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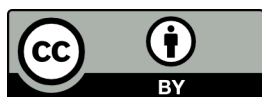
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# Exposing and re-placing leadership through workers inquiry

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## Abstract

The literature on leadership place and space offers us an understanding of how the built environment, geography of location and socio-economic forces can coalesce to shape (and be shaped) by leadership practices. Missing thus far, however, is an account that constitutes leadership space and place through antagonism and struggle, crucial if we are to acknowledge the agency of workers in leadership practice. We therefore outline a workers inquiry approach that seeks to learn directly from the struggles of workers as they enact place and space through their particular, geographically situated practices. We do so through reading leadership studies, Marxist accounts of space and place, and workers' inquiries dialectically to draw out two practices that can offer a framework for both understanding the contribution of workers inquiry approaches to leadership but also to inform future studies. Our first practice of *exposing* is the drawing to the surface by workers inquiry of the oppressiveness, contradictions and absurdities of leadership discourse and practices of capital as they shape the places and spaces within which workers are exploited. *Re-placing*, on the other hand, offers workers' movements potentially emancipatory alternative forms of leadership, which re-shape and re-appropriate place and space.

## Keywords

Leadership, space, place, workers inquiry, Marxism, power, technology, ethnography

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## Introduction

Everyday experiences of space and place are sources of great social inspiration and belonging, but also of deep and traumatic social conflict (Jackson, 2019; Lefebvre, 1991). It is vital therefore that leadership studies continues to build on emerging research that helps us to situate leadership as something particular to the social and economic dynamics of spaces, where material conditions, practice, language and bodies co-constitute leadership (Ropo and Salovaara, 2019). This is a re-search agenda that is 'bringing place into the foreground from the background' (Jackson, 2019: 210), helping us to appreciate how urban environments (Budd and Sancino, 2016), localised discursive and embodied practices (Munro and Thanem, 2018; Ropo et al., 2013) and political governance (Collinge and Gibney, 2010; Jackson, 2019) can coalesce to shape (and be shaped in turn) by leadership practices. Yet, despite some engagement with Marxist accounts of space (Ropo and Salovaara, 2019), the literature has thus far not explored in depth leadership place and space constituted through conflict and struggle.

Our article contributes to the literature on leadership place and space by proposing workers inquiry as a mode of study that seeks to learn directly from the struggles of workers as they articulate a sense of place and space through their geographically situated practices. In doing so, we seek to invert the normal and somewhat hierarchical relationship between scholar and research participant, arguing that to understand how workers lead through and in space we need to hear from them directly, in ways that minimise as much as possible the academic filtering and 'extraction' (Hardt and Negri, 2017) of data that inevitably accompanies much academic labour (ours included).

In adopting this position, we propose workers inquiry (Haider and Mohandesi, 2013; Woodcock, 2014) as an approach to researching leadership place and space. Workers inquiry, we claim, can provide us with rich, first-hand accounts of leadership through struggle but is also itself an act of leadership in the sense that it facilitates workers to enact leadership through the crafts of inquiry and writing, performatively enacting alternative forms of space and place in the very act(s) of research. The approach therefore challenges boundaries that neatly separate method from theory but also research from action. As such, the task of the researcher within workers inquiry, we argue, is to inhabit a liminal leadership role of political activist, agitator, organiser and practice-focused scholar.

Important to our contribution is introducing more explicitly Marxist accounts of space and place (Harvey, 2019a, 2019b; Lefebvre, 1991), which help us interpret space as constituted (not solely but substantially) through dialectical struggle between capital and workers. Dialectical approaches to leadership have been recommended as offering interpretations that are 'interdependent as well as asymmetrical, potentially contradictory and contested' (Collinson, 2005: 1422; Collinson, 2014), and we adopt this view by positing place and space as highly politicised terrains that co-constitute leadership practice. Here, forces of capital engender and normalise a particular neoliberal ideology of atomised individualism, privatisation of space and competition (Harvey, 2019a). We argue that workers inquiry is an important means through which we can better understand – and practice – a leadership that is locked in dialectical relation to capital, enabling us to see and build alternative spaces of solidarity (Harvey, 2019b; Ross, 2008). We offer a dialectical interpretation of the workers inquiry, leadership studies and Marxist place and space literatures, through which we argue a potentially powerful account of leadership emerges. Through this process we posit two practices of workers' leadership. *Exposing* encapsulates attempts by workers to draw to the surface the op-pressiveness, contradictions and absurdities of the leadership discourse and practice of capital as it colonises and shapes the places and spaces within which workers are exploited. *Re-placing*, we state, potentially offers the workers' movement emancipatory alternative forms of leadership, which re-shape and re-appropriate place and space.

