



## 'No More Heroes': Critical Perspectives on Leadership Romanticism

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## ‘No More Heroes’<sup>1</sup>: Critical Perspectives on Leadership Romanticism

### Abstract:

This paper revisits Meindl et al’s (1985) ‘romance of leadership’ thesis and extends these ideas in a number of inter-related ways. First, it argues that the thesis has sometimes been neglected and/or misinterpreted in subsequent studies. Second, the paper suggests that romanticism is a much broader and more historically rich term with wider implications for leadership studies than originally proposed. Arguing that romanticism stretches beyond leader attribution, we connect leadership theory to a more enduring and naturalistic tradition of romantic thought that has survived and evolved since the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. Third, the paper demonstrates the contemporary relevance of the romanticism critique. It reveals how the study of leadership continues to be characterised by romanticising tendencies in many of its most influential theories, illustrating this argument with reference to spiritual and authentic leadership theories, which only recognise positive engagement with leaders. Equally, the paper suggests that romanticism can shape conceptions not only of leaders, but also of followers, their agency, and their (potential for) resistance. We conclude by discussing future possible research directions for the romanticism critique that extend well beyond its original focus on leader attribution to inform a broader critical approach to leadership studies.

**Keywords:** leadership romanticism, leader attribution, natural leaders, expressive collectives, romanticising followership, critical leadership studies

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<sup>1</sup> This title is inspired by the 1977 classic UK punk rock anthem of the same name by ‘The Stranglers’.

## Introduction

It is now over 30 years since Meindl, Ehrlich and Dukerich (1985) published their classic article critically examining the widespread tendency for leadership scholars, practitioners, the media and societies as a whole to attribute undue influence and responsibility to leaders for organizational successes and failures. Meindl et al's critique helped to facilitate the emergence of important new post-heroic ideas about distributed, shared and situated leadership and followership. In recent years, however, important insights from this critique have either been forgotten or have tended to be misinterpreted in ways that dilute or neutralize Meindl et al's critical insights. Partly prompted by this misunderstanding, our paper revisits the romanticism thesis to re-state its continued relevance for leadership studies. It also seeks to build on and extend Meindl et al's original ideas in a number of ways.

First, we re-examine the leadership romanticism thesis and question the way it has sometimes been interpreted in contemporary accounts. Second, the paper examines the aesthetic and historical dimensions of romanticism and considers their wider implications for leadership studies. The paper connects leadership theory to a more enduring and naturalistic tradition of romantic thought that has survived and evolved since the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. Meindl's notion of the romance of leadership is largely restricted to leader attribution and does not explore romanticism as a concept or discourse with its own history. By revisiting the concept, we seek to show how romanticism can be approached as a mode of thinking that is ubiquitous and holds relevance beyond leader attribution. Third and relatedly, the paper is concerned to demonstrate the contemporary significance of the romanticism critique of leadership research and practice. It demonstrates how various currently influential leadership theories, both leader-centred and post-heroic, continue to romanticise leaders. We also suggest that

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3 romanticism can shape conceptions not only of leaders, but also of followers and their  
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5 practices.  
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10 The paper highlights the usefulness of applying a historically-situated critical aesthetic  
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12 analysis to contemporary organizational concepts. Doing so, we suggest, can enhance  
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14 understanding of the genesis and persistence of certain discourses. More specifically, we seek  
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16 to identify and foreground the notion of romanticised discourse as influential in our  
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18 organizational times. The paper makes the case that romanticising leadership is informed by  
19  
20 certain key characteristics that can be traced back to dimensions of romantic thought and  
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22 philosophy. Romanticising leadership naturalises the privileged status of leaders, portraying  
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24 them as possessing the imaginative and heroic capabilities to access transcendent natural  
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26 truths.  
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31 Romanticism is not restricted to accounts of individual leaders, however, but also stretches to  
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33 collective constructions of both leadership and followership. We theorise such ‘post-heroic’  
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35 constructions as ‘expressive collectives’, accounts of leadership and followership that  
36  
37 emphasise ‘collective individuality’ (Murphy and Roberts, 2004: 45), a perspective that  
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39 offers primacy to freedom of self-expression. It is also a discourse in which concerns relating  
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41 to power tend to disappear from view, replaced by a focus on the language of natural  
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43 harmony and conciliation. In re-examining leadership romanticism, we draw on Benjamin’s  
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45 (1996) critique of Romantic thought, which he claimed risked overlooking the role of  
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47 criticism in identifying and amplifying points of rupture and negativity in works of art.  
48  
49 Informed by Benjamin’s arguments and our own analysis of contemporary theories and  
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51 practices, we conclude the paper by discussing future possible directions for more critical, de-  
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53 romanticised approaches to leadership theory and practice.  
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### The Romance of Leadership

The concept of leadership romanticism has its origins in the 1985 paper by Meindl, Ehrlich and Dukerich. Drawing on detailed empirical analysis, the authors highlight ‘the prominence of the concept of leadership in our collective consciousness’ (1985: 78). Examining the attribution of performance outcomes to leaders’ abilities, they question the widespread tendency in both academic research and popular thinking to exaggerate leaders’ contributions and to treat leadership as a causal and explanatory category. Meindl et al refer to this tendency as ‘the romance of leadership’. They contend that such accounts tend either to excessively credit leaders for high organizational performance or, conversely, to hold them overly responsible for workplace failures.

Meindl et al suggest that in complex contexts of indeterminate and unpredictable events, ‘the romance of leadership’ provides a reassuring, but overly simplified way to understand multifaceted organizational and economic processes, and to construct causal connections. They argue that in practice individual leaders’ contributions to a collective enterprise are likely to be much more constrained and closely tied to external factors outside a leader’s control. Echoing Smircich and Morgan’s (1982) argument, Meindl et al contend that leadership should be understood as intimately entangled in organizational symbolism and, by extension, wider social symbolism. The manipulation of language and other organizationally significant symbols allows leaders to manage the political and social processes that maintain organized activity, generating a sense of ‘efficacy and control’, and thereby emphasising that leaders ‘do make a difference’ (ibid: 97). In this sense-making process, leadership has assumed a status of ‘mystery and near mysticism’ (ibid: 78).

