavishing riches on leaders while denying rewards to their subordinates limits the willingness of subordinates to provide feedback that is essential for the detection and correction of problematic decisions and arrangements (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015). It also limits their willingness to suggest new ideas, to show initiative, and to motivate others (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Wilkinson, 2023).

All this is lost on disciples of zombie leadership. Indeed, rather than being on the retreat, they have been on the advance in recent years and their mantras have colonised whole new fields. As noted above, one of these is academia (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Smyth, 2017). Here, as elsewhere, the triumphant march of zombie leadership has been accompanied by dramatic rises in remuneration for leaders (Baker, 2017; Hubble & Bolton, 2018; Lucey et al., 2022; Morgan, 2011). For example, Boden and Rowlands (2022) observe that while in 1975 Vice Chancellors at elite Australian universities were paid only 2.9 times more than a starting lecturer, by 2018 they were paid 16 times more. Evidence that such rises are linked to performance is thin on the ground; evidence that they *produce* performance uplift even thinner (Hearn, 1999; especially when one takes luck out of the equation, Fitza, 2014). On the contrary, what evidence there is suggests that, if anything, exorbitant leader pay has the oppositive effect (as per Steffens et al., 2020). Thus Walker et al. (2019) observe that there is a small but significant *negative* correlation between Vice-Chancellor pay and key indicators of institutions' research quality and research impact.

Somewhat ironically, then, when leadership is understood and embraced as something 'other' it creates a sense of otherness between leaders and followers that undermines trust and influence — the very things that effective leadership is all about. It weakens the efforts of followers to work for the leaders' goals and hence dooms leadership to failure (Aromaa et al., 2019). But the advocates zombie leadership do not seem unduly concerned. Indeed, they laugh all the way to the bank.

Axiom #7: Leadership is always good and it is always good for everyone

If leadership isn't always grand, at least it's always good. This is another central claim of the zombie leadership manifesto — in which leadership is associated with "everything and anything that has a positive ring to it" (Alvesson et al., 2017, p.8). Along these lines, Bass and Steidlmeier (1999, p.184) argue that authentic transformational leadership rests on a "moral foundation of legitimate values" while Hannah et al. (2014) argue that "morality is an inherent component of leadership" (p. 604). Indeed, as Palanski and Yammarino (2009) observe, it is almost axiomatic in leadership studies that effective leadership is married with integrity.

Illustrative of this point, in Maskor et al.'s (2022) exhaustive survey of popular texts about leadership "secrets", every single one of the themes that these texts unearthed had a positive focus (e.g., relating to knowledge and learning, habits, behaviors and practices, or personal inspiration, drive and motivation). This means that when people discuss such things as authentic leadership, transformational leadership or even servant leadership they implicitly do so in the belief that they will be a source of 'goodness' for them, for the groups they lead, and for society as a whole (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Avolio & Walumbwa, 2014).

This is not to say that those who go into bat for zombie leadership do not recognize that leaders sometimes do bad things or lead groups that do bad things. However, when they do so, they tend to treat it as an aberration from the 'real' or 'normal' leadership on which they want to focus. In this way, consideration of bad leadership is quarantined from mainstream analysis lest it somehow poison the well (Kellerman, 2004). Amongst other things, this is achieved by relabelling these rogue forms of leadership as a manifestation of 'something else' (e.g., dictatorship, bullying, petty tyranny; Hannah et al, 2014).

The idea that leadership is fundamentally a force for good is particularly pronounced in the domain of leadership development. Here programs hold out the promise of helping participants to develop as leaders on the implicit understanding that this will 'improve' both them and the organizations in which they work (Aboujaoude, 2021). As a result, the leadership training industry that caters to these appetites is both vast and very lucrative, with an annual turnover estimated to be over US$40bn in 2021 (and growing at about 10% per annum; Technavio, 2022).

Yet, while in many circles enthusiasm for the elixir-like qualities of leadership knows few bounds, enthusiasts at the coalface quickly run into trouble (Alvesson & Einola, 2019). This is because zombie leadership presupposes a 'consensus world' in which what is good for the leader and the organisation is good for the individual for society. This is a world where interests never clash. But again it is a fantasy world.

On the one hand, then, a leader may profit from increasing company profitability, but this may come at the cost of worsening working conditions, lower pay and more redundancies for the workers. Equally, there is much evidence that the qualities associated with good leadership may have as much of a dark side as a bright side (Conger, 1990; Kellerman, 2012; Tourish, 2013). Such things as 'being true to yourself' and 'having an insatiable desire for change' easily slip over into narcissism, hubris, bullying and exploitation which turn the lives of employees and followers into a misery (Sankowsky, 1995; Schyns & Schilling, 2013). Concretely, among U.S. Presidents who are perceived to be great, narcissism is the rule not the exception (although this can be seen as a something they 'grow into' rather than a stable trait; Deluga, 1997).

