

# The Diffusion of the Concept of “Leadership” How Well Does it Travel?

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## 1. Introduction

Observations and studies according to the principle “The history of the world was the biography of great men” (Carlyle 1907: 13) or the maxim “Men make history” (von Treitschke 1886: 28) were popular topoi of historiography for a long period of time. In more recent history, however, the science of history has viewed such concentration on the individual “personality of the history of the world” with skepticism (Günther 2006: 297f.; Eibach et al. 2006; Kershaw 1999; Kershaw 2001). Historiographical research in the journal *Annales*, which combines social and economic history with political history, has been gaining significance since pre-war times and was the vanguard of a forceful counter movement to a perspective that concedes definitive or at least primary importance to the personality traits of the actors involved. A comparable tendency to abstract from the individuals involved when explaining social, economic, and political processes can also be seen in political science: The conflict with the person of the political actor has since been considered by various subdisciplines of political science to be atheoretical – an ascription that hides the accusation of unscholarliness behind it.

Such disdain of the term “leadership” and its significance for the analysis of political or economic processes can hardly be found today. Based on a long ongoing debate that has been taking place – from pragmatic viewpoints – in the US, the term “leadership” experienced a renaissance. The attention to the phenomenon of leadership came – quite unsurprisingly – from professional schools. The starting point was therefore a practical one; theoretical considerations followed.

The term “leadership” has meanwhile become a concept with virtually irresistible appeal, both in theoretical and practical debates. The term dazzlingly highlights that certain structures in politics are non-deterministic and that the actions of individuals

can make a difference; leadership as a type of action can moderate between the one-sided fixation on persons on the one hand and on structures on the other. As it is apparently useful as an explanation for all kinds of political impacts, the term “leadership” has primarily been used in three ways in recent discussions in Germany. First, it is used as a cross-sectoral concept that seems equally attractive to the areas of politics, business, and administration. Second, the English word “leadership” has replaced the traditional German term “Führung” in the practice of business, administration, and politics. Third, the fields of political science, business administration, economics, and to some extent psychology increasingly use leadership as a theoretical concept.

The scholarly preoccupation with leadership developed rather slowly at first. The American debate was received in Germany only after a long delay. Based on the semantics of the term – and its use in National Socialism – a sense of unease exists to this day. Universities particularly objected to addressing this term as they felt that it abetted an elitist view of politics. This had one major consequence: It is hardly possible to carry out a purely academic or scholarly reflection on the phenomenon of leadership – personal political views, contemporary and therefore often time-bound judgments of the constants and conditions of leadership infiltrate most studies. The topic should be considered with caution.

We would therefore like to carefully and experimentally reflect upon the rediscovery of leadership in politics and its peripheries. This means that in a first overview, we will discuss the convergence of leadership performances in politics, business, and administration which is the general foundation for a discussion of this phenomenon. Afterwards, we shall formulate a warning against using the American word “leadership” as a replacement for “Führung” in the German language without great consideration for the impact this would have on the political and scholarly discussion about this term.

## **2. The discovery of “leadership”**

Extensive and thoroughly researched portraits of politicians who are considered to be important appear in newspapers and magazines on a regular basis. Analyses of the career development, political realms of imagination, and personality structures of

individual politicians suggest the following: If we do not understand the actors (their character traits and motives), we cannot comprehend political processes. American presidential campaigns demonstrate this notion particularly well, as even reputable organs of the press thoroughly examine the biography and character of the candidates in order to draw conclusions about their (future) actions as president. Often, psychologists and historians are included in such research – however, due to the nature of journalism, the criteria for a judgment and prognosis are not systematically developed and substantiated. Yet the significance of one's personality is uncontested, and the ability to lead is considered one of the most important criteria for which its own prerequisites must remain for the most part unexplained. The “profiles” of leaders that are regularly published in the *New Yorker* are a good example of this. Most recently, these have included a portrait of the Afghani president Hamid Karzai (June 6, 2005) and the Democratic candidate for the US presidency Barack Obama (May 7, 2007).