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3 It may be that this mysterious and elusive status makes leadership particularly amenable to  
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5 the kind of romanticised causal attributions problematized by Meindl et al. It is certainly the  
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7 case that leadership scholars have often conceptualised leadership as ‘something’ that escapes  
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9 and goes beyond the regular boundaries of rational organizational reasoning. Leadership has  
10  
11 been approached as offering an appeal over and above the more mundane but also, perhaps,  
12  
13 the more accountable concept of management (O’Reilly and Reed, 2011). Leadership appears  
14  
15 to stretch beyond the boundaries of rational and directly knowable language, scattering a  
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17 mysticism that includes, but also exceeds individual leaders. Perhaps it is this vagueness and  
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19 ambiguity, combined with aggrandising language, which provides important clues as to its  
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21 ‘romantic’ appeal, an appeal which has led to a collectively ‘enamoured’ population of  
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23 scholars, policymakers, developers and practitioners (Ford and Harding, 2007: 476).  
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30 Presenting a damning critique of many mainstream studies, Meindl et al’s romance of  
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32 leadership thesis has been highly influential and widely cited (see for example, Bligh and  
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34 Schyns, 2007; Shamir et al, 2007). It has also been instrumental in the emergence of post-  
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36 heroic theories that emphasise the social, situational, relational and collective nature of  
37  
38 leadership dynamics. Post-heroic perspectives focus on distributed (Gronn, 2002), shared  
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40 (Pearce and Conger, 2003), servant (Hale and Fields, 2007), quiet (Collins, 2001),  
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42 collaborative (Jameson, 2007) as well as community leadership (Ricketts and Ladewig, 2008)  
43  
44 and co-leadership (Alvarez and Svejnova, 2005). They also ascribe greater importance to  
45  
46 both context (Fairhurst, 2009, Jepson, 2009) and followership (Bligh, 2011; Chaleff, 2015;  
47  
48 Kellerman, 2007; Riggio et al., 2008; Uhl-Bien et al, 2014). Yet, despite its influence on  
49  
50 leadership studies, the critical and questioning edge of the romance of leadership thesis has  
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52 often been neglected or downplayed in subsequent research. Many perspectives that have  
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3 emerged since 1985 have largely ignored Meindl et al's central critique, reproducing  
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5 romanticised assumptions that fixate on leaders – or collectives - in heroic terms.  
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10 In recent times, the critical dimension of leadership romanticism has tended to be diluted.  
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12 Indeed, vigorous critiques of leadership and management writing generally are few and far  
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14 between (c.f., Rosenzweig (2014), whose demolition of many sacred managerial cows is  
15  
16 exemplary). Within leadership studies, Kempster and Carroll (2016) seek to reframe  
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18 romanticism and leadership in more ethical terms, advocating 'a new romanticism' (p.8),  
19  
20 which they refer to as 'The Romance of Responsible Leadership'. Here, romanticism is  
21  
22 acknowledged, but is re-interpreted in less critical ways. Drawing on the imagery of the  
23  
24 Romantic poets, the editors re-define romanticism as a focus on 'hope' (p. 2) and  
25  
26 'imagination' (p. 9), and as 'the free and imaginative expression of the feelings of the artist'  
27  
28 (Kempster and Carroll, 2016: 9). In place of Meindl et al's *critique*, the authors *value*  
29  
30 romanticism and refer to themselves as '*the new romantics of responsible leadership*'  
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32 (Kempster and Carroll, 2016: 9).  
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39 What is surprising about the contributions in this edited collection is their lack of engagement  
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41 with Meindl et al's (1985) original thesis and its critical implications. Of the 11 chapters,  
42  
43 only two cite Meindl et al's seminal article (Blakely, 2016; Lee and Higgs, 2016). Two others  
44  
45 (Kempster and Carroll, 2016; Parry and Jackson, 2016) cite Meindl's (1995) chapter  
46  
47 published ten years later, which adopts a more explicitly follower-centred perspective.<sup>2</sup> The  
48  
49 introductory chapter defines leadership romanticism as 'the follower tendency to attribute  
50  
51 responsibility for company performance to organizational leaders', a thesis the editors assert  
52  
53 was 'developed by Meindl (1995)'. There is no mention of the classic Meindl et al paper  
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57 <sup>2</sup> As we discuss later, Meindl's single-authored 1995 chapter takes a different perspective to the co-authored  
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59 1985 paper, where the romanticizing impulse is more broadly conceived and attributed.  
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3 published ten years earlier. Concerned to ‘embrace’ romanticism as a positive discourse,  
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5 rather than use it to advance critique of contemporary leadership theories and practices, the  
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7 editors seek to:

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10 reintroduce the romanticised rhetoric to situate it within current leadership discourses  
11 regarding authentic, distributed, and ethical leadership where the societal, economic, and  
12 environmental challenges do require us to collectively take the lead in moving forward  
13 towards doing good and growing well. (Kempster and Carroll, 2016: 3)  
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16 This rather uncritical statement takes for granted that concepts such as ‘ethical leadership’,  
17  
18 ‘doing good’ and ‘growing well’ are self-evident and have universally accepted meanings.  
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20 More critical approaches recognise that these are essentially contested terms that can be  
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22 defined in multiple ways according to various political agendas. The editors’ intention to  
23  
24 ‘reintroduce’ and ‘embrace’ romanticism significantly redefines the term’s meaning, limiting  
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26 its original critical intent. In effect, their argument tends to romanticise leadership  
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28 romanticism.  
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34 Rather than ‘romanticise romanticism’, we seek to build on and extend Meindl et al’s more  
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36 questioning insights. For them, the romance of leadership thesis is not concerned with  
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38 promoting hope or imagination. Rather, it questions the widespread tendency to attribute  
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40 excessive and causal power and influence to leaders. We see the romance of leadership thesis  
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42 as an important precursor and starting point for the critical analysis of leadership theory and  
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44 practice. In seeking to develop our argument that romanticism stretches beyond leader  
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46 attribution, the paper begins by connecting leadership theory to a more enduring and  
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48 naturalistic tradition of romantic thought that has survived and evolved since the mid-18<sup>th</sup>  
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50 century.  
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## The Old Romantics and their Problematic Legacy

Romanticism is typically understood as an artistic, intellectual, literary and even social-political movement that sought to recapture a sense of proportion with regard to humanity's relationship to nature (Ferber, 2010). Applied retrospectively to a collection of late 18<sup>th</sup> century writers, poets, artists and musicians, Romanticism originally developed as a reaction to the Enlightenment. Indeed, it is impossible to understand Romanticism (late 18<sup>th</sup>C – middle 19<sup>th</sup>C) without first understanding the context from which it arose, namely the modernising impulses of the Enlightenment that prioritized rationality, logic, production, objectivity and control (early 17<sup>th</sup>C to late 18<sup>th</sup>C).

By the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, although great strides had been made in understanding the world and human beings' place within it, these breakthroughs had come at the expense of a sense of alienation, a feeling that 'avidly rationalist philosophy ignored the sensuous qualities of particular things, while a short-sighted empiricism was unable to peer beyond particular bits and pieces of the world to any total picture which they might compose' (Eagleton, 1983: 21-22). Reacting against industrialisation and the factory system, Romanticism emphasised that which was being lost: human subjectivity, emotions and imagination, human embeddedness in nature and the romantic idyll of rural communities. In this sense Romanticism was utopian, fundamentally shaped by idealism, nostalgia and a sense of loss (Lowy and Sayre, 2001).

The Romantic movement was never united in its cultural reaction to the Enlightenment. Indeed, the Enlightenment itself was built upon difference. Certainly the Enlightenment had a French timbre – as exemplified by the *Encyclopédie* of Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert published between 1751 and 1772. It embodied common assumptions about

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3 abandoning traditional forms of authority (especially political and religious) and seeking out  
4 possibilities for applying the logic and scientific rationality of the Age of Reason to address  
5 humanity's problems and create a universally better society (Fitzpatrick, 1999), or to liberate  
6 the mind from wanton ignorance (Porter, 2001): at least until the French Revolution.  
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14 The Romantic rebuttal to the Enlightenment was rooted in the assumption that human  
15 intuition and emotion were better arbiters of civilization than science, especially the French  
16 version that had 'inevitably' led to revolution, when Britain's political stability allegedly  
17 demonstrated the superiority of evolution and accommodation. However, the meaning  
18 attributed by the Romantics to the idea of romanticism was more diverse and contested than  
19 the interpretation of 'romance' utilised by Meindl et al. Whilst the latter were critical of the  
20 excessive attribution of power and influence to leaders, the elevating tendency of individuals  
21 was but one aspect of the richer fabric of thought of the Romantics. In relation to leadership  
22 studies we suggest that much value can be gained by extending the conception of  
23 romanticism beyond leader attribution and by approaching romanticism as a concept and  
24 movement with a more generally salient legacy.  
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#### 41 **Benjamin's critique of Romantic criticism**

