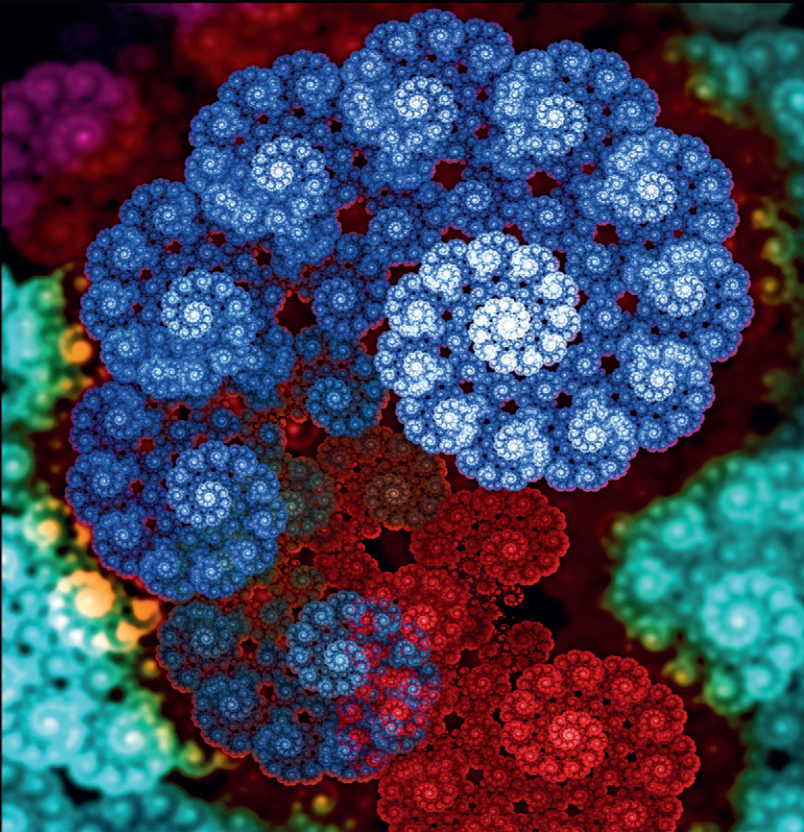


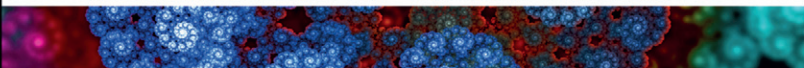
Fractal Leadership

Ideologisation from the 1960s to Contemporary Social Movements



*Athina Karatzogianni
and Jacob Matthews*

DIGITAL ACTIVISM AND SOCIETY



Fractal Leadership

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Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL

First edition 2024

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83797-109-1 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-83797-108-4 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-83797-110-7 (Epub)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This book results from a common observation, as in one that is conceded by most of those with a stake or an interest in radical politics: they are not producing the goods. Worldwide, none of even the most prominent oppositional movements of the past three decades have been able to build any durable and effective resistance to counter capitalism's pathological iniquity, and against what will be this system's ultimate achievement, the ruin of the planet's climate and its catastrophic consequences for virtually all forms of life. On the contrary, we have in fact witnessed the emergence of multifarious political and social mobilisations which appear to be opposing the existing order and proposing radical alternatives, yet effectively both celebrate established authority, and reinforce the most predatory existing social powers.

The origins of this book also lie in our earlier research. Some of this was carried out separately, in the areas of cyberconflict, digital activism, social movements, protest and insurgency groups, or on the question of cultural industrialisation, its relation to alternative cultural production and the neutralisation of counter-cultural figures. Some was conducted jointly between the two authors, notably on the ideological production surrounding the so-called 'sharing economy' and its 'collaborative' platforms (Karatzogianni & Matthews, 2020). One key finding from our previous research, which feeds into this work, is that of the significance of grassroots and individual contributions to the overall ideological consolidation of the existing system – whose 'participatory' nature is materially inscribed in the design of digital usages which are now mandatory in so much of our everyday lives.

This question – of how insurgent and resistant groups, oppositional or revolutionary movements are effectively 'produced' and 'conducted' – has therefore been at the forefront of much of our research, and the first sketches of this book sought to question whether contemporary groups really are more reliant on the contributions of their base than earlier mass followings, such as the workers' movement in the first half of the twentieth century, somewhat lazily renowned for its passive adherence to wholly imposed dogma and personality cults. In the initial discussions and perusals that slowly shaped this project, it became clear that the question of leadership – how authority and direction are generated and sustained – would become a key focus of our research. One early intuition that bolstered our

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choice to explore this question was our observation of a potentially new form of political leadership, which we will come back to shortly and chose to refer to as ‘fractal’ leadership.