Before proceeding, we need to clarify our use of terminology regarding space and place. We acknowledge that there are differing definitions of these words (Jackson, 2019), with some authors interpreting space as something open, multiple and contested, but seeing place as more tangible and grounded. While there is value in various approaches, for a study that is interested in dialectical conflict and worker accounts, we prefer to interpret both space and place as contested (Massey, 2005), constituted through practice and counter-practice. Adopting this perspective allows us to see localised micro-sites of practice such as workplaces, where conflict ensues regarding the meaning and dignity of work, as contested and potentially fluid spaces; it also enables a view of place as the wider geographical location that contains and is constituted by multiple and heterogeneous spaces of struggle.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. We first review the literature on leadership place and space, proposing that it could be enriched through deeper engagement with accounts that interpret space and place as politically charged and contested, and turn to Marxist perspectives from geography to do so. We then introduce the principles of workers inquiry as offering a promising means of investigating leadership places and spaces. From this basis we offer a reading of the workers inquiry literature in dialectical relation to leadership and Marxism to offer our two leadership space and place practices.

## Leadership place and space

We present a review of the literature on leadership place and space, noting its emphasis on approaching leadership as constituted through practice in relation to geography and the built environment. In doing so, however, we highlight one significant group of people whose practices are largely absent – workers – and conclude that a Marxist and workers inquiry approach can help redress this deficit. We introduce a perspective that assumes space and place are constituted as much by attempts from senior leaders to dominate workers, and by workers fighting back, as they are by any shared interest and practice between a bourgeois class and workers.

Of particular interest to the study is the materialist turn within leadership (Ford et al., 2017; Pullen and Vachhani, 2013), which provides us with a useful definitional basis for approaching leadership as enacted through practice. This area reminds us that leadership is 'a politicized effect of practices that emerge from situated, performed relationships between people and things' (Hawkins, 2015: 952; see also Case and Sliwa, 2020). Relatedly, Crevani's (2018: 85–88) 'processual account' interprets leadership as an 'ongoing social process having to do with emerging structure', where the leadership can be located in the ways in which the material and human 'work' together in 'providing or creating direction in organizing processes'. In keeping with the emphasis of Case and Śliwa (2020: 552), however, we are interested in how power dynamics can influence direction within spaces of leadership, recognising that 'not all participants are contextually embedded in the same way' and therefore that 'some participants, in certain circumstances…attract privilege…and therefore have greater scope to influence the reorientation'. We push this point further by interpreting power asymmetries in the production of leadership dialectically, as inseparable from the inherent imbalance in the labour market between workers, who are forced to sell their labour power, and the owners of capital. This is an imbalance, we will show later, which stretches beyond the workplace and into the broader geography of places and spaces.

Writing from within the post-human tradition, albeit one informed by the Marxism of Lefebvre (1991) and Ropo and Salovaara (2019: 464) help us see 'how people and space interact' in leadership practice, where 'space is not given an independent agency but is treated in relation to human engagement'. A continuous theme in this and related work is how 'material places

can…function as substitutes of individual leaders' […] 'material places lead people through embodied experiences, such as feelings, emotions and memories of the place' (Ropo et al., 2013: 379–381). Ropo and Salovaara's (2019: 463) space is informed by an 'aesthetic and sense-based epistemology related to ways of knowing' where 'people are being led by their felt experiences on the physical spaces', thus introducing a much needed embodied and affective sense of how people and space dialectically interact to produce leadership. The authors help us see the potential for reading leadership in and with space as a 'constant performance' that is 'never repetitive' (2019: 465), holding out the possibility of a reading of space and place that is contested between a range of agents – human, non-human and hybrid. This possibility is articulated through Hawkins' (2015: 952) 'politicised' space of leadership, where, despite the constraints of the discursive traditions and material configurations of space, a degree of contingency prevails. Nevertheless, missing here is a sense of how certain types of exploitative employment can shape places and spaces, helping to define the cultures and struggles that unfold – for example, in the post-industrial regions of the UK, where a history of unionisation, strikes, solidarity and sometimes betrayal has been replaced by casualised service industry work, such as call centres.

We should of course be wary in embracing accounts of the material not to downgrade the status of language, particularly in so far as it can be interpreted as a performative phenomenon that itself restricts and permits certain logics of place and space (Mabey and Freeman, 2010). The language of leadership can have profound material effects on spaces and places. For example, the signifier 'leadership' played a significant role in the argumentation posited for invading Iraq in 2002 (Smolović Jones et al., 2020), and the destruction which followed dramatically re-shaped the spaces and places of the region. Further, as Schedlitzki et al. (2017) remind us, the very languages we speak (Welsh, English, German and so on) are rooted in and develop from the contours of particular geographic places and in turn shape and influence the forms of leadership that are talked about and performed (if indeed 'leadership' is even named as such in a particular language). Also relevant to our study, we note the connectedness of leadership narratives to place, their emergence from a place's practices and the capacity of people rooted in contemporary spaces to experiment with and re-write the meanings associated with them (Schedlitzki et al., 2015). We also, however, need an empirical account of language, space and place that incorporates the multinational melting pot of contemporary groups of workers, whose perspectives will add important dimensions of struggle to the analysis.