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43 In approaching romanticism as a problematic concept, as a movement with particular  
44 historical and aesthetic roots, and as a means of stretching the thesis of Meindl et al, we are  
45 influenced by Walter Benjamin's (1996) interpretation of Romantic criticism. Benjamin was,  
46 on the one hand, appreciative of Romantic theories of criticism, which he connected to a  
47 particular approach to reflection, where critique helps unfold the possibilities of a work of art,  
48 drawing attention to the work's internal possibilities. For Benjamin, this was to be welcomed,  
49 as such a focus on the immanence of art injected a much-needed challenge to (crude)  
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3 Enlightenment adherence to the known and knowable. He was alert, on the other hand, to the  
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5 possibility of Romantic criticism perpetuating the construction of an uncritical and unitarist  
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7 interpretation of art, a point we hold as significant for certain predominant approaches to  
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9 leadership studies that tend to valorise leaders and processes of leadership, offering them a  
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11 position beyond the realms of criticism.  
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16 The Romantics, in Benjamin's view, conceived of an 'absolute' (1996: 144) in nature that  
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18 was accessible via art and its criticism. For Benjamin, the Romantic account of criticism was  
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20 interpreted as problematic because it asked that 'every critical understanding of an artistic  
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22 entity [should be interpreted] as reflection in the entity, nothing other than a higher, self-  
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24 actively originated degree of this entity's consciousness' and that 'such intensification of  
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26 consciousness is in principle infinite' (ibid: 152). Observers and critics are asked by  
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28 romanticism to appreciate art in and of itself, with the work of art offering an increasing  
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30 sense of 'intensification' as the spectator becomes more attuned to some higher connection to  
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32 its truth, accessible directly through the work of art. The critic is thus 'transformed into that  
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34 infinitude' (ibid) of nature that the artist seeks to convey.  
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41 Benjamin argued that such an approach was problematic because it informed a logic of  
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43 criticism that did not countenance points of rupture. Thus, just as Marx argued that  
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45 commodities were fetishized in capitalism and operated to mystify the world of exploitation  
46  
47 (and generated alienation – a romantic term in itself) so romanticised art, for Benjamin,  
48  
49 replaced a disharmonious social reality with a harmonious collective myth (Jeffries, 2016:  
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51 178). Criticism and art become locked into an internal relationship of ever greater  
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53 appreciation of an absolute, rather than of critique. From the perspective of romanticised  
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55 criticism, any object that can be deemed an object of appreciative and immanent criticism is  
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3 also regarded as art, and anything that cannot, is simply pushed aside as not art. Good  
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5 criticism, for Benjamin, involves a ‘moment of self-annihilation, the possible negation in  
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7 reflection’ (p.152). This means that the critic is able to negate both the self and the work of  
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9 art, to highlight points of ‘rupture’ (p.347) in the form of the work of art: points that do not  
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11 seem to fit or that undermine its wholeness, and therefore undermine our own sense of  
12  
13 wholeness.  
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18 Our argument about leadership romanticism echoes that of Benjamin’s critique and runs  
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20 through the central themes of this paper: romanticised leadership invites only positive  
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22 engagement from readers, scholars and practitioners from within the particular concept of  
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24 leadership offered. It asks that one consumes and relates to leadership in a way that assumes a  
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26 positive and natural absolute: the status to be attained is simply leadership, rather than there  
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28 being such a thing as good and bad leadership practice. Romanticised leadership posits a  
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30 representation of universal truth within the particularities of its symbolic manifestations, the  
31  
32 various positive theories of leadership. Romanticized accounts of leadership naturalise power  
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34 asymmetries and solidify the identities of individual leaders as privileged actors, asking that  
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36 critique is substituted with expressive contributions to the absolute.  
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43 We can see something of these romanticised dynamics in the rise of Donald Trump: during  
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45 the US election campaigns of 2016, Democratic Party attempts to highlight the irrationality of  
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47 Trump’s pronouncements, or his predilection for casting ‘the other’ (in its various  
48  
49 embodiments – journalists, women, gays, Mexicans, Muslims etc.), proved irrelevant to his  
50  
51 popularity; indeed, the wilder his statements, the greater his popularity. Here, writ large, is  
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53 the ‘bearer of truth’, the leader destined to save the USA from itself. We do not have to be  
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55 avid readers of Plato, de Tocqueville, Burke or even Weber to recognize the dangers of the  
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3 mob: this is the other side of the same romantic assumption about the ‘wisdom of crowds’  
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5 (Surowiecki, 2005; C.f. Tammet) and about collaborative leadership (Kagan, 2016).  
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10 Informed by Benjamin’s critique, but seeking to go beyond it, we now extend Meindl et al’s  
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12 thesis by exploring three further ways that romanticism can characterize contemporary  
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14 leadership theories, namely: (1) that leaders are a ‘natural’ (and therefore beyond criticism),  
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16 rather than a socially-constructed phenomena, (2) that one consequence of this is that  
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18 leadership is, in its purest form, manifest in ‘expressive harmonious collectives’ – unitary  
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20 groups that are regularly required to regurgitate the ‘faith’, and (3), that another consequence  
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22 is a perspective on followers that, ironically, romanticises them too, so the ambiguity of  
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24 ‘followers’ is permanently displaced into the ‘wisdom of the crowd’.  
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### 28 29 30 **‘Natural’ Leaders** 31

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34 We begin by outlining how romanticised assumptions of a ‘natural’ leader often inform many  
35  
36 influential contemporary theories. These assumptions, we suggest, can be traced back to  
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38 Romanticism’s preoccupation with rediscovering a primal natural world and with elevating  
39  
40 the creative human imagination to a position from which it was thought possible to access  
41  
42 nature’s mystical but ultimately unknowable secrets. Furthermore, we argue that interpreting  
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44 contemporary critiques of individualist leadership theory through a critical analysis of  
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46 Romanticism can deepen understanding of the genesis and rootedness of such discourses of  
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48 leadership: specifically, that they privilege and mystify the individual imagination and  
49  
50 ‘natural’ context for leadership without allowing a basis for their critique. Romanticism asks  
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52 us to accept and judge leadership without rupture.  
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## Romanticism: Privileging Nature and the Human Imagination

Romanticism rejected what it saw as the Enlightenment's scientific pretensions of explaining, and thus controlling nature. It did so by projecting a conceptualisation of nature as something greater than the human potential to capture and fully understand it because the whole was greater than the sum of the parts. Romantics viewed nature as 'the primary fact and force, and that human consciousness is nature's product, not its creator' (Ferber, 2010: 57). Inherent in such thinking is the notion that the Enlightenment had crossed an important line of hubris, and had assumed that the human being could know, dominate or rationalise away nature. Such a cornerstone of Romantic thinking has often led to the misconception that the Romantics were somehow opposed to science. On the contrary, they were fascinated by science, viewing the latest discoveries as windows into the secrets of nature (Holmes, 2009). Nature was not to be controlled or rationalised away but glimpsed at via the arts, politics or science.

Bridging nature and the human being, for the Romantics, was the notion of an idealised human imagination: this was 'Romanticism's answer to the analytic powers of reason' (Murphy and Roberts, 2004: 4). Viewed historically, one can interpret Romantic investment in the power of the imagination as 'an image of non-alienated creation' (Eagleton, 1983: 19). Investment in the imagination was a way for people of the time to free themselves from the increasingly impersonal structures of organizational and social life arising from the Enlightenment. Human beings were viewed as created from and attached to the most meaningful force of them all, nature, and it was only via artistic practices of the human imagination that such a connection was possible (Berlin, 1965/2000: 98). The Romantics inserted into public discourse the notion that motives and ideals, discovered and explored via

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3 imaginative activity and struggle, were more important than measurable outcomes (Blanning,  
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5 2010).  
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10 Carlyle – the author of the Great Man theory of leadership - was especially enamoured of the  
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12 German reaction to the French Enlightenment. He corresponded with Goethe – the archetypal  
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14 Romantic novelist – and also translated into English the work of individuals such as  
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16 Richeter. Indeed, Carlyle’s (1841/1993) assaults even upon the acceptable face of the  
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18 Enlightenment - utilitarianism - perfectly capture his antipathy for the ‘mechanical mind’ and  
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20 his preference for the ‘dynamic’ nature of heroes, who alone, he argued, turn the wheel of  
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22 history. Such a stance was well aligned with a ‘Romantic [notion of] nature viewed  
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24 aesthetically, and romantic art [as] the product of nature in the subject (the genius)’ (Murphy  
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26 and Roberts, 2004: 20). Yet it was this very synecdoche (imagination standing in as a part of  
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28 nature) that was troubling for Benjamin, with such a posited relationship holding the potential  
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30 for a diminution of the power of critique.  
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### 34 35 36 **Romanticised Leaders: Transcendent Nature in the Subject** 37