On the other hand, even where a leader is effective in motivating and mobilising followers and advancing the interests of the group as a whole, this may come at the expense of the interests (or, at worst, the survival) of other groups. This is a point that Ciulla (1995, 2003) refers to as 'the Hitler problem' when she notes that there is a world of difference between being an effective leader (as, tragically, Hitler was for the Nazi movement in the lead-up and beginning to World War II; Kershaw, 2013) and being a good one.

Given that the consensus world of zombie leadership is a fantasy, and that interests within and between groups so often clash, one therefore cannot answer the question of whether leadership is good without first asking 'For whom and for what?' A failure to ask these questions doesn't make them go away. It simply means that one will be advancing the agendas of particular groups while ignoring the harms imposed upon others (Alvesson et al., 2017). These points may seem obvious once we make them explicit. But that is precisely why zombie leadership never does.

Axiom #8: People can't cope without leaders

Even if we reject all of the previous axioms, can we not hold on to one final core belief — namely that, providing it is not toxic, leadership is something we always need, and that the more we have of it the better? After all, surely if there is someone to direct and organize groups and ensure that they work together to the same end, then those groups will be more effective and more productive? Have not philosophers, novelists and film-makers shown that in a state of nature without leaders to organize us, we would either be lost or tear ourselves apart?

To be sure, this assumption is ingrained into our culture (Bregman, 2020). Think *Lord of the Flies*, *The Children of Men*, *Mad Max*, or indeed *Night of the Living Dead*. These cultural archetypes are predicated on two core assumptions: first, that credible leadership narratives necessarily revolve around a singular heroic leadership figure, and, second, that people cannot organize themselves effectively without someone to lead them.

As we have already seen, the former assumption is problematic because it excludes a voluminous literature on different forms of collective and distributed leadership in which the leader role is shared rather than concentrated in one person (Edwards, 2015; Pearce & Conger, 2002). However, the latter assumption might seem more reasonable. Indeed, so strong is this assumption that, when people act together in a coherent manner without overt leadership, it is often assumed that there must be a 'hidden hand' directing them. One of the recurrent claims of crowd psychology, for instance, is that agitators — 'ringleaders' — are always directing the masses. Accordingly, when an inquiry was established to understand the causes of US Urban riots of the 1960s, President Johnson explicitly directed those who were conducting it to discover who those agitators were. But try as they might, the investigators could find no evidence of any such covert leadership (Reicher & Stott, 2011; US Riot Commission, 1969). People, it seemed, were able to act together in crowds, not because someone was leading and organizing them, but because they shared a common sense of who they were and what they were about (Reicher, 2001).

Moving from crowds to groups and organizations more generally, Kerr and Jermier (1978) observed that a number of factors serve as leadership substitutes in groups and organizations, including such things as high group cohesiveness, a professional orientation among followers, and an intrinsically motivating task (Howell et al., 1986; see also Gronn, 2003). Work by Haslam and colleagues (1998) took this a step further by showing not only that can people self -organize without leadership but also that leadership can interfere with group functioning. They conducted a series of experiments comparing performance on a collective task across conditions in which groups (1) had no leader, (2) had a randomly chosen leader, or (3) had a leader who was formally selected on the basis of responses on a leadership inventory that assessed factors putatively associated with long-term managerial success (e.g., social awareness, verbal and planning skills). On measures of both cohesion and performance it was the groups with the formally selected leader that performed worst. A key reason for this was that when they were given the opportunity to walk away from their commitments, it was those groups with formally selected leaders that were most likely to do so.

There are at least three reasons why the identification and appointment of leaders can disrupt group performance. One is that the very notion that 'you need leaders' is an implicit insult to the rest of the group and can alienate the leader from them (Peters et al., 2019). Another is that, having been selected as 'special', leaders will often seek to assert their presence, interfere in what others do, and simply waste people's time in unproductive activities that are seen as interfering and toxic (Blom & Alvesson, 2015a; Franken & Plimmer, 2019; Kipnis, 1972; Singer, 2009; Steele, 2011). A third is that if leaders are set up as being exceptional, followers may be inclined to sit back, stop engaging, and rely on those designated to be leaders to do all the work (Einola & Alvesson, 2021b). In short, they may say to themselves "If you're so wonderful, why don't you get on with it?" or, alternatively, "Great. Now I don't have to do anything" (Haslam et al., 2011).