A community of scholars within policy studies and public administration has investigated the leadership at play with 'place-shaping', the 'making, shaping and re-shaping [of] the places we live and work' (Collinge et al., 2010: 368) by administrators, political leaders and stakeholders. Of interest, here is the range of approaches, challenges and political dynamics of shaping a place through leadership. Evoking notions of shaping indicates that there is a degree of construction involved in the leadership of place, from senior, 'strategic' leaders (Gibney et al., 2009) but also from the inputs and everyday practices of people and it is within these 'networks of social relations' (Collinge and Gibney, 2010: 383) that leadership of a place is enacted. Further, the nature of the problems to be addressed through practices of leadership may vary depending on the demographics, history and topography of a place (Gibney et al., 2009). Indeed, so multiple are the influences on the shaping of a place that Hambleton (2015: 15) (see also Hambleton and Howard, 2013; Budd and Sancino, 2016) urges us to think of plural leaderships at work – political leadership, public managerial/professional leadership, community leadership and so on.

Importantly for our study, Collinge and Gibney (2010) (see also Hambleton, 2015) make the case that leadership of place takes on a heightened importance and challenge in the wake of political and economic upheavals, such as recessions, changes in government ideology over time and, of course,

austerity. During such periods, the aesthetics, economics and social relations of place are changed, with or without the consent of residents, local political leaders and administrators. This is a contested and uneven process, meaning that through time 'new geographies are themselves laid upon previous rounds of economic restructuring, which produce layers of development involving contingent mixtures which create unique places' (Collinge and Gibney, 2010: 382). Ultimately, this literature reminds us that leadership and dialectical struggle over places and spaces are vital areas of knowledge and practice as societies globally ponder how to tackle 'thorny' (Jackson, 2019: 210), even epochal issues of 'social justice, global climate change, alternative energy and economic inequality' (Guthey et al., 2014: 62). Lacking in this place-shaping literature, however, is an account that offers a specifically workers' perspective on the generation of leadership practice in place and space. The presence and importance of workers is acknowledged by Budd and Sancino (2016) and, going further, built into the conceptual modelling of Hambleton (2015), but not followed through empirically. In the study of Gibney et al. (2009: 10), trade union leaders are classified as 'informal leaders' and are therefore excluded from their model of a strategic leadership of place. Missing in general is a sense in which workers can disrupt and challenge place-shaping, offering an alternative leadership that seeks to shape space and place along more egalitarian lines.

Overall, the literature helps us view place and space not as neutral and permanent locations where leadership is played out but as themselves constructed, politicised and contested. Place and space can be interpreted as shaped and shaping competing ideologies, histories and priorities – but also as sites where the materiality of a place itself speaks back, permitting and restricting certain forms of leadership. The literature allows us to situate our theorising within an account of leadership as an emergent agency constituted through a dialectical relation between people places, spaces, non-human objects and language. This builds on the analyses of workers inquiry, to be examined in more detail later. For example, Harvey (1947) argued that workers' actions need to be analysed 'not at face value, superficially – but rather fundamentally, in its innermost essence, in a word, dialectically'. This dialectical analysis needs to be focused on the moments of class composition (Notes from Below, 2018), unpicking how different aspects of society are both shaped by workers (and indeed go on to shape them), as well as how capital responds. This includes the workplace itself, as well as factors beyond it, combining relationships of exploitation and oppression that are rooted in particular places and spaces. This is not a deterministic reading of different actors, but one that is alive to the contradictions and tensions inherent in these struggles.

Nevertheless, we also note from the leadership literature that although several of the studies acknowledge the role of power and contest, few explore these as a primary focus. Furthermore, we were unable to find a study that approached place and space as shaped and influenced through the actions of workers, surprising given the centrality of worker struggle to so many of our spaces. Finally, this area of study also largely overlooks more participatory research methods, meaning that the voices of academics tend to dominate over those of people who dwell and practice within particular places and spaces. It is important to address these gaps, as without doing so we risk studies of leadership space and place overlooking the agency of workers. Before we introduce our framework, however, we will briefly sketch out a reading of place and space influential to our theorising, a Marxist-informed account that offers a necessary supplement to the literature already discussed.

## Marxism, space and place

Marxist accounts of space have largely followed the predominant sites of capital intensity, namely, urban environments. In this sense, they bear a similarity to place shaping leadership studies by

adopting geographical areas as their focus, rather than particular organisations. However, Marxist studies are primarily interested in the transformation of cities into spaces of capitalist accumulation, exploitation of workers and, of course, resistance. Harvey (2019b: 4–5) explains that in constructing cities, humans 'remake' themselves and that this reproduction reveals that 'urbanization has always been…a class phenomenon'. Since the 1970s turn towards neoliberalism, urbanisation, it has been argued, can increasingly be seen to supplant industrialisation as a leading engine of capitalist development, forming a secondary valorisation circuit which both absorbs surplus capital from financial speculation and extracts rents from workers (Lefebvre, 2003; Harvey, 2019b; Rolnik, 2019). This 'spatial-fix' (Harvey, 2019b) or 'capital switching' (Lefebvre, 2003) within urban environments therefore needs to be of primary concern to leadership worker-scholars. Adopting this focus can include, but also helpfully moves us beyond, assumptions that leadership practice occurs within organisations and, furthermore, helps us see that leadership occurring within the boundaries of organisations will be shaped by broader dynamics of class struggle within the spatial environment.