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40 This notion of a transcendent ‘nature in the subject’, we argue, continues to permeate much  
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42 of the contemporary leadership literature, resulting in the routine diminution of critique,  
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44 whereby leaders are held as beyond the realms of criticism by virtue of attaining leader-  
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46 status. Little space is provided for considering the tensions and ruptures in such theorising of  
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48 leadership in the influential perspectives we examine, although we also recognise the  
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50 important contribution of some scholars to exposing the ‘dark side’ of populist and academic  
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52 infatuation with leadership (e.g. Gabriel, 2012; Tourish, 2013; Vince and Mazen, 2014). To  
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54 illustrate our position, we draw in particular on spiritual leadership (SL) as an exemplar of  
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3 romanticised theorising, whilst also suggesting that similar romanticised perspectives  
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5 frequently characterise other contemporary theories such as transformational, authentic and  
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7 servant leadership.  
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11 In recent years studies of SL have become increasingly common. Spirituality in relation to  
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13 the organization is defined by Weinberg and Locander (2014: 391) as ‘a psychological  
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15 characteristic encompassing meaningful life, wholeness, and interconnectedness with others’.  
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17 SL is a theory, then, with grand, even total ambition and is a good example, in Benjamin’s  
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19 terms, of the ‘intensification’ of imaginative appreciation without the rupture of critique,  
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21 promising meaning above and beyond seemingly restrictive and rational organizational  
22  
23 language. Indeed, Whittington et al (2005: 755-757) claim that spiritual leaders ought to offer  
24  
25 a ‘pure motive’ for their actions and decisions, in addition to ‘influence without asserting  
26  
27 authority’. This claim ascribes a status for leadership beyond the mundanity of everyday  
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29 concerns of organizational power, instrumentalism and transactionalism – and a position (of  
30  
31 purity) beyond critique. Transcendence is indeed a common theme within SL, with, for  
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33 example, Weinberg and Locander (2014: 391) discussing ‘meaning and purpose through the  
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35 transcendental experience of work’.  
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43 From a more critical perspective, Tourish and Tourish (2010: 218) argue that SL promotes a  
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45 view of leadership as embodied in a leader, a view of ‘subjectivity which enables powerful  
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47 elites to promote sectional interests while claiming that they embody universal truths and  
48  
49 principles’. Tourish (2013) notes the tendency of SL studies to promote the intrusion and  
50  
51 colonisation of people’s private lives via mystical language that claims a privileged status. He  
52  
53 also argues that SL offers an exalted status to the individual leader-figure, who is said to hold  
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3 the 'ability to "enable" the worker's inner life, sense of meaningful work, and community'  
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5 (ibid: 66). This in turn, Tourish argues, promotes a unitarist notion of purpose and work.  
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10 We seek to take this critique a step further by advancing the proposition that SL, in common  
11  
12 with other theories of leadership that exalt the individual leader and promote a unitarist view  
13  
14 of organization, can be more richly understood as a concept with deep romanticizing  
15  
16 tendencies. These tendencies stretch beyond leader-attribution and into commitments that  
17  
18 idealise organizational and social relations, claiming a position for itself beyond critique.  
19  
20 Most obviously, SL, in addition to similar leadership theories, such as authentic and servant  
21  
22 leadership, separate themselves from the purely religious and are instead expressed in largely  
23  
24 non-theistic, albeit mystical terms. This is a commitment to a natural realm unknowable  
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26 through conventional science, philosophy or theory development. Such a romanticised  
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28 commitment, we hold, manifests in three dominant ways.  
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34 First, SL is concerned with a meaning that 'calls' leaders and followers to a greater purpose  
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36 (Fry et al, 2005). This 'sense of calling' (Fry, 2003: 711) is a dominant signifier in SL,  
37  
38 imprecisely defined other than as something that speaks to subjects from beyond, much in the  
39  
40 same way as the Romantics hailed nature as the immanent force that invited artists to free  
41  
42 themselves from the shackles of Enlightenment science. Transcendence appears as vital to the  
43  
44 discourse, suggesting a purpose above and beyond enjoying one's job. Just as the Romantic  
45  
46 painters and writers believed that anyone was able to tap into the transcendent powers of  
47  
48 nature via an unleashing of the human imagination, access to the powers of spirituality are  
49  
50 deemed open for anyone in organizational life – leaders and followers. Guidance is required,  
51  
52 however, for the aspiring spiritual leader and follower: hence a recent emphasis on the  
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54 importance of 'close and personal' mentoring in the cultivation of workplace spirituality,  
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3 with a leader-figure deemed important to guide followers, providing ‘the requisite identity-  
4 building support necessary to nurture and sustain individual spirituality over time’ (Weinberg  
5 and Locander, 2014: 392; Cf., Brinkmann, 2017).  
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11 A second manifestation of romanticised thinking in SL is its proclamations of faith. If one is  
12 to step beyond the rational confines of organizational systems, it appears that an additional  
13 investment needs to be made in a *faith* that cancels out more managerial notions of  
14 accountability or scientific burdens of evidence. Faith, and by extension SL, is posited as  
15 something that does not require validation in an external referent (science, the political, or  
16 even aesthetic criticism): ‘Faith is exactly the thing that renders [its] strict proof unnecessary’  
17 (Mitroff and Denton, 1999: 89). SL writers particularly introduce faith in relation to an  
18 organization or leader’s vision and the motivation of followers to abide by such a vision. An  
19 exemplar of such thinking, Fry (2003) and Fry et al (2005) instrumentalise faith as that  
20 supplement which ties workers in an irrational sense to their work and, crucially, improves  
21 productivity, driving them to ‘do what it takes’ in the service of SL:  
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38 Doing what it takes through faith in a clear, compelling vision produces a sense of  
39 calling—that part of spiritual survival that gives one a sense of making a difference  
40 and therefore that one’s life has meaning. Vision, hope/faith adds belief, conviction,  
41 trust, and action for performance of the work to achieve the vision...People who have  
42 hope/faith in the organization’s vision and who experience calling and membership  
43 will do what it takes in pursuit of the vision to continuously improve and be more  
44 productive (Fry et al, 2005: 839).  
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3 One might interpret such passages as a somewhat knowing and even cynical act of  
4 romanticising: the content, the ‘meaning’ of the spiritual object is less significant than its  
5 form, its ‘sense’, and the role that form plays in acquiring outcomes of hard work towards  
6 meeting organizational objectives.  
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14 Third, and most importantly, SL offers a closed, self-referential system, akin to the totalistic  
15 and autonomous conception of nature within Romanticism. We are informed that a ‘growing  
16 chorus of scholarly voices is arguing that spirituality is necessary in organizations’ (Benefiel,  
17 2005: 724), implying an inevitable momentum for SL that is beyond the control of any  
18 individual or scientific logic: SL is *necessary*. Nowhere is such necessity more advanced in  
19 SL than in the notion of unitary, ideologically neutral and permanent values. Fry (2003: 712)  
20 posits ‘patience, kindness, lack of envy, forgiveness, humility, selflessness, self-control, trust,  
21 loyalty, and truthfulness’ as key values for the practice of SL. The author encapsulates these  
22 values in the form of ‘altruistic love’, which he defines as ‘a sense of wholeness, harmony,  
23 and well-being produced through care, concern, and appreciation for both self and others’  
24 (ibid: 714); or, in the words of Chen et al (2012: 893), ‘complete, harmonious, and happy  
25 feelings through care and appreciation for self and others’. Altruistic love and the other  
26 values of SL are constructed as all-encompassing (‘whole’, ‘complete’), external to power  
27 relations (‘harmonious’, ‘happy’) or even in fact beyond any specific philosophical, political  
28 or scientific anchor. One may speculate or interpret such values as belonging to Christianity,  
29 new-age spirituality (Swan, 2010) or capitalist ideology, but we are invited by the authors to  
30 view them as a-historical and transcendent: as connected via the human imagination to a  
31 permanent, ultimately unknowable and autonomous nature. Such ideas and practices, in  
32 Benjamin’s (1996) terms, are problematically positioned beyond critique, as the only  
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3 qualification for 'good' SL is simply surrendering oneself to an intensification of the  
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5 transcendent.  
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10 A sense of immanence and the closing down of the potential for critique through appeal to a  
11  
12 universal and transcendent truth is a dominant feature of several other influential leadership  
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14 theories. 'Servant leaders' are presented as possessing 'moral authority... They follow truth.  
15  
16 They follow natural law. They follow principles. They follow a common, agreed-upon vision.  
17  
18 They share values. They grow to trust one another. Moral authority is mutually developed  
19  
20 and shared' (Greenleaf, 2002: 5). Ethics are hereby reduced to a timeless, yet mystical sense  
21  
22 of purpose possessed by certain privileged leaders. Greenleaf thus subverts the 'common-  
23  
24 sense understanding of the word [servant], as someone who works in a menial position  
25  
26 keeping the home of someone else clean, tidy and well-functioning', instead positing a view  
27  
28 of servant leaders as the 'superior, exalted few from which those who serve (what is argued  
29  
30 to be) the [vague] common good are drawn' (Ford and Harding, 2015: 17).  
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36 A similar sense of universality and immanent closure is offered in authentic leadership  
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38 theory. Ethics seem central to the positioning of authentic leadership, yet what researchers in  
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40 this area constitute as the ethical remains unspecified. Smolović Jones and Grint (2013) have  
41  
42 argued that, in place of specific ethical postulations, one finds a series of vague affirmations  
43  
44 that leaders ought to display a 'high' (Gardner et al, 2009; Walumbwa et al, 2008) or  
45  
46 'positive' (Walumbwa et al. 2008) standard of ethics. Avolio et al (2004: 805), for example,  
47  
48 refer to 'honesty' and 'integrity' as constituting the 'high' moral principles possessed by  
49  
50 authentic leaders. Meanwhile, May et al (2003) offer 'courage' as an important value and  
51  
52 behavioural trait. Again, such values are posited as immanent and universal, the suggestion  
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54 being that they lie beyond the scope of philosophical or political critique.  
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3 This discussion has illustrated how romanticism is frequently reproduced in contemporary  
4 leadership studies through a focus on ‘natural leaders’ whose status cannot be criticised from  
5 within its positive, transcendental boundaries. But it is not only contemporary leader-centred  
6 leadership theories that reproduce romanticism. Currently influential post-heroic theories,  
7 often characterised by more collective approaches, can also succumb to similar romanticising  
8 tendencies.  
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### 19 **Expressive Harmonious Collectives**