The fundamental problem with the notion of leaders-as-saviors centers on the problems that this conceit creates for the social relationship between leaders and followers. More specifically, it highlights the danger of creating a strict binary between decision-making leaders and decision-following members. This sets leaders apart from their group. It creates or reinforces alienating notions of hierarchy. And it ignores the fact that differences in competence and ability to influence others in a group are generally a matter of degree, rarely of all-or-nothing absolutes.

Zombie leadership, though, is deaf to any such nuance. In its world, followers require the superior skills of leaders to thrive (and possibly even survive). So wherever — and on whomsoever — the mantle of leadership is bestowed, we should count ourselves lucky to be on the receiving end of it.

Discussion: Understanding and countering the threat of zombie leadership

> *In their paper "When Zombies Attack: Mathematical Modelling of an Outbreak of Zombie Infection" a University of Ottawa research team concluded that a large-scale zombie outbreak would lead to societal collapse unless dealt with quickly and aggressively.* The New York Times *included the work among its top ideas of 2009.*
> Mogk, 2011, p.44.

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of upbeat models of leadership that provide normative theoretical frameworks to guide both science and practice. Despite their differences, these frameworks are generally couched in terms that affirm the virtues of leading in particular ways (e.g., through transformational leadership, authentic leadership, respectful leadership, ethical leadership, inclusive leadership, distributed leadership, servant leadership, reflexive leadership, or identity leadership; Alvesson, 2019). Regardless of whether or not these frameworks are valid or valuable, as a range of researchers have noted — and as we noted in discussing Axiom #7 above — the realities that people encounter on the ground are often far less rosy, and routinely fail to live up to the normative expectations that these models create (Cohen, 2016; Schyns & Schilling, 2013; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). As we also noted, this has led to a range of analyses that explain how we can detect aberrant toxic leaders and how we can protect ourselves against them (e.g., Lipman-Blumen, 2005).

However, the problem of toxic leadership goes deeper. It is not just an issue of practice — of what leaders are doing 'out there'. It is also a problem that is produced by *theory and cultural understanding*. That is, it derives, at least in part, from the ideas that the purveyors of leadership knowledge (not just the theorists but also the industry of trainers and recruiters) fill the heads of would-be leaders with (Steffens & Haslam, 2022; Tourish, 2013). In this paper we have tried to document some of these ideas, to identify their underlying logic and, above all, to point out their dangers. Accordingly, in wrapping up our analysis, we will zero in on the threat that zombie leadership poses. We do this first, by explaining why it is so serious; second, by addressing why, given the level of threat, it has gone largely unchecked; third by making some suggestions as to what can be done about it.

Why the threat of zombie leadership is so serious

We have been harsh in our criticisms of zombie leadership. Some might say too harsh. Indeed, we ourselves noted at the start of this paper that our critique was rooted in a 'worst case' characterization of the phenomenon. In reality, few adhere to the strong forms of the eight axioms set out above, and in their more moderate form, these axioms may appear more palatable. Indeed, some might argue that, for all their limitations, many (perhaps all?) contain at least a kernel of truth.

Posed in this way, the threat of zombie leadership may not seem much of a threat at all, and certainly not one that needs an urgent response. There are several reasons why we disagree, but the main one is drawn from the lessons of stereotyping research in the middle and late 20th century (see Oakes et al., 1994, for a review). At that time, many researchers argued that racial stereotypes (e.g., that Black Americans are 'lazy' and 'stupid'; Katz & Braly, 1933) were not all bad because they had at their core a kernel of truth (e.g., Prothro & Melikian, 1955). Quite apart from being deeply offensive, this is problematic for at least three reasons. The first is that it confuses description for explanation (McGarty et al., 2002). That is, Black workers may not flourish at work and Black children may do worse at school – something that concerns anti-racists as much as racists. But to call the worker lazy or the schoolchild stupid serves as an explanation of the phenomenon and it is one which locates the cause in the deficiencies of the person rather than in the discriminatory nature of the institution which alienates the worker (cf. Reicher, 2012).

Second, such explanations are problematic, not because they are misdescriptions of phenomena in the world but because of the ways in which they *produce* these phenomena in the world. On the one hand, to call members of a group 'lazy' or 'stupid' serves to alienate them and hence undermines their motivation. On the other, it legitimates the creation (or stops us from addressing) the structures and practices of discrimination (Reicher, 2007). Harsch (1979), for instance, documents how the description of South African Black farmers as 'lazy' was a device by white colonists to expropriate their land and force them to become laborers in white-owned mines.