Before proceeding, however, we need to acknowledge that a homogenous Marxist account of space and place is not forthcoming but understanding the heterogeneity of the field also helps illuminate the possibilities for enriching leadership studies by stretching their focus across a broader, richer and more conflictual terrain. More orthodox Marxian thought, as Harvey (2019b: 139) discusses, can overlook the process of urbanisation and 'urban social movements', relegating such activity to issues of 'reproduction rather than production, or about rights, sovereignty, and citizenship, and therefore not about class'. Equally, however, it can be possible to place class too far in the background in reading space, so that a 'fetishism of autonomous urban space' substitutes spatial/territorial conflict for class conflict (Soja, 1980). Falling into either trap, Harvey (2019b) notes, creates an issue of analysis, a dichotomy between the inherent spatiality of class relations versus a theoretical propensity to obscure or ignore the physical terrain that shapes them. Soja (2013: 2) therefore suggests that the key to developing an understanding of 'consequential geographies' is to grasp that they 'are not just the outcomes of social and political processes, they are also a dynamic force affecting these processes in significant ways'.

Space, Harvey (2019a) states, needs to be read dialectically, as being continuously constituted through numerous aspects of uneven geographical development – the ways in which the natural environment, the ideological tenor of government, the maturity of capital, and of course particular class alliances converge in a place at a certain time. It is specifically the addition of class and a conflictual reading of the operations of capital in space that make this focus so important for studies of leadership space and place. We need an analysis that understands leadership as situated within a broader set of geographical and political-economic forces but that also maintains the (uneven) agency of workers to make a difference within their spaces of work. Therefore, we should read leadership space and place as dialectical, contingent and contested phenomena, as 'space is not a scientific object removed from ideology and politics; it has always been political and strategic' (Lefebvre in Soja, 1980: 210).

Hence Lefebvre (1991; see also Harvey, 2019a; Ropo and Salovaara, 2019) offered a seminal distinction between conceived, perceived and lived space that provides a useful vocabulary that will help us navigate the contested terrain of space and place within which workers practice leadership. For Lefebvre, conceived space is that which is 'planned' (Taylor and Spicer, 2007) from above, for example, by town planners, executives and policymakers who have a pre-conceived notion of how a space should be used, often to maintain processes of capital accumulation. Perceived space denotes the ways in which we come to know space through our sensory experiences (touch, smell, and so on). Lived space concerns the meanings and emotions people relate to space through everyday life.

Following Harvey (2019a), we draw on these categories dialectically, choosing to interpret leadership – the creation of direction, and contesting of direction, between people, places, spaces and material objects – as working through, against and between all three.

In placing our analysis we also need to ask more specifically, as Toscano (2004: 199) does, where in space worker contestation may occur, asking ourselves 'where does militancy take place, what…are the "places of politics", and in what sense do they overlap with the places of the economy'. As we can be justifiably sceptical about the usefulness of knowledge produced within the 'centres' of power for addressing these questions – with leadership studies being no exception – we need to focus our inquiries instead at the 'margins' (hooks, 2015). For Toscano (2004: 199), the Italian tradition of 'workerism' (*Operaismo*), which proceeds from the basis that workers themselves hold the power to overturn exploitative economic and social relations, and in particular its method of workers inquiry, offers an important means of drawing together a Marxist reading of space with a praxis of inquiring into disputes within the production process. Doing so will help in the task of filling in the absence of workers from studies of leadership space and place.

## Workers inquiry: Genesis and strengths

Whilst some accounts may infer an inherent politics of space, the method and tendency of the workers inquiry we discuss begins with a precept posited by Ed Emery (1995: 1), which is that 'before we make politics' we have to understand the class composition that constructs it. This we do through a process of inquiring into the 'exact and positive knowledge of the conditions in which the working class – the class to whom the future belongs – works and moves' (Marx, 1938).

Workers inquiry is a process that combines research with organising. Its focus on research needing to fulfil a practical function of developing knowledge of organising means that we need to consider its development and relevance in relation to practice as much as theory. The roots of the method can be traced back to Karl Marx's (1938) relatively unknown attempt at a postal survey in 1880. In this survey, Marx sought to connect the theory of Capital (Marx, 1990) to the experience of workers. Although there is no evidence of responses to the survey, Marx (1938) explained the aim was:

> to meet in this work with the support of all workers in town and country who understand that they alone can describe with full knowledge the misfortunes from which they suffer, and that only they, and not saviours sent by Providence, can energetically apply the healing remedies for the social ills to which they are a prey.[1]

The survey was both an attempt to understand new conditions of work, but also a spur to organising. As Haider and Mohandesi (2013) have argued, this 'granted a strategic role to research' within the workers' movement. The explicit approach of workers inquiry was not taken up at the time. However, the method is implicitly present within any organising: it is first necessary to understand conditions before organising to change them.