20 This section begins by exploring the Romantic notion of expression and its location in  
21 harmonious collectives. We then apply these insights to contemporary accounts of collective  
22 leadership, arguing that such constructions seem to be under-written by two romanticised  
23 commitments:  
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- 32 • Harmonious leadership over divisive power: a view of leadership that seeks to  
33 neutralize rupturing power in favour of collective work, portrayed as seeking  
34 harmonious dialogue and consensus.  
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- 38 • ‘Expressive leadering’: we posit expressive leadering as constituting a central  
39 commitment to self-expression within notions of collective leadership. Such  
40 expressive leadering, we argue, ‘positivises’ leadership as object and practice to the  
41 extent that it excludes the possibility for critical engagement, and privileges immanent  
42 intensification (Benjamin, 1996). It can also act as a cosmetic concealment that draws  
43 on the alluring language of leadership to present the unwanted, the mundane and the  
44 unpleasant in emancipatory terms.  
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3 The tendency within both commitments, we argue, is to approach collective leadership as of  
4 value beyond critique.  
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### 9 10 **Expressive Collectivism in Romanticism**

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14 One of the chief curiosities of the Romantics is that the commitment to accessing nature via  
15 the human imagination could be interpreted as a particularly individualistic pursuit and yet  
16 perhaps more than most intellectual and artistic movements, the Romantics displayed an  
17 unusually strong affinity for comradeship and solidarity. There was a sense within  
18 Romanticism of ‘democratizing the creative spirit’ (Ferber, 2010: 39). We explore this  
19 tendency to romanticise collectives as *expressive*. A Romantic notion of expressive  
20 collectives is closely linked to the kind of intense ‘collective individuality’ (Murphy and  
21 Roberts, 2004: 45) that was a hallmark of artistic communities and the political philosophy of  
22 the era. Romantics tended to find common bonds of solidarity around the notion of an  
23 ‘intuitive feeling of kinship with the natural world’ and the sense of shared commitment to  
24 allowing the human imagination free reign (Ferber, 2010: 55). This was no superficial,  
25 hedonistic comradeship, however, but a collective bond based on the commitment that artists  
26 would support other artists in attaining and pursuing their individual ideals (Hay, 2011).  
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45 The Romantics inserted into public discourse the notion that motives and ideals, discovered  
46 and explored via imaginative activity and struggle, were more important than outcomes  
47 (Riasanovsky, 1995). Crucial for the Romantics was idealism, of discovering a meaning  
48 greater than the human self, ‘the necessity of fighting for your beliefs to the last breath of  
49 your body’ (Berlin, 1965/2000: 8). This is the image savoured by the Romantics of the  
50 Antigone-like subject prepared to sacrifice all in the name of an ideal. As nature itself was  
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3 ultimately approached by Romantics as incapable of final capture, so also the human ideal  
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5 could only strive towards a satisfaction that could never be fulfilled, a 'view of human life as  
6  
7 incessant striving towards an unattainable ideal' (Riasanovsky, 1995: 82).  
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11 For Murphy and Roberts (2004: 43), Romanticism witnessed the birth of the 'expressive  
12  
13 subject', a subject that evolved through to modernity and post-modernity. The Enlightenment  
14  
15 contributed to the notion of a knowable and manipulable subject of science (Foucault, 1991).  
16  
17 Romanticism preferred a conceptualisation of the subject 'not defined in terms of rational  
18  
19 control but in terms of the capacity for self-articulation. This places a premium on  
20  
21 individuation, authenticity and originality, in the double sense of reconnection with the living  
22  
23 source and uniqueness' (Murphy and Roberts, 2004: 44). One sees in Romanticism early  
24  
25 traces of the self-development and therapeutic cultures movements (Cederström and Spicer,  
26  
27 2015; Smolović Jones et al, 2015; Swan, 2010). Such an emphasis places value on individual  
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29 wellbeing, on finding physical and emotional health through both private and professional  
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31 work, blurring the distinctions between workplace, private realm and indeed an ultimately  
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33 unknowable but ubiquitous 'nature'.  
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41 Collectivism, then, can be individualised via recourse to a natural and universal harmony and  
42  
43 synchronicity, only accessible via free self-expression. It is this notion of expressive  
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45 collectivism, we argue, that is particularly prominent as a discourse within collective  
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47 accounts of leadership but is deemed problematic as its romanticising tendencies tend to close  
48  
49 down avenues for critique in favour of intense expressions of harmony (Benjamin, 1996).

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51 Barker (2002: 87), for example, highlights the limitations of what he refers to as 'the  
52  
53 industrial paradigm of leadership' (i.e. Enlightenment-informed trait or behavioural theories).  
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57 Barker's critique is rooted in a view of social goals as inherently complex (see also Grint,  
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3 2005; Heifetz, 1994). For Barker, conventional approaches to leadership work when the goals  
4 are more clear-cut: increased profit, market share, return on investment etc. If the goal is  
5 more contested or amorphous, concerned, for example, with social development, education,  
6 freedom or some other end-value, success is no longer as straightforward to capture.  
7  
8 Knowing and measuring is here framed as 'industrial', whereas a collective sense of  
9 leadership is viewed as less certain. If collective leadership is beyond the 'industrial', then  
10 perhaps it should be interpreted as closer to a more natural, expressive sense of the human  
11 and collective humanity?  
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### 20 21 22 23 **'Harmonious Leadership' over 'Divisive Power'**