A second reason we chose to consider the concept of leadership is precisely the analytical nexus that it offers: the formation and implementation of leadership is simultaneously a process of ideological production and of material effectivity. On the one hand, leadership construction and form of leadership requires establishing and sustaining the charisma and authority attached to specific individuals, therefore the provision of cultural forms (representations, texts) which are used to develop and maintain the social/institutional form of the leader (the following, potentially the cult). This process of ideological production is of course materially grounded, insofar as it relies on given internal relations of production, distribution of resources, power relations, which are, in turn, necessarily conditioned by broader material relations of production within society. Concomitantly, leadership construction and form of leadership is always itself an exercise of effective ideological production: more or less deliberately and successfully, leadership coordinates material activity within a given group; doing so, it necessarily promotes or impedes specific internal relations of production, partially commands distribution of resources and power relations within the group, and (whatever its avowed political objectives) its effectivity can thus potentially extend to broader material relations of production within society – consolidating or opposing these last.

Our initial research object, therefore, emerged from questions such as: how can present leadership forms be compared to those of former radical movements? What paths does the construction of the leader figure take within past and present radical movements? To what degree is the emergence of leader figures and spokespersons as much enforced ‘from above’ as nurtured by the grassroots themselves? And significantly, how can the forging of leader figures – as an ideological process and productive activity – be analysed as a mediation (*Vermittlung*) of wider relations of production?

Our work indeed stems from the premise that a critical understanding of leadership in radical movements can best be attained by analysing the mediations that the actual activities of leaders and leader-makers effect or in some cases embody – mediation here being understood as (both actively and retroactively determining) links between social structures, on the one hand, and individual and collective ideological production, on the other hand. This entails dismissing the misleading conception of *Vermittlung* as a sort of nexus between an economic basis cast in pure materiality and a superstructure located in the ethereal realm of values, beliefs and immateriality. Employing the concept of mediation today leads to the analysis of those concrete points of junction that are incarnated in dominant digital platforms and networks, and their wholly material algorithmic machinery, at the same time as the (thereby determined) usages of these last by hundreds of thousands of active ‘anonymous’ ideological ‘producers’. One must therefore address the issue of labour/capital *rapport de force* on, and with regard to, digital intermediation platforms.

The owners of the platforms used by current radical movements can be seen as ideology industrialists (or communicative capitalists): they control much of the ideological resources, communication tools and algorithm based machinery that peddles ‘content’ to broader audiences, allowing user-consumer-activists to produce ideological ‘commodities’ or to complete ideological production simultaneously with their own (political) consciousness formation and that of other interconnected user-consumer-activists. In an epoch marked, as Frederic Jameson has noted both by ‘a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm’ (Jameson, 1991: 48) and an equally ‘prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas’ (Ibid.: 36), one essential question to consider is how digital intermediation platforms actually do exploit so-called ‘participatory’ or ‘collaborative’ usages, and whether one should consider that the production of ideology, and the political consciousness generating process itself, has been fundamentally modified by these phenomena.

One key hypothesis which we chose to explore was that of correlations between leadership formation and implementation, on the one hand, and on the other hand, a series of characteristics shared by current political and social groups. The scope of this observation goes back to Occupy, Indignados and other public square occupation movements (and their few governmental spin-offs). It includes contemporary civil rights and climate change awareness activism, protest mobilisations such as the French Gilets Jaunes. Incidentally, it also encompasses certain aspects of artificially contrived ‘extreme centre’ organisations such as Emmanuel Macron’s La République en Marche, alt-right groups, so-called ‘diagonal movements’ and ‘start-up parties’, and incidentally the digital ‘collaborativist’ believers which we analysed in our work *Platform Economics* (Codagnone et al., 2018).