The ideas of workers inquiry were later taken up by a series of small radical publications and organisations (Woodcock, 2014). In the 1940s, in the United States, the Johnson-Forest Tendency – of which CLR James was a prominent member – experimented with forms of worker writing. This included *The American Worker* (Romano and Stone, 1946), the first part written by a factory worker and the second by Grace Lee Boggs (a member of the Johnson-Forest Tendency, published under a pseudonym). This worker writing was an attempt to bring together militants with workers, particularly those at the forefront of the technological revolutions that this

work was undergoing. *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in France undertook similar worker writing experiments, seeking 'to solicit testimonies from workers and publish them at the same time as it accords an important place to all forms of analysis concerning proletarian experience' (Lefort, 1952). Unlike many of the dominant Marxist organisations at the time, these can be understood as attempts to return to the importance of workers' experiences. Rather than the party as leader, this was a search for forms of analysis and leadership from the workplace, bearing some methodological similarities, therefore, to more critical ethnographic and anthropological accounts of leadership (Edwards, 2015; Sutherland, 2018).

These smaller interventions were taken up more widely through their rediscovery in Italy (and translation) in the 1960s. Again, the question of leadership was important to those experimenting with forms of workers inquiry. In the factories of the north of Italy, technological and organisational changes were re-shaping workplaces. New struggles were unfolding with young factory workers. They accepted neither the leadership of the trade unions, nor the Italian Communist or Socialist parties. Striking against the new conditions of work, a new flashpoint emerged after the union at the FIAT factory in Turin negotiated a return to work. Young workers protested outside the union's offices in what became known as the *Piazza Statuto* revolt. While some saw this rift between these young workers and the unions/parties as a crisis, others – who became known as Workerists (*Operaismo*) – saw this as evidence of a new class composition emerging in Italy (Wright, 2017). They argued that a new composition of the 'mass worker' was emerging, estranged from the conditions of factory work, but equally not prepared to accept leadership from existing unions, which they viewed as too integrated with management and stifling of democratic participation. The Workerists first gathered within a journal called *Quaderni Rossi* and sought to use inquiry to understand how the mass worker was being formed, looking to the new forms of organisation, struggle and potential leadership that were emerging.

Across each of these examples there is an eclectic mix of methods: postal surveys, worker writing, interviewing and participant observation. However, in terms of methodology there is a principle that runs through each of these experiments: that research must be of use to the workers' movement. It also follows in Marx's (1843) footsteps, involving a 'ruthless criticism of all that exists', a ruthlessness 'both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be'. This involves a heterodox interpretation of Marxism pushed into trying to make sense of changes in class composition, even if this goes against mainstream understandings. A key part of this process is a hybridisation of the researcher and subject of practice: both are participants who research and organise. The later Italian experiments emphasised 'co-research' as a goal of workers inquiry, further eroding traditional distinctions between researcher and researched as the process unfolds.

There are some similarities and differences here with academic research that involves intervention. For example, Burawoy (1998: 14) argued that ethnographic research should not have the 'prohibition against reactivity, which can never be realized'; instead, 'reflexive science prescribes and takes advantage of intervention'. As Burawoy indicated, research always involves a tension between researcher and subject, but rather than trying to avoid this, he argued that it could be used effectively. This can take the form of participative research, for example, 'engaging those who might otherwise be subjects of research or recipients of interventions to a greater or lesser extent as co-researchers' (Reason and Bradbury 2008: 1). However, there has been a broad decline in workplace ethnographies from the 1980s onwards (Taylor et al., 2009), with much research attention now focussing elsewhere.

More recently, there has been a renewal of interest in, and practice of, workers inquiry. *Notes from Below* – from which examples are drawn in this article – is one example in the UK, as well as

*AngryWorkers*, *Ankermag* in Belgium, *Plateforme d'enquêtes militantes* in France, *Into the Black Box* and (the new) *Officina Primo Maggio* in Italy and *Invisíveis Goiâna* in Brazil. These groups have developed the theory and practice of workers inquiry in new ways. For example, Notes from Below (2018) uses an updated framework to analyse class composition as a material relation with three parts: the first is the organisation of labour-power into a working class (technical composition); the second is the organisation of the working class into a class society (social composition); the third is the self-organisation of the working class into a force for class struggle (political composition).

This is not simply a return to workplace ethnography, however. Instead, it involves the generation of knowledge based on workers' own writing or through collaboration with researchers – many of whom are outside the traditional academic context. For workers inquiry, intervention is not only encouraged because it improves the quality of the research, but because it is also the aim of the project. It therefore involves a relationship with the labour movement – whether more established or nascent – and builds upon practices that workers already use: before trying to change conditions, it is first necessary to understand what those conditions are. This process is, of course, shaped by the politics of workers who choose to write about their own experiences and change their conditions of work, as well as the victories and defeats of the labour movement.