In political science (or historical) studies, on the other hand, any preoccupation with individuals, their personality traits, and their leadership styles has been avoided – particularly the question of what enables a certain politician to be a good leader. This also applies to a pragmatically oriented political science that made the explanation and elaboration of day-to-day politics its concern. At the end of the day, even non-Marxist authors accepted the Marxist saying: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already” (Marx 1965: 9). The “circumstances” – actual living conditions, structures, organizations, institutions – appear as that which one is attempting to comprehend. Where political science has been theoretically oriented and interested in law-like generalizations, personality traits have been kept at a distance from analysis because they were seen as idiosyncratic, disruptive coincidental factors. As they are greatly variable, not comparable, and often difficult to identify, they were left aside even by those who did not fully agree with Marx' view. Those who adhere to mainstream political science schools such as structuralism, functionalism, institutionalism, or rational choice, pass over leadership personalities; those who still chose to bother with the description and analysis of leadership styles positioned themselves as people observing the events of the day outside of

mainstream political science, working contemporarily but far from theoretically at best. Politics and its peripheries as well as analytics and science always chose different ways of viewing things: “The movers and shakers in media and politics focused more and more on personalization; political scientists, on the other hand, for the most part looked away” (Walter 1997: 1290).

A comprehensive scholarly debate about the phenomenon of leadership thus did not take place for a long time. This was not so in the US. There, a lively academic debate about leadership – often based on business studies – developed and not only attempted to research the phenomenon, but also attempted to integrate it in the practical education of professional schools. The Harvard Law School, for example, offers its own program for Leadership in Law Firms. The John F. Kennedy School of Government created its own Center for Public Leadership, and at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, public policy students must complete leadership courses to prepare themselves for their careers.

Two factors are crucial for this: First, the increase in the importance of the media in politics (Holtz-Bacha 2003: 17ff.) has been accompanied by a trend toward personalization (Sarcinelli 2005). The perception of the media is becoming an ever more important factor of political reality. One of the most important aspects of this perception is the “leadership ability” of politicians. One good example is the discussion of Willy Brandt’s loss of power after having won the Bundestag elections in 1972, which was attributed to his lack of leadership ability. In its December 10, 1972 issue, the Spiegel printed the headline “A chancellor in crisis”, lamenting the chancellor’s lack of leadership. One could say the same about the discussion about Kurt Beck (the chairman of the Social Democratic Party) in the spring of 2008. The online version of the Spiegel magazine (May 20, 2005) speaks of “Beck’s fall from power: How the chairperson chased after his party”. Again, the lack of leadership was lamented. Political science can therefore not permanently abscond from this development. If an increasing personalization of politics (not only as a concomitant of election campaigns) can be established, this must not only be explained, but the question of the role these leadership personalities play must also be investigated.

Second, the debate about the necessity and design of reform politics may be of even greater importance to the new interest in leadership. Many analyses – of the complexity of politics, the semi-sovereign character of the German political system,

veto players, and negotiation democracy – suggest that although fundamental reforms may be necessary, they are unlikely due to structural blockades (Wolf 2007; Scharpf 1976: 42-45; Scharpf 1985). It is postulated that mature and well-established democracies – even in Germany – are currently undergoing a deep-seated process of change. The successful shaping of this process is a prerequisite for the preservation and continued development of the democratic order. What is required for a successful shaping process? It is at least conceivable that some states could be more adept at reform because their political staff is more able to perform and to lead (however this may be measured in criteria). The analysis of the prerequisites for leadership (also in the sense of aptitude) and the selection (and perhaps education) of leaders is therefore allocated decisive importance for the political process. As the field of political consulting sees it, we must therefore seek general criteria for the evaluation of the quality of leadership and the personal traits connected to it. Educational programs should be conceived according to the findings. Schools of government and public policy are increasingly rising to the challenge. These developments cause leadership to be an explosive topic, both politically and scholarly (as well as pragmatically academic).