Four specific features stand out when considering the common traits of these groups. First, one must note their general ideological confusion or imprecision (i.e. either the fluctuating mishmash of themes and goals; often a blurring, inversion or abandon of the left/right schema, or a frenzied oscillation between classical ideological themes from both left and right). Second, one might consider the aggressively simplistic, rambling nonsensical or infantile discourses that serve to erect their leaders, or that these last deploy, either to assume leadership status, or to allegedly avoid this engagement in the name of horizontal and decentralised organisation. Second, grievance and identity politics appears to be their latent *modus operandi*, manifest ideological content notwithstanding. Third, all these movements demonstrate acknowledgement and respect for – or at the very least, appeal towards – national and supranational authority figures and institutions, whether these remain in the hands of ‘liberal democratic’ forces or not (i.e. the relative or full absence of a truly insurrectionist drive and a tendency to ‘petition the king’, despite the obvious disinterest or failure of authorities with regard to the manifest agendas of these groups). Last, we observe their – more or less conscious – confidence in the most predatory of economic players: consider, for instance, their reliance on GAFAM (Google, Amazon, Facebook Apple, Microsoft) and purportedly ‘independent’ web platforms – in other words financial and commercial players – for data storage, resource collection and mobilisation tools, or

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their general avoidance of the question of State and Capital surveillance, and the quasi absence of strategic focus on relations of production and property.

At first glance, this characteristic, together with these movements' highly heterogeneous manifest ideological offer, is fully in opposition with the intellectual and theoretical clout and rectitude expected of anarchist, socialist and indeed communist leaders in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The latter, moreover, were systematically recruited among the working class (experience of manual labour being a *sine qua non* condition) and leadership went hand in hand with a process of 'self-aggrandisement' through both practical and theoretical education, as well as the acquisition of and obedience to a strict moral code. It might however be a mistake to over-estimate the homogeneity of the old mass political structures. There was after all a constant struggle to maintain coherence, through the heavy, time consuming, bureaucratic structures that processed militants within these movements (the pioneer camps, the women's groups, the party press, the mandates, holiday and leisure time organisations, etc.). No doubt there existed back then, as today, a trend towards dispersion and inertia rather than a 'natural' homogeneous drive. In his essay *In Girum*, reflecting on the Gilets Jaunes uprising, Laurent Jeanpierre reminds us of this lack of homogeneity of contemporary social and political movements, but also, they recall that revolutionary moments and movements are characterised by ferment, mixing, confusion and heterogeneity (Jeanpierre, 2019: 35), a claim which suggests that the 'fractal' politics of the yellow vests is not an entirely novel phenomenon.

Our work nonetheless seeks to address the question of transformations of form of leadership in contemporary social and political movements that are highly reliant on digital communication technologies. We have indeed stated as a research hypothesis that these contemporary movements may be characterised by a phenomenon of 'fractal' leadership. By this term we point to leadership construction afforded (or intensified) by algorithm-based flows of information and viral affectivity, and forms of leadership marked by their highly volatile nature, both in terms of public mass-following and sudden passage from local, inter-individual level to worldwide 'live' mass celebrity. We deploy the term *fractal* to illustrate how a somewhat amorphous structure is replicated from this almost intimate, localised community level, all the way up to the global level and how one might observe swift, almost breath-taking transfers from one plane to another, carrying therefore new forms of leaders to sudden public mass-following, but just as quickly sweeping them away (or back down to less prominent structure folds). Incidentally, Martin Thomas (of the admittedly sectarian British and Australian Trotskyist group, Alliance for Workers' Liberty) also chooses to use this term with regard to the anti-capitalist movement of the late 1990s and early 2000s:

Its appearance as a kaleidoscopic whirl is not something external, not a matter of first impressions which can be corrected by a closer look at who and what is really "behind it", but something which runs through the whole movement right down to the level of small groups involved in it, or even, arguably, the minds of individual

activists. [. . .] When we try to look through the surface froth of the movement to find its core or what or who is “behind” it, then. . . we find just the same frothiness repeated at every level. We cannot find sharp arrow-head points that constitute its few essential demands. Although the movement has existed, with some self-awareness of its existence, for five years now, with an immense amount of argument and discussion through books, assemblies, and websites in that period, it remains just as multifarious. It has become no more settled-down or consolidated. (Worker’s Liberty, 2 September 2003)

Coming across his remarks (made in a piece discussing Scott Lash & John Urry’s, 1987 book, *The End of Organized Capitalism*), we found a similarity with our own observations of ‘gig economy’ collaborative evangelists, producers of a similar nebulous of often objectively conflicting discourse, however converging in what can be seen as a fractal whirl, from the intimate level of a one-to-one conversation in a corner of a suburban co-working space, up to the keynote speeches of large international events and on into the realm of the dour propaganda exercises of global political leadership. The current stance of simultaneously ‘petitioning of the king’ – interpellating and thus acknowledging the legitimacy of existing power structures – and advocating a horizontal, often leaderless organisation within movements, at times rejecting even the notion of spokespersons, can be observed in the various youth and ecologist protest groups that are active today in the Global North. It was also a prominent feature of *Gilets Jaunes* activists, and the forms of leadership these groups, or *mouvances* foster may be well attuned with the contemporary rise of a new authoritarian politics. We use the French term *mouvances* because it has the advantage of conveying some degree of the slippery, amorphous and shifty nature of these groups. Precipitated with COVID-19 social experimentations, this shift of régime appears to complete the historical process of administration of populations (whether in the name of public health or averting climate catastrophe), while ensuring an effective segregation between an insanely opulent capitalist minority (flanked by its mercenaries and obliging *encadrement* class) and a vast global multitude of pauperised, contaminated, contained workers – often objectively unproductive, especially in the more ‘developed’ counties. Alain Bihr uses *encadrement* to characterise management and supervision (the *cadre* is the ‘executive’, i.e. an individual with senior managerial responsibility), but also to the activity of framing, as in ideological engineering and coordination.