Third, the concern with stereotypes as accurate or inaccurate, true or untrue, only makes sense if they are seen as descriptions of the world as it is now. However, they are also things which shape, and are intended to shape, the world in the future. And the problem here is that they can shape the world in ways that *make them true* even when they were not before (see Haslam et al., 2010; Mackenzie, 2006, for examples).

All these problems apply to claims that zombie leadership is not a problem (or, at least, less of a problem) because it contains kernels of truth: for instance, sometimes leadership is all about leaders and sometimes leadership is confined to just a few people with special qualities. At one level, we don't disagree. Sometimes these things are indeed true. But this is not because they are inherent outcomes of the leadership process. Rather it is because practices encouraged and legitimated by zombie leadership have made them true.

By only looking for leadership amongst leaders we only find it there and bury all signs of leadership from below. By only recognizing, training, selecting and nurturing a few in positions of leadership we ensure that only a few develop the qualities associated with leadership. Elitist theory scaffolds elitist practice which creates an elitist world (Gemmill & Oakley, 1992; Smyth, 2018). This helps us understand the true extent of the threat posed by zombie leadership: not that the world it describes is false but rather that it may help to create a world in which it becomes true.

Why the threat of zombie leadership goes largely unchecked

The threat posed by zombie leadership is manifold and it contributes to the creation of a deeply unequal world — a world in which the elite dominate and the many are alienated because their contribution goes unrecognized and unrewarded; a world in which wealth is both limited and distributed in a grossly unequal manner; a world in which human potential is denied and squandered. But if this threat is so serious then why is so little done to challenge it? In particular, why does it go largely unchecked within academia?

We have already given some answers to this question: because the nature of the threat is misunderstood and under-estimated; because zombie leadership serves the interests not only of the powerful but also of the powerless who have lost hope in their ability to direct their own lives (Reicher & Haslam, 2006). Here, we want to add a third reason, one which derives not from the complacency or complicity of academia but from its myopia.

Generally speaking, leadership researchers are happy to operate in a very small world that is occupied only by other members of their academic microtribe. Their main concern is with influencing their fellow researchers by publishing in specialist journals that are only read by these researchers and often hidden behind a paywall. And even if a wider public were able to access them it is less and less certain that they would be impacted by them given that the readability and relatability of academic research is in steady decline (Plavén-Sigray et al., 2017; Tourish, 2019).

This combination of the financial paywall and the academic jargonwall makes it increasingly difficult to access scholarly insights about leadership outside the tight guild of academic specialists. Relative to its popular counterpart, the audience for academic leadership research is vanishingly small. As a result, the insights of critical and reflective academic scholarship on matters of leadership rarely penetrate public consciousness (Maskor et al., 2022). More specifically, whatever critiques academics might make of zombie leadership, these are insufficient to keep it in check within the wider world (e.g., Alvesson, 2019; Alvesson & Spicer, 2014; Haslam et al., 2011; see also Carroll et al., 2022; Collinson, 2011; Dugan, 2011, 2017). And while these problems are hardly confined to leadership research (Biswas & Kirchherr, 2015; Eveleth, 2014) that is scant consolation.

How to stave off the zombie apocalypse

> *There is no "one size fits all" for counter-zombie operations command relationships.*
>
> United States Strategic Command, 2011, p.9

Having discussed some of the reasons why the academic world has not done much to hold zombie leadership in check, we are now in a position to make some suggestions about what we might do to stave off the apocalypse. The most obvious thing is recognize that the apocalypse is on its way. As long as we are soothingly seduced into accepting 'don't look up, there's nothing to see', we certainly won't see the need to act. Conversely, the act of seeing depends upon two factors.

The first is to recognize the seriousness of the threat — which is what we have sought to do in this paper. Zombie leadership, then, is not just a 'dodgy dossier' containing a variety of somewhat dubious claims. Rather it is a coherent set of ideas and practices, tied together by a powerful metatheory that serves to preserve 19th century elitism into the 21st century. It treats all that is productive in groups and organizations as coming from those at the top. It treats the general populace as little more than empty cyphers (Mols et al., 2015). It thereby helps to produce a world in which power and riches are confined to those at the top while those at the bottom are rendered dependent and passive. In short, zombie leadership contains within it a depressing recipe for zombie followership (for relevant discussion see Bastardoz & van Vugt, 2019; Steffens et al., 2018). As suggested in Table 2, identifying the ingredients of zombie leadership (as we did at the start of this paper) and then countering them with reference to the definition of leadership (as we also did above) are therefore two key strategic priorities for the field.

The second imperative is to package these ideas in a way that is intelligible and attractive to as wide an audience as possible. We are not dealing with an issue that is only of importance to academics. We are

Table 2
Strategies for defeating Zombie Leadership.