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27 This section argues that a key dimension of the romanticising of collective leadership is the  
28 prioritization of consensus and harmony over power and conflict. More specifically, we  
29 highlight the tendency within collective accounts of leadership to emphasise individual  
30 expression within collective boundaries (organizations or smaller groups), and the 'natural'  
31 synergies that are made possible when expressive individuals engage in open dialogue free  
32 from conflict, self-interest and bad faith. Key in such a romanticised account, we suggest, is  
33 the vague, even mystical portrayal of leadership. This very vagueness, combined with an  
34 affiliation with 'positive' emotions and states (Collinson, 2012), such as 'synergy',  
35 'consensus' and 'hope', offers a view of leadership as immanently accessible, harmonious  
36 and universal, leaving little space for the 'rupture' of criticism (Benjamin, 1996).  
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52 Chrislip and Larson's (1994) 'collaborative leadership' is a good example of expressive  
53 collectivism at work. Focusing explicitly on complex problems facing communities, the  
54 authors offer a comprehensive framework for collaboration. Yet the text is replete with the  
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3 expressive collectivism that we suggest is a defining feature of romanticised leadership. The  
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5 authors describe their ‘collaborative premise’ as ‘a belief that if you bring the appropriate  
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7 people together in constructive ways with good information, they will create authentic visions  
8  
9 and strategies for addressing the shared concerns of the organization or community’ (p.14).  
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11 Underlying this statement is a(n)(extra-rational) ‘belief’ that collaboration represents a kind  
12  
13 of natural state of organization, a ‘ground zero’, whereby the simple act of bringing people  
14  
15 together with ‘good’ information is sufficient to unleash ‘authenticity’ (undefined). Chrislip  
16  
17 and Larson argue that, if one commits wholeheartedly to processes of collaboration, then new  
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19 and unforeseen possibilities will emerge.  
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25 For Chrislip and Larson, inclusivity (p.75), credibility and openness (pp.79-80), trust (p.83),  
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27 empowerment and inspiration (p.117) within a collaborative process will yield desired results  
28  
29 for a community. Some of these characteristics are more tangible than others: it is not always  
30  
31 clear what is meant by ‘empowerment’ or ‘inspiration’ beyond a subjective feeling that most  
32  
33 of us know them when we experience them. Nevertheless, a language of inevitability lingers  
34  
35 in the text, as if through collaborating, people are part of a natural and immanent force. The  
36  
37 process of collaboration is thus portrayed as organic, as ‘natural’, as what people do when  
38  
39 unnatural obstacles and interests are removed. Throughout the text, however, the status of  
40  
41 leadership is unclear. Leadership seems to equate to participating, albeit with an added sense  
42  
43 of ‘hope’, ‘inspiration’ and ‘authenticity’. As in the case of individual-focused theories,  
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45 leadership appears to serve the function of mystifying or sugar-coating a process that the  
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47 authors acknowledge can be somewhat gruelling.  
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54 The status of leadership seems equally vague in other influential theories of collective  
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56 leadership. Pearce and Conger’s (2003: 1) ‘shared leadership’ is defined as ‘a dynamic,  
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3 interactive process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another  
4  
5 to the achievement of group or organization goals or both.’ While Pearce and Sims (2000)  
6  
7 provide detailed propositions concerning antecedents to shared leadership, the substantive  
8  
9 content of leadership remains vague. Pearce and Conger (2003) sketch a picture of leadership  
10  
11 as concerned with influencing ‘vertically’ and ‘horizontally’, ‘more than just downward  
12  
13 influence on subordinates’ (p.1). They later amalgamate influence with knowledge and  
14  
15 decision-making. Leadership is characterised as something exercised by people who may  
16  
17 know more than the ‘formal leader’ (p.2) and will therefore be better at making decisions  
18  
19 within this sphere of knowledge, provided, of course, they can influence those around them.  
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21 Detail is lacking, however: leadership seems to enjoy the status of an assumed but vague  
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23 good, with the right to leadership expression gained via the gateways of knowledge and  
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25 influence.  
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32 Notions of power (either as productive or regressive) are largely absent from accounts of  
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34 collective leadership. Rather than speak in terms of power, authors prefer to emphasise the  
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36 role of dialogue and communication as transcendent of power. The work of Drath and  
37  
38 colleagues on ‘connected leadership’ (Drath, 2003) and the DAC (direction, alignment and  
39  
40 commitment) framework of collective leadership (Drath et al, 2008) exemplifies this  
41  
42 conceptual absence of power. These ideas are rooted in a notion that complex problems  
43  
44 require alternative approaches to leadership. Yet power and asymmetry are absent in both  
45  
46 accounts. In its place, Drath (2003) speaks of ‘shared sense-making’, ‘connection’ and  
47  
48 ‘navigation’ (pp.6-7). The task of leadership is thus framed as sensitivity to the emergence of  
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50 processes, issues and relationships, with an emphasis on dialogue.  
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3 Drath's later work (Drath et al, 2008) is more explicit in offering 'belief' in the absence of  
4 alternative signifiers, such as 'power', 'position', 'conflict' etc., 'such as the belief that a  
5 shared goal is essential to team effectiveness'; 'beliefs about the characteristics and  
6 behaviours of individuals that enhance or hinder the production of DAC'; and 'beliefs about  
7 the practices that produce DAC, such as the belief that it is a duty to obey the legal  
8 commands of a superior officer, the belief that decisions affecting everyone should be made  
9 by consensus, or the belief that strategy should be set by top managers' (p.644). In the  
10 absence of an engagement with power and inequity, DAC asks for 'personal commitment that  
11 survives disagreement, conflict, and confusion' (p.648). Such romantic support for 'the party  
12 line' would not look out of place in Orwell's *1984* or totalitarian societies.  
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27 Returning to Chrislip and Larson's (1994) account of collaborative leadership, one finds that  
28 these authors emphasise 'inclusive' and 'consensual' leadership, a 'shift from hostility to  
29 civility, from advocacy to engagement, from confrontation to conversation, from debate to  
30 dialogue, and from separation to community' (p.4). Issues of power and conflict are thereby  
31 relegated to an undesirable contradistinction to a range of alternative, more expressive and  
32 harmonious signifiers. Power and conflict are to be *overcome* through intensive engagement,  
33 rather than identified and reflected upon, through individual acts of expression within a  
34 collective.  
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47 The foregoing romanticised accounts primarily emphasise harmony in collective leadership.  
48 No levers are offered through which one might critically engage with romanticised accounts  
49 of collective leadership outside the appreciative limits offered. Exploitative, prejudicial or  
50 oppressive practices are not accounted for within the romanticised category of 'leadership':  
51 such behaviour is simply regarded as not-leadership.  
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### Expressive Leadering

The premium placed upon critique-free expression within collective accounts of leadership perhaps reaches an apex in the tendency of such studies to marginalise, or even entirely eradicate, the figure of the follower. We refer to the process of transferring heroic properties previously associated with individual leaders to the collective as one of ‘expressive leadering’: the collective of individuals becomes the unit of leadership agency to such an extent that the category of ‘follower’ becomes redundant. The ability to express oneself, held as the organizational ideal within romanticised perspectives, seems to require a category more prestigious than ‘follower’, with its associations of subservience (Ford and Harding, 2015).

Gronn (2002) argues that distributed leadership should ‘dispense with the category of followership’ (p.427) and think of leadership as ‘evident in the interaction of many leaders’ (p.420). He attempts to circumnavigate power imbalances by emphasising ‘conjoint agency’ (p.431) between leaders. For Gronn, the potential value of distributed leadership lies in the force offered to ‘concertive action’, where the collective effect of the relationships between leaders are held as more powerful than the sum of their individual expertise. Ford and Harding (2015) argue that this is a utopian account of collective leadership that fails to recognise the necessity of followers in any configuration of leadership: i.e. one cannot lead if no one will follow. Abolishing the category of followers within distributed leadership means, according to Ford and Harding, that a climate of uncritical positivity is allowed to dominate, and the tendency for research in this area to focus on top teams might also help to explain this (Chreim, 2015).

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3 Expressive leadering also manifests as a transference of individualised, heroic qualities onto  
4 collective processes. The role of processes within a romanticised view of collective  
5 leadership is to provide an appropriate forum where people can express themselves freely.  
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8 Chrislip and Larson (1994)'s collaborative leadership does not challenge the underlying,  
9 expressive assumption of transformational leadership, arguing instead that participants in  
10 collaborative leadership are required to demonstrate 'transforming leadership' through a  
11 preoccupation with process (p.146). There is little room for followers in such a system.  
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20 Rather than privileging leaders over followers (or vice versa), Raelin's notion of 'leaderful'  
21 practice, or leadership-as-practice (L-A-P) (2003; 2011; 2014, 2016) seeks to transcend the  
22 issue by 'reframing' (2014: 2) the unit of analysis of leadership as emergent and continuous  
23 collaborative practice between people, 'the activity of all those who are engaged' (Raelin,  
24 2014: 4). Consequently, 'follower' becomes a problematic category because organizational  
25 participants think of being a follower in subaltern terms. Instead, L-A-P is conceptualised as  
26 something abiding by 'the norms of the democratic tradition' (Raelin, 2011: 198). By  
27 'democratic tradition', Raelin means participatory and deliberative practices. His emphasis is  
28 thus on establishing the conditions necessary for free expression, for 'mutual control' (2011:  
29 200), 'mutual adjustment, shared sense-making, dialogue, and collaborative learning' (2011:  
30 202). Agency, for Raelin, thus resides in 'intersubjective collaborative process' (2011: 199).  
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47 Raelin offers a normative view of how leadership ought to be enacted, rather than a means for  
48 researching specific relationships and practices. Thus, leadership holds an inherently positive  
49 connotation associated with certain democratic norms of equality and freedom to participate.  
50 Practice that strays outside these boundaries of freedom to participate is not to be thought of  
51 as leadership at all. This, of course, assumes that democracy is itself free of political  
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3 inequalities; the other side of the leadership coin, which insists that only (undefined) 'moral'  
4 or 'ethical' leadership is 'real leadership'; hence the infamous Hitler Problem (see Ciulla,  
5 2004). From this perspective leadership comprises only leaders (i.e. it is 'leaderful').  
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11 Raelin presents a view of leadership as associated with more egalitarian practices and  
12 relationships. He also specifies certain tests to determine what does or does not qualify as  
13 leadership. This is problematic because leaderful practice does not allow for the possibility of  
14 leadership manifesting in paradoxical, conflictual or contradictory terms. It is also a  
15 perspective where process is sovereign. This view of leadership seems to romanticise process  
16 above other valid considerations and concerns. Missing from leaderful practice and L-A-P is  
17 the possibility of critical rupture, a consideration that leaders, or followers, might distort or  
18 co-opt 'leaderful' language or practice in order to strengthen their material positioning within  
19 an organization; make unpleasant or oppressive practices seem more palatable; or as a means  
20 of manipulating the emotions of others concerning work. Leadership as communities of free  
21 self-expression are held as an ultimate good. In this sense the collective community replaces  
22 the individual leader, the spirit-realm or nature, as the site of romantic elevation. But, as  
23 Leonard's (2010) empirical study of senior public sector managers demonstrates, even  
24 collectives charged with leading change in their own organizations have a tendency to  
25 displace responsibility elsewhere. When asked to 'share leadership', collectives can struggle  
26 to reach a consensus that facilitates effective decision making.  
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### 49 **Romanticising Followers**