“Leadership” is not only popular in discussions in the field of political science, however. Rather, it is an overarching concept that has also gained importance in the areas of management and administration. The foundation for the expansion of the term is an increasingly observable and recognized convergence of the demands placed on leadership achievements in both of these areas. We can expect with some certainty that this term will reach still more areas of life beyond politics and business. In this way, European (and to a lesser degree American) and German ideas about leadership will begin to converge.

### **3. The cross-sectoral diffusion of leadership**

Power is considered the currency of politics, and the politician who has mastered the game of power is considered a “strong leader”. Chief officers are evaluated according to their bureaucratic efficiency (even if this is not always appreciated) and their assertiveness. The objective conditions surrounding their actions are changed

by other strong personalities; legalities do not exist in politics. Since Machiavelli, we have known that a concurrence of *fortuna* and *virtù* that is quite difficult to ascertain controls the political game. The same, in principle, applies to business.

Nevertheless, objections to this equation do exist. The view that corporate management is subject to particular efficiency constraints due to the logic of the market is one of them. If we follow this assumption, we can conclude that the conditions are strictly predetermined – the market is a more rigid environment than politics. Yet if we observe various developments in politics, business, and administration, these differences cannot be sustained with the same clarity as was once claimed. This has consequences for the analysis of the object of investigation. The clarity of earlier demarcations is lost.

### **3.1 Differentiation**

Simply looking back at the older discussion shows that the sociology that emerged in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century systematically justifies the dissimilarity of leadership performance in various sectors of society by describing and analyzing the differentiation of society (Schimank 2007). Max Weber – whom we can view as a proto-theorist of differentiation – provides an early analysis of the entelechy of actions in politics, administration, and business as separate areas of society. Even though Weber does not explicitly use the term “leadership”, he does elaborate on the differing rationalities of leadership in politics, administration, and business.

Other considerations of Max Weber’s can also be useful when reflecting on leadership. His analysis of bureaucracy is one of them. Max Weber’s theory of bureaucracy may “only” be the ideal-typical description of one of the main developments of modern societies that can be found in various areas of society, including in business (Weber 2002). At the same time, it is a succinct analysis of the structural features of public administration and is therefore viewed as the “classic” theory of administration (Wilson 1991; Theodoulou 1995). According to this theory, bureaucracies are characterized by a fixed division of labor and specific education of those who work there, the written form of process execution, and a formal hierarchy. These give rise to the advantages of an administration: efficiency, regularity, impartiality. The management of an administration therefore must first and foremost

ensure that an agency works according to the established routines. Although Weber does not use this term, the specific leadership performance in administrations would thus be the securing of bureaucratic efficiency on all levels. This could take place by reducing the number of leading ministerial posts, by way of rotation, or by reducing rotation, for example. Ideological criteria would not play a role in the quality of leadership according to this view – the main focus would be on administrative efficiency.

According to Max Weber, bureaucratization is a development that can be observed in all parts of society, though differences apply in the area of business. Here, actions are primarily characterized by an orientation toward economic gain. The profit motive entails a logic of efficiency augmentation and reinvestment. With the medium of bureaucracy, costs of business are systematically reduced. Realized profits are thus not consumed, but rather serve as investments for the basis of future realization of profits. This gives rise to the tasks for the management of a company. Furthermore, the dominance of the aspect of control as a primary task of corporate management was discussed in early management literature and was a major component of Frederick Winslow Taylor's justification of academic teaching on management (Taylor 1947). Other aspects of free enterprise, particularly the importance of innovation, were later emphasized by Friedrich August von Hayek (von Hayek 1960, von Hayek 1974-1979) and Joseph Schumpeter (Schumpeter 1993). It was then that the entrepreneur emerged as a figure that had to possess specific leadership abilities. This entrepreneur became the model of management education.

Weber's debate on leadership in companies indeed remained less pronounced because of his more fundamental interest in the development of occidental capitalism; however, he was one of the first to work on the theory of political leadership.