	1. Recognizing the components of Zombie Leadership metatheory *Four key claims* 1. Only leaders can lead. 2, Leaders have qualities that set them apart from ordinary people. 3. Group success should be attributed to leaders. 4. History is ultimately the story of great leaders.
	2. Returning to the definition of leadership *The definition* The process whereby one or more people motivate one or more other people to contribute to the achievement of collective goals by shaping beliefs, values, and understandings in context. *Four key points* 1. Leadership is grounded in relationships and connections. 2. Without some form of followership there can be no leadership. 3. Leadership is more about getting people to want to do things than about making them do them. 4. Leadership is a group process and ultimately about the activities of collectives not just individuals.
	3. Recognizing the cost of Zombie Leadership *Four key costs* 1. Fails to recognize and reward the efforts and achievements of ordinary people. 2. Alienates group members and reduces their willingness to contribute. 3. Damages leaders by inducing narcissism, complacency and unwillingness to listen. 4. Reduces the productivity and health of groups and society.
	4. Championing theoretical and practical alternatives to Zombie Leadership *Four key priorities* 1. Champion approaches that broaden our understanding of leadership beyond leaders. 2. Champion approaches that see leadership as a process to which everyone can, and needs to, contribute. 3. Champion approaches that recognize that success depends upon connections between leaders and their group. 4. Champion approaches to leadership development that prioritize these objectives.

dealing with something that is fundamental to the nature of the society we want to live in and hence of relevance to everyone in society. That is why we have written this piece in a style that, in many ways, violates academic norms and which has been deliberately provocative. It is why we have framed our arguments in terms of 'zombie leadership' because zombies "are the most widely understood metaphor of our time" (McLendon, 2017; see also Bishop, 2015). We are aware that our position may dismay some and enrage others. But at least it should be noticed. And if it is, it will be accessible to all and thereby provoke a debate to which all can contribute.

Yet necessary as it is to highlight the threat in as clear a manner as possible, it clearly isn't sufficient. For some, the more clearly it is spelt out, the more the elitist world of zombie leadership – of heroic leaders and passive masses – doesn't seem a threat at all. It is rather a promise. This isn't only true for the elite. It sucks others in with the promise of a gordian solution to all their problems (Brown, 2014; Sprong et al., 2019). Such a promise can be particularly appealing when groups are failing and it looks as if everything is falling apart — even if the 'strong leaders' that people turn to under these circumstances have had a large role to play in that failure (Haslam & Reicher, 2007; Reicher & Haslam, 2006).

It is therefore necessary to challenge this appeal and to stress the various costs of zombie leadership to different social groups: how it fails to recognize the efforts and achievements of ordinary people and depresses their rewards; how it reduces the productivity of groups and organizations by alienating members and reducing their willingness to contribute; how it even destroys the careers of leaders by inducing narcissism, complacency and unwillingness to listen to followers — which in turn diminishes the influence and electability of those in positions of power (Haslam et al., 2022).

Finally, even if one were able to persuade people that zombie leadership is not only a threat but a threat to themselves, this would still be insufficient. For as many studies show, inducing a sense of fear is disempowering and can lead to avoidance and inaction against the source of danger — unless, that is, you combine threat information with information about how the threat can be overcome (e.g., Peters, Ruiter & Kok, 2013; Tannenbaum et al., 2015; Witte & Allen, 2000). So, simply exposing the threat of zombie leadership is unlikely to have much impact unless one provides an alternative framework for thinking about and doing leadership. In other words, we need, first, to develop a theoretical approach which broadens our understanding of leadership beyond leaders to encompass the wider group and which, rather than increasing the separation between the one and the other, shows that success depends upon deepening the connection between the two. Second, we need to develop new forms of leadership training and development which take a whole group approach, which encourage the active involvement of all parties, and which measure success through the eyes of all members. These are both journeys on which we and others have embarked (e.g., Alvesson et al., 2017; Haslam et al., 2023; Reicher et al., 2018). But there is further to go. Much, much further.

In conclusion, we can do no better than quote Anselm Strauss who noted that "the naming of an object provides a directive for action" (cited in Charmaz, 2006, p.96). Our purpose in this paper has been to name zombie leadership and thereby to direct action against the elitist vision, the elitist practices, and the elitist world it serves to produce. Moreover, despite differences in our favored approach to leadership and our preference for specific 'camps', we believe that zombie leadership is something that we can all recognize and unite to fight against. Ultimately, then, our analysis of zombie leadership is, above all, an invitation to join — and to both follow and lead — the Anti-Zombie Leadership Alliance.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

S. Alexander Haslam: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Project administration. **Mats Alvesson:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Stephen D. Reicher:**

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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