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53 Some writers have observed that leadership romanticism reinforces the 'subordination of  
54 followership' (Uhl-Bien and Pillai, 2007: 187). Alternatively, as the foregoing section  
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3 argued, collective leadership theories often propose the complete eradication of the notion of  
4  
5 followership based on romanticised conceptions of collective leadership. In this final section  
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7 we suggest that the concept of followership remains important, but we also highlight how  
8  
9 conceptions of followers, their agency and oppositional practices can equally be characterised  
10  
11 by romanticising tendencies: a theme neglected in Meindl et al's (1985) paper.<sup>3</sup>  
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16 In his later work Meindl (1995) (and we recognise that Meindl and colleagues wrote a  
17  
18 number of papers on leadership that have not been discussed here) seeks to escape the  
19  
20 confines of romanticism by developing a framework for studying leadership from the  
21  
22 perspective of followers. He proposes that researchers should no longer be concerned at all  
23  
24 with leaders, and should concentrate on followers' views of leaders, at both an individual and  
25  
26 group level. Such processes in Meindl's model inform a construction of what good leadership  
27  
28 ought to look like, against which leaders are judged and follower responses to leaders are  
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30 shaped.  
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36 In doing so, however, Meindl seems to fall into his own trap of romanticism. If leadership  
37  
38 should be approached as a matter of follower attribution, then is one romance simply being  
39  
40 replaced with another case of romantic infatuation? By eschewing *any* consideration of  
41  
42 leaders in favour of an exclusive focus on followers, Meindl seems to invert, and then  
43  
44 reproduce, a dichotomy between leaders and followers. In addition, although Meindl claims  
45  
46 to be subverting the dominant focus of leadership studies, the individual leader remains at the  
47  
48 core of Meindl's (1995) followership model. It is leaders who are supposed to preoccupy the  
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50 thinking of Meindl's followers: the latter remain enamoured by their (ideal) leaders. Little  
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52 scope is allowed for a conception of leadership that challenges these boundaries and so we  
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56 <sup>3</sup> It is also important to recall that Romanticism as a movement was fundamentally about protest and resistance,  
57 concerned to critique that which had been lost in the Enlightenment (Lowy and Sayre 2001).  
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3 remain trapped within the walls of leader-centrism. Equally neglected in Meindl's paper is  
4  
5 any detailed consideration of follower agency and dissent.  
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10 Research in organization studies demonstrates that (followers'/employees') oppositional  
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12 practices can take numerous forms (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999), including strikes,  
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14 'working to rule', output restriction, 'working the system', 'whistleblowing' and sabotage  
15  
16 (Edwards et al., 1995). In exceptional cases, subordinates may even (seek to) depose leaders  
17  
18 (Mole, 2004), and social anthropologists have long noted the ability of subordinates to  
19  
20 organize 'reverse dominance hierarchies' to discipline or displace unpopular leaders (Boehm,  
21  
22 1993). Through oppositional practices followers can try to change and improve their  
23  
24 situation. They can express discontent, exercise a degree of control over work processes  
25  
26 and/or construct alternative, more positive identities to those prescribed by organizations. In  
27  
28 leadership studies it is only relatively recently that the analytical significance of resistance  
29  
30 has been acknowledged (Banks, 2008; Zoller and Fairhurst 2007). Whilst it is important to  
31  
32 recognise the importance of opposition and dissent in organizational leadership dynamics, we  
33  
34 also argue that such conceptualisations of resistance need to avoid romanticised thinking.  
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41 One of the ways that romanticism can characterize the study of resistance is in under-  
42  
43 estimating the barriers to follower dissent. For example, Chaleff (2009, 2015) advocates that  
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45 'courageous' followers need to voice 'intelligent disobedience' and constructive criticism,  
46  
47 particularly when they believe that leaders are not acting in the best interests of the  
48  
49 organization. Yet, such recommendations tend to underestimate the costs and overestimate  
50  
51 the possibilities of explicit dissent in organizations. For example, studies of whistle blowing  
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53 suggest that followers who express their concerns in precisely the way advocated by Chaleff  
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55 need to recognise that their actions might be career-damaging and may even result in being  
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3 fired (Barron, Crawley, & Paulina, 2003; Miceli & Near, 2002). For many employees, the  
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5 prospect of being disciplined for expressing dissent and of having to find another job can be  
6  
7 daunting. The ensuing material (salary) and symbolic (erosion of autonomy and self-respect)  
8  
9 insecurities can significantly limit overt dissent. By underestimating the hierarchical nature of  
10  
11 power asymmetries, post-heroic perspectives may replace the privileging of leaders with the  
12  
13 romanticism of 'heroic followers'.  
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18 Resistance romanticism can also occur in cases where radical researchers automatically  
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20 attribute subversive or even revolutionary motives or outcomes to follower/employee dissent,  
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22 for example when referring to workers as 'class warriors' (e.g. Beynon, 1980, Nichols and  
23  
24 Beynon, 1977). A small number of writers have questioned this tendency to romanticise  
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26 resistance. Kondo (1990, p. 224) cautions against any tendency automatically to impute a  
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28 subversive or emancipatory motive or outcome to resistance. She contends that there is no  
29  
30 such thing as an entirely 'authentic' or 'pristine space of resistance' or of a 'true resister': a  
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32 position Benjamin would hold as distinctly unromantic. Observing that people  
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34 simultaneously 'consent, cope, and resist at different levels of consciousness at a single point  
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36 in time', Kondo questions the idealisation of the term 'resistance'.  
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43 Other researchers have sought to de-romanticise resistance by pointing to its potentially  
44  
45 paradoxical processes and outcomes (e.g. Ashcraft, 2005 Fleming and Spicer, 2003). They  
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47 suggest that apparently oppositional practices may unintentionally reinforce the very  
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49 conditions of power and control that stimulated resistance in the first place. Their focus on  
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51 the consequences of employee resistance helps to avoid overly romanticised interpretations  
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3 that celebrate, rather than critically examine, follower opposition.<sup>4</sup> These studies also reveal  
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5 how opposition can itself embody elements of domination. For example, Cockburn (1983)  
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7 showed how the oppositional practices of male-dominated trade unions in the UK printing  
8  
9 industry excluded women and/or segregated them into subordinated work. Hence, in this case  
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11 male workers' organized resistance to management had the effect of reinforcing women's  
12  
13 subordination.  
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18 In sum, we propose that the leadership romanticism thesis needs to be extended to recognise  
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20 how follower agency and resistance can also be subject to romanticised interpretations. This  
21  
22 is not to dismiss the theoretical and empirical importance of resistance in organizational  
23  
24 leadership dynamics, but rather to recognise that romanticised thinking can constrain the  
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26 analysis of follower agency and opposition, just as it can in the case of individual and  
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28 collective leadership theories.  
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### 32 33 34 **Conclusion**