The writing explored through the framework we will shortly introduce comes from inquiries: worker writing, co-writing, interviews, leaflets, bulletins and so on. These projects are about producing new knowledge of production and work, but also about identifying successful workplace resistance and leadership.

While we do not claim our study as bearing empirical status, we did apply a dialectical approach to the way in which we looked for and interpreted leadership in our worker inquiry texts. We first sought out a purposive sample of workers' inquiries from which we could draw broader conceptual lessons. Already familiar with this terrain, we identified the journal *Notes from Below* as offering access to a body of material because of its specialism in publishing workers inquiry. A second step involved each author reading through the journal, which provided the basis for an initial scoping discussion, which yielded the insight that leadership practice was most evident in writing that was authored from the direct experiences of workers, organisers or hybrid worker-organiser-academics, rather than from authors making more issues-based, conceptual or methodological contributions. Based on that insight, we pursued a third step of collectively identifying a pool of articles that could be read in more depth for the presence and practice of leadership, which was supplemented by other workers' inquiries we were familiar with from elsewhere that were a good fit with our criteria, eventually narrowing our pool down to 32 articles and three books.

In keeping with our conceptual focus, we interpreted the presence of leadership as workers offering a form of (contested and political) direction through their spatial practices but also as a discourse that was employed by workers and employers, which could in turn be bolstered or critiqued through workers' practice. We knew of some of these texts as reviewers and editors, and had occasionally more direct knowledge of the struggles through participation. As a fourth and final step we read the texts against our working definition of leadership, agreeing on the practices of *exposing* and *re-placing* and their mutual dimensions through a process of iterative discussion and reading. These categories also seemed plausible to us in relation to workers' practices we had studied and participated within. However, we acknowledge that these insights are limited by our particular positioning as researchers engaged with specific groups of workers. These claims can both be enriched and challenged through further research.

## Leadership place and space through workers inquiry

We now illustrate – and speculate – how a workers inquiry approach to place and space might enrich knowledge within leadership studies. We propose two practices of workers inquiry that can enliven the leadership literature, presented through a dialectical reading of workers inquiry studies in relation to the leadership and Marxist space and place literatures. These practices can be read as potentially discrete but also as potentially interleaving, either approach offering possibilities for the development of knowledge through future research.

First, we view *exposing* as a practice that questions and contradicts the official accounts of leadership offered by senior organisational leaders. This practice therefore focuses on the interface between language and the material, between what organisations profess and how conceived and lived spaces either bolster or contradict these claims. In more detail, workers, through a process of spatial engagement, reveal executive leadership rhetoric as riven with (class) contradictions and untruths. We see three dimensions at play within exposing. 'Suffering' articulates the ways in which workers experience the top-down place-shaping of executive leaders as oppressive, challenging corporate rhetoric to lay bare the daily lived realities of manoeuvring within these spaces in order to make a living. 'Deciphering' denotes the ways in which workers seek to make sense of the bewildering and distributed spatial hierarchies of organisations as a means of learning where to target resistance efforts. 'Embodying' presents the lived and sensual experiences of workers within certain 'shaped' spaces.

Second, we view *re-placing* as signifying the generative ways in which workers inquiry re-purposes places, often ones dominated by managerial and neoliberal control, for alternative forms of leadership. We see three dimensions at play within re-placing. 'Subverting' refers to notions of working from within neoliberal spaces to erode and repurpose them for workers' ends. 'Concretizing' explores the ways in which the urban geography of a place can be re-imagined as offering spaces of autonomy and empowerment. Finally, 'expanding' denotes the creation of new spaces through merging digital and in-person spatial experiences as a means of fostering worker consciousness and imagination.

The practices and their dimensions are represented in Figure 1:
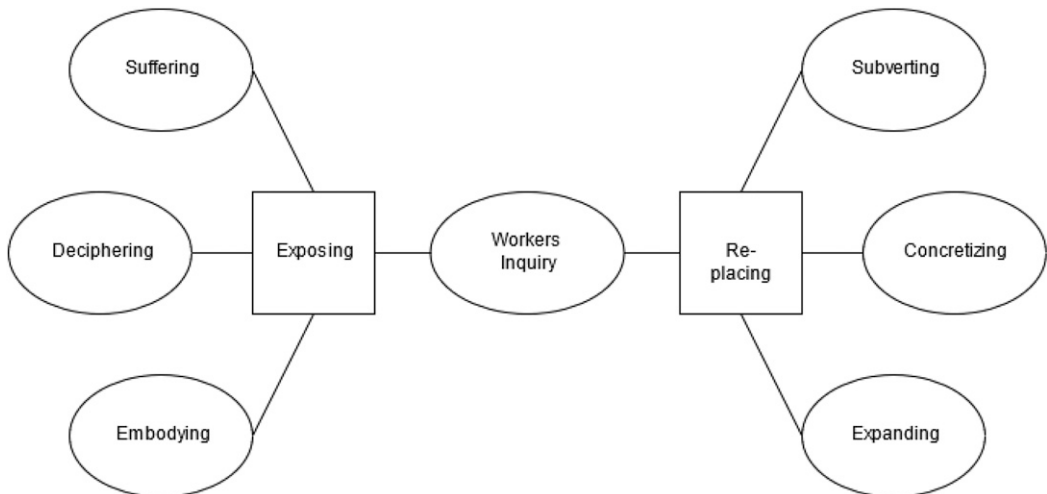