Weber distinguishes between three types of legitimate authority: traditional authority rests "on the established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of the status of those exercising authority (Weber 1964: 159). Charismatic authority is based "on the devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him" (Weber 1964: 159). Rational authority rests "on the belief in the

legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issues commands” (Weber 1964: 159). In the reception of Max Weber’s types of authority, political leadership is in many cases reduced to the dimension of “charisma”. Even the biographer and historian Kershaw, in his voluminous biography of Hitler, sees the decisive dimension of the (perverted) national socialist conception of leadership in Hitler’s charisma (and its consequences for politics and administration).

The differentiation between areas of society as observed and analyzed by the classic sociologists therefore justifies first of all the assumption of different rationalities of actions in politics, business, and administration.

This is why the rationalities that were established for the various areas of society were thereafter the object of countless detailed studies. In the current development of theories of societal differentiation, particularly the system theory assumes the entelechy of various subsystems in society. Niklas Luhmann, among others, emphasizes that societal subsystems are codified in a binary manner (Luhmann 1981; Luhmann 2005). He places the actions and viewpoints in the different areas of society or even different lifestyles in (binary) pairs of opposites: right vs. wrong in the legal system; true vs. false in the area of science; allocation vs. non-allocation in the business system; belief vs. non-belief in the religious systems; and government vs. opposition in politics. The different reference systems place different demands on those who must take decisive actions. These persons therefore require different traits. An individual logic for each of the subsystems of society thus arises from these binary codifications. This corresponds to the thesis that the conditions for taking action are fundamentally different in administration, politics, and business. This also applies to the demands placed on the leadership of these areas.

### **3.2 Convergence and diffusion**

Beyond the subsidences of the system theory, however, convergence processes have been observed since the 1970s by which an approximation of the conditions and rationalities of the actions in business, administration, and politics can be recognized. Based on a critique of bureaucracy as represented by public choice theoreticians, a reform movement beginning in the 1980s in many Western democracies has

attempted to change the structures and ways of thinking in public administrations in such a manner that it requires the convergence of administrative actions and those in the business world. In the course of the discussion of “New Public Management” (NPM) or of the “New Steering Model” (NSM) (Osborne, Gaebler 1997), the modernization of administration that had been deemed necessary was linked to an explicit reflection of changed demands placed on leadership in the public sector.

The orientation toward ideas of the management in free enterprise is a key trait of the NPM reform movement. No longer was the sheer execution of administrative tasks in an orderly fashion and according to the rules the sign of a good public administration. The public administration was supposed to become result-oriented and efficient. This meant a renunciation of bureaucratic routines, and the room for leaders to take actions on their own was enlarged. Due to this new mission, new demands were placed on the leadership achievements of top administrators (Budäus 1998).

So while actions in administrations became more “businesslike”, a convergence process in the business world toward political action rationalities could be observed: from the point of view of the classic liberal constitutional state, a clear separation of public and private space is required (Forsthoff 1949). Companies are subject to the (politically defined) legalities of the market; a characteristic amount of pressure on businesses for efficiency and performance thus follow. This is because the profit motivation of private entrepreneurs is legitimate in the framework of the applicable legal system, and a direct commitment to an orientation toward the common good does not exist. This rigid differentiation is, however, breached by a change in the tasks and functions of private companies as a consequence of cooperative politics, governance, and a new definition of the relationship between public and private space.

The borders of the public sphere are increasingly blurred. In the end, this means that private actions must now also be measured from the viewpoint of common welfare. Altered views on companies led to the emergence of a critical public that inquires about the behavior of companies and the compatibility of this behavior with common welfare. The attention of the media that is connected to this and acts as a controlling instance applies more and more to companies. In order to fulfill these changed conditions for legitimacy, companies pursue strategies with which they can satisfy

the demands for being compatible with common welfare. This is also summarized as “corporate social responsibility” (Wether, Chandler 2006; Széll 2006). Growing observation on the part of the public and therefore greater pressure to legitimize the actions of companies has caused a convergence of leadership achievements in business and politics.