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38 This paper has sought to re-assert the critical value of the romance of leadership thesis, and to  
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40 extend its framework for contemporary leadership studies. In so doing it has also been  
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42 concerned to contribute to more critical readings of leadership dynamics (e.g. Alvesson and  
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44 Spicer, 2012, Tourish, 2013). Arguing that romanticism stretches beyond leader attribution,  
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46 the paper has suggested that the implications of romanticised thinking continue to have  
47  
48 considerable significance for contemporary theorising on leadership and followership. In the  
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50 post-Meindl era, many scholars remain fixated by a romanticised view of leadership, ignoring  
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56 <sup>4</sup> These arguments in turn raise important questions about the meaning of resistance, about who resists, how,  
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58 why and when they do so, what strategies inform their practices, and what outcomes ensue.  
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3 the challenge of the romanticism critique or side-stepping its critical emphasis in ways that,  
4  
5 ironically, seem to romanticise romanticism. As a result, leadership research continues to be  
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7 characterised by romanticising tendencies in relation, not only to leaders, but also to  
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9 followers and their potential for resistance. Like leadership, followership is an important area  
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11 where romanticism can emerge and thus a significant theme where the original thesis can be  
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13 extended.  
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18 We therefore propose that the romance of leadership thesis has more far-reaching  
19  
20 implications for contemporary leadership studies than is often recognised. Romanticised  
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22 leadership can be thought of as a tendency and discourse of deeper significance than that  
23  
24 previously related to a particular view of leader attribution. While leader attribution  
25  
26 foregrounds some of the snares of romanticised thinking, it does not explore the deeper  
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28 aesthetic, philosophical and historical roots of such thinking. We have made the case that  
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30 leader attribution can be connected to a stream of romantic thought that ‘naturalises’: an all-  
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32 powerful nature is made accessible via a privileged human imagination. Romanticised  
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34 leadership stretches further, however, into accounts of collective leadership that place a  
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36 premium on freedom of individual expression, on harmony over power and on the process of  
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38 expressive leadering, whereby all that is deemed positive in organizations is labelled  
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40 leadership and all that is bad is excluded as irrelevant. Informed by the insights of Benjamin  
41  
42 (1996) into Romantic criticism, our discussion has revealed how contemporary leadership  
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44 theories in both their individual and collective forms often stay faithful to an immanent and  
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46 intense form of appreciation, reproducing romanticising themes and bypassing critique.  
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54 Meindl et al (1985) were concerned to highlight ‘the prominence of the concept of leadership  
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56 in our collective consciousness’. We have sought to extend this analysis to explore the  
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3 prominence of *Romanticism* in a much larger number of perspectives within leadership  
4 studies, as well as within the work of Meindl himself. Although our focus here has been on  
5 the history of romantic discourse and its applicability to leadership scholarship, we might  
6 pause to reflect on *why* such romanticism is equally at play in contemporary leadership  
7 writing as it was in the work of 18<sup>th</sup> century poets, artists and writers. Although an exhaustive  
8 analysis is beyond the remit of this paper, we might reflect that the forms of alienation felt by  
9 the Romantics to the perceived coldness of Enlightenment reason could be said to have  
10 become yet more pronounced in contemporary societies.

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23 As voting publics express anger towards what they view as distant, impersonal, technocratic  
24 and corrupt power ruling over them (in the European Union, in the USA, and other  
25 transnational institutions, international trade deals, and so on), they are turning to politicians  
26 and parties of the extreme right, who promise a return to mythical golden eras (Ford and  
27 Goodwin, 2014; Frank, 2012; McGowan, 2013). In this turbulent climate it is perhaps to be  
28 expected that some leadership scholars, employed in increasingly instrumentally-focused  
29 institutions, themselves search beyond the mundane of more conventional organizational  
30 theory into the more mystical edges of leadership. Many scholars seem so invested in  
31 unfolding the possibilities of leadership, that they neglect or avoid the ruptures, tensions and  
32 contradictions in the practices and theories of leadership. In some cases, we note the material  
33 investment many scholars hold in the concept of leadership, particularly in relation to their  
34 consultancy and leadership development activities. Adopting the identity and practices of the  
35 critic, as Benjamin was only too aware, may not prove to be as materially lucrative.  
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52 Nevertheless, we argue that, rather than reproducing these romanticising tendencies in  
53 leadership research and writing, there is a pressing need for scholars to revisit and embrace  
54 the critical roots and implications of the romanticism thesis.

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3 Bearing in mind the continuing allure of romantic thinking in leadership theory and practice,  
4  
5 our broader interpretation of romanticism carries the potential, we argue, to open up valuable  
6  
7 new directions for leadership studies. This requires leadership scholars to adopt the stance of  
8  
9 the aesthetic and cultural critic, approaching the task of leadership criticism by opening up  
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11 and addressing points of rupture, tension, paradox and contradiction. This more critical stance  
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13 therefore involves embracing the generative possibilities inherent in the rupturing of  
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15 leadership romanticism. We conclude by providing various possible directions for such de-  
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17 romanticised critical engagement.  
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23 There is now a growing literature on leadership hubris and its relationship to the enactment of  
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25 power (Claxton et al, 2015). Building on this work, further research could examine the  
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27 processes through which power and identity are socially constructed and manufactured, for  
28  
29 example, through self-romanticism and self-mythologizing. The narcissistic dynamics of  
30  
31 self-romanticism would seem to be highly relevant to the study of both leadership and  
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33 followership. Critical research could also explore how the language and discourses of  
34  
35 leadership may reflect and reinforce romanticism. Further research could ask what happens in  
36  
37 the post-romantic phase, when followers become disenchanted with the leaders they  
38  
39 previously placed on a pedestal. What are the conditions, processes and consequences of  
40  
41 follower disillusionment? Future research could also examine the gendered dynamics through  
42  
43 which men may be especially prone to elevate other men as leaders, and to try to reinforce  
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45 male leaders' power and authority, whilst securing themselves through forms of masculine  
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47 'prestige by association'.  
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54 Finally, and underpinning many of the foregoing questions, is the under-explored relationship  
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56 between romanticism and the search for heroes. The notion of the hero has a long *his*-tory  
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3 (sic) in human thought (e.g. Hook, 1943). It has had an enduring influence in leadership  
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5 theory and practice, particularly through the so-called ‘great man’ theory (Carlyle,  
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7 1841/1993, Spector, 2016), and it continues to be influential in popular leadership  
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9 publications (e.g. Cohen, 2010; Sebag Montefiore, 2009, 2012). Interest in leaders as heroes  
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11 is particularly extensive in the US (e.g. Allison and Goethals, 2011, Allison, Goethals and  
12  
13 Kramer 2017), where this way of thinking resonates strongly with the dominant culture of  
14  
15 individualism. We argue that more research from a critical perspective on the relationship  
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17 between romanticism and heroism could raise important issues, for example, about gender  
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19 and masculinity (Boon, 2005), as well as race and ethnicity (Liu and Baker, 2016). It could  
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21 also surface important questions about romanticism and death, with recent research  
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23 suggesting that followers’ ascriptions of charisma tend to increase after a leader dies  
24  
25 (Steffens et al, 2016). In sum, further research could critically examine the seductive image  
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27 of the hero and its various inter-relationships with the continued allure of romanticism in  
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29 leadership studies.  
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36 It is our case that romanticising leadership can be equal parts bewitching, disingenuous and  
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38 harmful. Romanticising leadership is bewitching because it offers a lexical account of  
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40 leadership drenched with imprecise mystique. It can be disingenuous and harmful by offering  
41  
42 a self-fulfilling account of leadership where critique is excluded from its logic. Romanticising  
43  
44 leadership asks that we engage with leadership as an exceptional case, a privileged unit of  
45  
46 thought that seeks to hold a transcendent position above the fray of political or historical  
47  
48 critique. Engagement is only possible in the here-and-now of the theory, in its ‘natural’ state.  
49  
50 But this is just a romanticised mirror image of an ideology that promises salvation in the next  
51  
52 world – providing we comply in this one. In the leadership romance, salvation is promised  
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54 either by an individual hero or a collective hero in this world, – but it is still a hero and we  
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3 should not look beyond this world just in case we recognise that we have been here, waiting  
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5 for, and failed by, heroes, in the past. When are we going to stop looking for heroes and  
6  
7 recognize that, in the words of the Hopi Indians, 'we are the ones we have been waiting for',  
8  
9 warts and all?  
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