**Figure 1.** Practices and dimensions of a workers inquiry approach.

*Exposing.* Corporate leadership rhetoric abounds with positive and aspirational, yet often elusive and misleading, language concerning the practice and value of leadership (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Collinson, 2012; Collinson et al., 2018; Smolović Jones et al., 2020). Workers inquiry, through engaging with workers' daily experiences of toil within precarious spaces, offers a potentially powerful counter-narrative that demystifies the fabulation of leadership (Śliwa et al., 2013). *Exposing* shows us space that is conceived as controlling and stifling, even while it is spoken of by executives in emancipatory terms.

*Suffering.* Despite the notionally inclusive language of leadership, the reality of the spatial experiences of workers is alternatively revealed through inquiry as suffocating: spaces closing in on workers to restrict autonomy and meaningful connection. The case of the London School of Economics (LSE) is a helpful starting point in illustrating this dimension. London School of Economics claims to be 'committed to building a vibrant, equitable and truly inclusive environment in which staff and students from all over the world come together' (LSE, 2020), yet a workers inquiry account of the daily experiences of its outsourced cleaning staff tells a different story (Hughes and Campanile, 2018). The authors describe a situation of cleaners experiencing ever greater intensification of work amidst lower hours, poverty pay and an environment of 'racist bullying' (2018: 3). While the rhetoric of LSE emphasises a 'coming together' of diverse people within the institution, the cleaners speak of 'segregation' (2018: 5) between in-house and outsourced workers, which is manifested through space as well as material terms of employment. For example, the university cafes were marketed as ethical ventures and yet the cleaners were not permitted to use them. The workers inquiry of cleaners exposes spatial suffering that is the shadowy underbelly of an ever more commodified higher education sector in the UK, where the trebling of student fees sits alongside the expansion and redevelopment of spaces to attract a growing student population and external corporate events. Where the institution uses its spaces to grow revenue, the cleaners invite readers to see the 'growing work intensity…more people, more dirt, more work' (2018: 3). Spaces are cast as creating suffering and struggle for workers, while producing income for executives and learning for students and paying corporate customers.

Through offering an inquiry rooted in the daily experiences of space and place, we can begin to demystify the more ubiquitous pillars of the service economy and the inevitable rhetoric of positivity that accompanies them (Collinson, 2012). Call centres are the exemplar of this. Elliott (2019) therefore describes a spatial 'circuit' of outsourced call centre firms in the north east of England, situated there because of comparatively cheaper labour costs, access to a ready pool of over-qualified labour and the appealing tones of the regional accent, ideal for speaking to customers. Within this circuit 'people survive by finding work in one, staying for a few months, becoming exhausted, bored, or getting sacked, then moving on to another' (2019:1). Evoked in this inquiry is a sense of claustrophobic space, which jars against the positivity of the marketing material and motivational posters. Situated within a 'non-place' of a cheaply assembled industrial estate, the space constitutes for Elliot (2019: 3) the 'temporary, easily-moved and disposable' nature of the worker. Surviving within such places means finding ways of coping with the highly prescribed segmentation of worker movements and time, combined with temporary and precarious employment contracts. Working spaces are divided up, workers separated from one another by card swipe access and booths, contradicting the promotional message on corporate posters of 'Together we make a difference' (2019:4). More pressingly, during the COVID pandemic, workers inquiry helps us see these spaces, as with *Invisíveis* Goiânia's (2020) inquiry of a call centre in Brazil, as potentially lethal: workers being forced into offices convey how usually mundane features of office life – lack of fresh air, an air conditioning system pumped between rooms, dirt congealed in keyboards, the cramped conditions

of the daily commute – become menacing assemblages (Hawkins, 2015) of the powerlessness of people referred to in the leadership literature as followers (Ford and Harding, 2018).

Finally, we need to acknowledge the way in which workers inquiry can act as a geographical bridge between workers' experiences in spaces of work and the political-economic forces at play in their places of residency (Jackson, 2019). The two places become dialectically co-constitutive through the process of inquiry. Hence, cleaners are able to see that they are being exploited within university spaces in London because the 'high costs of living' brought about by the spread of finance capital and privatisation across most spaces of human life in the city (Hughes and Campanile, 2018: 3) force them into highly asymmetrical relations of power within the employment contract. Whereas in the north east of England, it is lack of employment opportunities, even for university graduates, which pushes people into claustrophobic call centre offices.