Parallel to this development, and as a third convergence process, the demands for good management placed on political actors are rising. It is not just a matter of courting voters when politicians – like Edmund Stoiber, for example – stylize themselves as “Chairman of the Board of Bavaria, Inc.” (Helmut Schmidt described himself somewhat more modestly as a “Leading Employee of Germany, Inc.”). The acceptance of an ideal of professionalized management is expressed herein, which applies equally to politics and to business. Specific management qualifications and abilities are named, such as “compromise management” (Schuett-Wetschky 2003; Schuett-Wetschky 2004), “information management”, and “communication and media management” (Hirscher et al. 2003). Such talk of management abilities implies that political leadership achievements are not only a matter of charisma or special talent, but rather that they can be learned in a professionalized way.

We thus acknowledge a total of three convergence processes: managing companies increasingly requires leadership competences of the political sort; in administration and politics, management qualifications are gaining importance. Parallel to this convergence, the American term “leadership” has spread intersectorally through many areas of the German discussion.

#### **4. Does “leadership” travel?**

“Thank you very much for your leadership”: a sentence heard quite often in the US, not necessarily only on the political front. It is with such a remark that a teacher can thank a student who organized a school festival or was the driving force in a theater group. A member of a citizens’ initiative can thank a member of the group who carried out a particular action. The term “leadership” expresses recognition of initiative. People set apart in this manner do not have to hold a leadership position in the formal sense of the word. There is also no clear picture of the skills required,

except for dedication or initiative.

In the US, the word leadership is always connected with the idea that commitment, initiative, and the willingness to work are not required only in formal or hierarchical positions. This is, for instance, one of the key topics in literature on “educational leadership” (Jazzar, Algozzine 2007, Caldwell 2006, Scapp 2006, Cunningsham 2006).

This alone shows the different connotations that the American term “leadership” and the German word “Führung” carry. In a current study, we find the statement, “Political leadership [Führung] in its comprehensive meaning is conceivable in practically all political-social contexts, on the level of state organs as well as in more civil societal and private areas. Leadership [Führung] in this general sense is not, however, bound to the possession of a certain office” (Helms 2005: 14). Yet this is not the case in the everyday use of the German language. It is hardly imaginable that a teacher would thank a student for his or her “Führung”. It is more likely that he or she would express recognition of initiative shown or responsibility assumed.

There is a second significant difference between the American term “leadership” and the German word “Führung”. Leadership is not free from normative connotations, but it has a positive connotation overall. Some remarks will show this more clearly:

- Leadership is used in contexts in which an argumentative assertion of goals takes place that is shown later to be correct. In journalism as well as in academic representations, examples from war history are often used: Ulysses S. Grant as an outstanding Civil War general of the Union, or Franklin Delano Roosevelt as the great leader of the US during World War II.
- Those who exhibit leadership lead by way of exemplary personal integrity, with which special skills are connected. Robert E. Lee, for example, although he fought for the wrong side, was considered an exceptional commander of the Confederate Army. He was not only a great tactician on the battlefield, but also a person of integrity and thus also respected by the enemy.
- Leadership can be based on special skills, such as exceptional scientific understanding. This circumstance is typically strongly emphasized at award

ceremonies.

- Leadership can mean charisma (often religious charisma, as in the case of the founders of the Mormon Church Joseph Smith and Brigham Young) or empathy (President Clinton after the terrorist attack on the federal building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma).
- Leadership is expressed by presence of mind and drive in crises (one's "finest hour"). Common examples of this include John F. Kennedy's leadership during the Cuban missile crisis, Abraham Lincoln's persistence in the most difficult moments of the Civil War, Churchill's perseverance in World War II, or, more recently, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's actions after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. (Rudolph Giuliani later wrote about his experiences as mayor and in particular about how he overcame the crisis caused by the attacks in a book with the designative title *Leadership* (New York: Hyperion, 2002).

