

Call for Abstracts

Nobody Leads Alone: Rethinking Leadership, Authority and Organizational Power

**Critical Management Studies beyond the Academy? 30th June – 2nd July 2027,
Lancaster University**

Session Type:

The stream will be organised around paper presentations grouped by theme, followed by discussion. We anticipate contributions from leadership studies, organization theory, critical management studies, political economy, industrial relations, business history and related fields. Sessions will be structured to encourage dialogue across disciplinary boundaries and between conceptual, empirical, and historical approaches to the study of leadership, authority, and organizational power.

Convenors:

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Diversity Statement

The organising team brings together scholars from three UK institutions and from different disciplinary traditions, including critical management studies, organization theory, political economy, leadership studies, and intellectual history. The team spans a range of career stages, from early-career to senior scholars, comprising academics with research expertise across international, contemporary and historical settings. The organisers also bring experience from beyond academia. For example, Sean Irving has worked in local government and the UK Parliament, alongside research and teaching across history, political theory, political economy, and management. Diansha Wang has conducted fieldwork research in Chinese private-sector corporations. Leo McCann's research has involved research, engagement and advocacy with organizations as diverse as the UK's National Health Service, the Royal College of Paramedics, and the World Bank. These different disciplinary and professional backgrounds reflect the stream's interest in leadership and authority both within and beyond conventional academic settings, in keeping with the theme of 'Critical Management Studies Beyond the Academy'.

What happens when we stop treating leadership as the property of exceptional individuals and begin treating it as a social and organizational relationship?

Leadership occupies a privileged position within contemporary organizational discourse. Across business, government, higher education, and civil society, 'leaders' are routinely invoked to explain organizational success, failure, innovation, and change. Yet a growing body of scholarship has questioned both the dominance of leadership as an explanatory category and the tendency to treat leadership as the property of exceptional individuals (Kellerman, 2012; Tourish, 2013). Other important trends have decentred the notion of leadership as a personal feature or ability, asking vital questions about the location, aesthetics and legitimacy of leadership (Liu, 2021; Sutherland et al, 2022)

Once leadership is understood as a socially-constructed, organizational, locational or aesthetic process rather than a quality of particular individuals, questions of governance and legitimacy move to the centre of analysis. Rather than assuming who leads is known, attention shifts to the organizational, political and societal arrangements through which authority is exercised, projected and experienced. This shift connects leadership studies to growing interest in inclusive forms of organizing and worker participation (Raelin, 2016). Different organizational, societal and political arrangements generate different patterns of authority, responsibility, and decision-making. Leadership, from this perspective, is not simply a matter of individual traits, abilities or effectiveness but a consequence of how organizations are designed, legitimated and understood.

This stream asks what follows from such a shift in perspective. If leadership is not simply a characteristic possessed by exceptional individuals, how should it be understood? What happens when we shift attention from leaders themselves to the organizational relationships, institutional arrangements, and forms of followership and stakeholder relations through which leadership becomes possible (or impossible)? And how might such a shift alter our understanding of authority, participation, and collective action both within and beyond the academy?

These questions have acquired renewed significance in an era marked by growing concern with very poor standards of leadership in general and the rise of democratic backsliding and authoritarian populism in particular. If workplace authority is exercised in unrestrained ways, citizens may become inured to tyrannical practices beyond, particularly in the political realm (Battilana et al, 2022). Analyses of neoliberal governance have highlighted the coexistence of market-oriented reforms with increasingly centralized and insulated forms

of decision-making (Brown, 2015). Additionally, critiques of managerialism have challenged the concentration of authority in managerial elites and questioned assumptions that organizational effectiveness depends upon hierarchical control and executive decision-making (Knafo et al, 2019). Together, these developments have placed questions of authority back at the centre of contemporary debate.

These developments also speak directly to the conference theme of *Critical Management Studies Beyond the Academy*. Questions of leadership, authority, and organizational power extend far beyond academic debate, shaping everyday life across workplaces, public services, trade unions, co-operatives, civil society organisations, and political institutions. We therefore particularly welcome contributions that demonstrate how critical scholarship can illuminate practical questions of leadership, authority, and organizational power beyond academic settings.

This stream invites conceptual, empirical, and historical contributions that explore leadership as an organizational and social process. Rather than treating leadership as the property of exceptional individuals, we are interested in research that examines how authority is organized, experienced, legitimized, and contested within contemporary organizations.

We welcome contributions from leadership studies, organization theory, critical management studies, political economy, industrial relations, sociology, business history, and related fields.

Possible themes include:

- Followership and relational leadership
- Leadership, authority, and legitimacy
- Managerialism and organizational power
- Worker ownership and democratic governance
- Self-management and leaderless organizations
- Leadership, populism, and authoritarianism
- Cultures and aesthetics of leadership
- Leadership in diverse historical contexts
- Organizational change and collective agency
- Decolonizing and decentring leadership research and practice

By bringing these conversations together, the stream seeks to connect leadership studies with wider debates about authority, governance, and organizational power. Rather than asking how organizations can secure or develop better leaders, the stream asks what

follows when leadership is understood as a consequence of organizational design and social relationships rather than the property of exceptional individuals.

Please submit your paper abstracts for consideration (not more than 500 words in length) to Dr Sean Irving: sean.irving@essex.ac.uk

References:

Battilana, J., Yen, J., Ferreras, I., & Ramarajan, L. (2022). Democratizing work: Redistributing power in organizations for a democratic and sustainable future. *Organization Theory*, 3(1), 1–33.

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Tourish, Dennis (2013). *The Dark Side of Transformational Leadership: A Critical Perspective*. London: Routledge.

Uhl-Bien, Mary (2006). "Relational Leadership Theory: Exploring the Social Processes of Leadership and Organizing." *The Leadership Quarterly*, 17(6): 654–676.