The proprietary algorithmic management of dissent and the permanent, accelerated production of a misleading and impotent ‘fractal’ leadership takes on a key strategic role at this juncture, in what may amount to the very petrification of social relations foreseen in the late 1960s by T.W. Adorno, fittingly in the same delivery of *Kritische Modelle* that took stock of the blinding obsession of so-called ‘New Left’ student activists with unbridled praxis:

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Praxis without theory, lagging behind the most advanced state of cognition, cannot but fail, and praxis, in keeping with its own concept, would like to succeed. False praxis is no praxis. Desperation that, because it finds the exits blocked, blindly leaps into praxis, with the purest of intentions joins forces with catastrophe. [...] The transition to a praxis without theory is motivated by the objective impotence of theory and exponentially increases that impotence through the isolation and fetishization of the subjective element of historical movement, spontaneity. The deformation of spontaneity should be seen as a reaction to the administered world. But by frantically closing its eyes to the totality and by behaving as though it stems immediately from people, spontaneity falls into line with the objective tendency of progressive dehumanisation: even in its practices.

(Adorno, 2005 [1969]: 265–266)

Following the insight Adorno offered at the close of the 1960s, our preliminary research pointed to a secondary hypothesis, nonetheless closely related to the perspective of ‘fractal’ leadership. This would take the shape of an analogy, regarding broad historical developments of the late 1970s and 1980s, subsequent to the demise of the New Left and the counter-cultural movement in North America and other Western countries, and burgeoning ideological trends which have gained momentum in the wake of contemporary ecologist activism (as epitomised by the figure of Greta Thunberg or the tactics of Extinction Rebellion). The coinciding agony of the New Left, end of the 1960s psychedelic dream and morphing of the Movement into a kickstand and commercial for what Boltanski and Chiapello have famously called the new spirit of capitalism, is echoed by the short yet lucrative allegory of musician, writer and film-maker Jim Morrison, better known for his stint as lead singer of The Doors. Son of a US Navy admiral who was one of the highest-ranking officers present at the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incidents (which confirmed direct American engagement in Vietnam), Jim Morrison was an iconic figure of the US counterculture between 1967 and his death, 4 years later. Specific sequences and impressions of the mediation that was effected around, against and admittedly to a certain extent by this public persona – a highly antagonistic process – are interspersed among our text, providing a complement and at times counterpoint to empirical elements pertaining to openly political radical leaders.

It indeed seemed worth considering how the evolution of the New Left was marked, at the end of the 1960s, by a hyperinflation of discursive production and a form of inflated and romanticised radicalism and, as Adorno puts it, a blinded and blinding leap into false praxis. In particular, the American New Left’s SDS/Weatherman epilogue appeared to constitute a flight towards direct action – firstly street-fighting and subsequently underground armed-struggle – only for most of its key leader figures to re-emerge 10 years later as eager candidates for the capitalist *encadrement* class and firm promoters of the postmodernist zeitgeist.

We would argue that this flight, and other manifestations of what effectively amounted to a form of misleading or absent leadership, contributed to the neoliberal turn of the following decades, facilitating – albeit modestly – the destruction of post-war socialist and communist inspired welfare safety-nets and the predominance of identity and grievance politics. A sub-hypothesis worth considering from this perspective was that of the 1960s New Left having inaugurated an ideological and material bind with dominant capitalist players and their State political agents. Might these three interdependent ideological producers effectively have concerted to replicate dominant relations of production, though ‘theory development’ and neutralisation of oppositional politics on the one hand, and through the commodity exchange that materially operates within such a bind? Could it be shown that the spectacular confrontation between the ‘Movement’ and the government provided the raw material that culture industries would convert into surplus capital via the ‘audience labour’ of the masses?