The term "leadership" used with a negative connotation can only be found in a few rare cases; one does not typically speak of the "leadership" of Mao, Stalin, or Hitler. In *The Mask of Command*, British military historian John Keegan investigates and compares the leadership style of Alexander, Wellington, and other military leaders including Hitler (Keegan 2004) – however, such impartial usage of this term remains the exception.

In America, the term "leadership" is thus not necessarily associated with a hierarchically superior position, and it generally has a positive connotation. For this reason, "politische Führung" cannot be translated as "leadership". Corresponding to the common understanding and usage of the word in German, "Führung" can only be practiced by people in hierarchically superior positions. A student who took initiative in organizing an excursion can be thanked for his or her initiative, commitment, or even for the responsibility he or she assumed, but not for his or her "Führung". The association of hierarchy with the word "Führung" is also expressed in classical definitions. The Meyers Universal Dictionary (*Meyers Universal-Lexikon*) defines "Führung" as "the planning, leading, coordinating, and controlling activity of higher-ranking or superior members of a group, an organization, or in a larger collective vis-à-vis subordinate, inferior members". This view can also be found in relevant works

of reference in political science: In the *Handlexikon Public Affairs*, it says that “Führung” is “an interaction in which one actor – the leading one – elicits and sustains behavior in another actor – the one who is led – that should lead to the attainment of a goal set by the leading one. The term ‘Führung’ implies the existence of a certain hierarchy” (Althaus 2005). The notion of hierarchical ranking also appears in academically oriented studies. Korte, for example, defines “Führung” as “the advancement of an organizational change. This implies an interaction between various persons involved in the process in which a leader elicits and sustains behavior in others that should lead to the attainment of a goal” (Grasselt, Korte 2007).

“Führung” is, at least in everyday language usage, always connected with the idea of assertiveness. This can occur independently from the correctness of the goals being pursued. As “Führung” is also closely associated with the assertion of perverted or twisted goals due to the German experience of the Nazi regime (Klemperer 2007, Schmitz-Berning 2007), a certain hesitancy toward using the word “Führung” at all is understandable and justified. Even the historic encumbrance of the term “Führung” provides reasons for the attractiveness of the English word “leadership” in German academic literature. In doing so, one accepts the imprecision of the term.

In English, the term was first used in 1834 with the meaning of having the honor of holding an office or of accompanying a leadership position (Holtmann, Patzelt 2007): “Dignity, office, or position of a leader, especially of a political party; also the ability to lead”. The first records of “Führung” in German go back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century as “voering”, a Middle High German word from which “führen” was derived. At this time, “Führung” was primarily used in the sense of guiding or accompanying someone.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, “Führung” had the quite positive connotations, as we see here: “The determination in connection with being together with others of direction, movement, or action a) by going ahead, leading, commanding, or being in supreme command. (...) b) by action or influence. (...) [or like] the determination by a higher being or presider over people as well as the determined or effected by the same” (German Dictionary by Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, Volume 4, 1878). In contrast to “leadership”, the term “Führung” was given its negative overtone retrospectively by its targeted and pointed use in Nazi jargon. The German words

“Führerkult”, “Gruppenführer”, “Führerprinzip”, and of course the widely known and used term “the Führer” are prime examples of this.

## **5. Caution with the term “leadership”**

The debate about this term in both journalism and science are characterized by terminological imprecision. In Germany, “Führung” is a historically tainted term that is – even in the scholarly debate – often avoided. This is yet another major reason for the literal boom of the term “leadership” imported from American English. Translating “leadership” as “politische Führung” is therefore problematic – not least because of differences between the political cultures and historic experiences of German and the US (from the political culture of which the term is typically borrowed; other English-speaking countries play a lesser role in this context). The term “Führung” is to be used, and must therefore continue to be used, but it should be decoupled from the common perception of its meaning and distinguished from its use in National Socialism. Simply borrowing the American term “leadership” is not advisable, as it is too broad and does not correspond to the political culture of Germany. Ultimately, we will have to work with interim solutions.

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