In this perspective, ideology itself appears to meld with commodity, and this value generating ‘audience labour’ is sustained by an ‘ideologisation’ process at work in the minds of radical leaders and followers. Could this constitute the beginnings of a significant new step in the neutralisation of radical politics and petrification of existing material relations of production? And might this historical moment have been the dawn of a process which we now witness with current protest movements, in which activist leaders and leader-makers invariably appear to be stuck? These questions, and those pertaining to the previous hypothesis, were advanced in order to refine our research problematics, allowing us to reach a more concise objective and book structure which we will now briefly outline, along with a short presentation of our methodological options.

We have observed that, particularly in the global north, leadership in seemingly radical and alternative political and social movements has become something of a taboo over the past 50 years. We suggest that this shying away from leadership – as accountable orientation – and its framing in terms of charisma-driven authoritarian rule, have their roots in the 1960s, with the advent of the New Left abstract assemblage and its concrete localised variations. Although fully intertwined with digital networks and technology, loose and purportedly horizontal organisations such as Youth for Climate, Extinction Rebellion, and Black Lives Matter, are related to earlier left-leaning movements that emerged in a low-fi, analogue era, yet it would be an error to consider them as direct descendants. Thus, our study theoretically investigates the concept of leadership mediation by tracing historically this phenomenon. First and foremost, this demands an analysis of leadership in terms of mediations of relations of production (evolutions, variations and dominant forms), charting the paths that the construction of leader figures has taken and currently takes within radical movements, in specific physical, material, sexual and spectral spaces where, metaphorically speaking, ideology and material relations of production ‘meet’, and become organisation. It entails taking into account elements of personal biographies of specific leaders (and in some cases followers), including specific ‘accidents’ i.e., individuation, affectivity and consciousness generation, identity and subjectivity formation.

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Our research is indeed focused on the ways in which objective, structural determinants finely interact with subjective experiences in the life-worlds of movement participants, and how this feeds ideologisation, as a process of being in the world, of experiencing and articulating political (false-)consciousness, formed by interacting with the political, social and historical conditions that define the political unconscious. It simultaneously calls for detailed consideration of accelerations induced by digital transformations of leadership and the digital political economy in which this phenomenon occurs. Our book therefore examines communicative means of production employed by social movement leadership, asking how technological transformations interact with movements, how mediations are embedded or incarnated in digital platforms and networks (for instance within their algorithmic machinery), and how these objectively impede alternatives or could, potentially, present opportunities for dissent or subversion.

To these ends, we offer a historically informed account of contemporary leadership mediation and its emergence in social movements through mapping in Chapter 2 the international, national and local socio-economic and political context(s) that leadership evolves or has evolved in from the 1960s and 1970s to the present configuration; analysing the dispersion and recycling of former radical politics; the hypothesis of significant links between countercultural tendencies, computerisation and the ecological breakdown; the present outcome of neoliberal conquests and their illusory morphing into a so-called ‘collaborative’ economy, as well as recent sociopolitical developments linked to the COVID-19 crisis.

In Chapter 3, the theoretical and practical aspects of how radical political leadership effects mediation between broad social structures and the life-worlds of leaders and followers, which entails: firstly, an in-depth analysis of the categories of authority and charisma; secondly, critically discussing how existing social movement research apprehends leadership (in a context of network vs. hierarchy conflict and dissonant orders of dissent); thirdly, what can be inferred from these theoretical perspectives, in regard to biolabour and a process that we refer to as ideologisation, which is at once individual internalisation and collective production.

In Chapter 4, the inner workings of leadership, within specific organisations: how leader figures, from spokespersons to iconic personalities, obtain and maintain leadership; how internal struggles are fought out and what command of relations of production are ensured, with what consequences; how subordinate cadres, followers and supporters are managed, mobilised, dismissed or lost.

In Chapter 5, the question of external leadership mediation and how it, in particular, reflects and (re)shapes material relations of production in wider movements, networks and beyond; negotiating and building solidarity and coalitions, networking with allies; the perils of connective action and media strategies, from agenda-setting to self-intoxication; the apparent failures of external mediation, or the paradoxical benefits of ‘negative mediations’.

Chapters 3–5 use reworked material from the UK fieldwork for the DigiGen H2020 EU project (Grant Agreement number 870548), previously published in Karatzogianni, A., Tiidenberg, K., Parsanoglou, D., Lepik, K.S., Raig, M., Suitslepp, M.L., Matthews, J., Symeonaki, M., Kazani, A., and Pnevmatikaki, M. (2021). Online