*Deciphering.* Here, we refer to accounts of workers that try to decipher who can be held accountable for their conditions within leadership structures that defy neat spatial understanding. Such forms of workers inquiry appear particularly useful for deepening knowledge of how collective forms of leadership can delegate and distribute unwanted or unpleasant aspects of work away from senior executives (Collinson et al., 2018). Within supermarkets, for example, we learn that the notional shift, team and store 'leaders' occupying shared spaces with workers are in reality 'proletarianised supervisors' (O'Donnell Savage, 2018: 2), managers caught in an 'equivocal' role as both subjects and objects of capitalist control (Willmott, 1997: 1338). These are people with minimally better employment contracts, who absorb worker and customer grievances and yet who have no power to enact meaningful change. Hence the distribution of 'leadership' in space is in effect the outsourcing of undesirable and routine managerial work within the spatial matrix of supermarket stores (Collinson et al., 2018). Meanwhile, the leadership shaping (Collinge et al., 2010) the spatial engagement of workers in the gig economy appears to be spectral, 'opaque technologies', their algorithms, designers and programmers situated in distant and unknown offices (Barr, 2018: 2). Hence, Cant's (2019) account of organising strike action amongst Deliveroo and Uber Eats platform food deliverers tells of protests being organised in sites far away from workers' places of work, in cities housing the companies' skeletal leadership staff, because human line managers in the spaces in which these workers labour are nowhere to be found.

*Embodying.* Whilst ethnographic accounts of leadership can offer an embodied sense of what it is like to work in a particular place (Ropo and Salovaara, 2019; Sutherland, 2018), workers inquiry has an edge in the sense that the workers who speak through its form usually cannot retreat to more comfortable and secure academic spaces at the culmination of 'field-work'. Accounts from workers are therefore more visceral, as the authors have skin in the game. 'Self-employed' food delivery work is presented by platform corporations and their surrogates in the media as liberating, coming with the ability to manage one's own schedule and control the means of production. Yet, the embodied realities of being answerable to machine leadership programmed through norms of value extraction are quite different. Cant (2019) therefore describes a deliverer's geography resisting such forms of distributed, technologized leadership – places fight back. The layout of restaurants, for example, and the habits of its managers to keep workers waiting in inconvenient spaces hamper the efforts of algorithms to keep workers – and therefore also capital – moving, in circulation. The hills of Brighton disrupt the logic of algorithmic leadership, adding considerable time to its calculations, which is felt through the swollen muscles and joints of workers:

Some of Brighton's roads are so steep that, back in the day, walls were built half-way down the worst culprits in order to stop runaway carts from killing people. Not only did getting up these hills

hurt, but each big hill you did reduced the potential length of your shift. A decent two-and-a-half hour evening shift would involve 20-plus miles of cycling, up and down hills. If you were working at a weekend, you typically wanted to stay out for five or more hours – and by the point you got to four hours it was difficult to get up a steep road without walking (Cant, 2019: 26–27).

Similarly, the dispersed and distributed spatial leadership of universities, segmented across faculty and administrative buildings, and between external contractors, turns in on cleaners. Working in isolation in a building, these cleaners are more vulnerable to assault, blackmail and bullying (Hughes and Campanile, 2018). The dark side of distributed and outsourced leadership, which in practice looks more like delegated control, is therefore felt through the bodies of cleaners, who are spatially isolated: 'Abusers would assign women to particular buildings and assault them at times when they knew they would be alone' (2018: 6). Cleaners come to experience their bodies as disembodied – as 'ghosts' (2018:9), their status and race rendering them invisible to centrally contracted staff and students. The workers' demand to be 'no longer invisible' (2018:9) can therefore be interpreted as an embodied one, informed by the alienated, ghostly experiences of occupying spaces where your presence is only marginally recognised.

To summarise our account of *exposing*, workers inquiry offers a potentially compelling means for us to learn, through engagement with practice, about the contradictions of official leadership rhetoric, which more often translate into spatial forms of control conceived from afar, alongside the delegation of unwanted and unpleasant managerial work to the proximate spaces of work. Remaining, however, is a need for us to explore how leadership space and place can be re-imagined more positively as a means of better understanding and building alternative forms of practice and we refer to this as a task of 're-placing'.

*Re-placing.* Involving as it does a reframe of the usual focus on who it is that enacts leadership, workers inquiry will necessarily suggest alternative practices driven from below. We speculate that these will not dispense with the collective and distributed emphasis in leadership studies, nor the sense that leadership is something enacted through practice rather than the behaviours of senior leaders (Raelin, 2019). However, what we gain from workers inquiry is a more grounded and conflict-rich account, which places power, its imbalances and reversals, at the heart of the analysis (Collinson, 2018). Moreover, we can gain a sense of these emerging dialectically through the places and spaces of capital, which in turn are challenged and re-shaped through the leadership acts of workers.

*Subverting.* Neoliberal spaces are defined by a certain cellular and individualising geography: free market ideology embeds itself in the conceived spaces of organisations. However, a key contention of Marxism is that it is precisely within spaces where the forces of capital seem at their strongest that potential for revolt and the generation of alternative possibilities exists (Cant, 2019; Harvey, 2019a). For Panzieri (2017), these are the 'development points' of capital, places where it experiments with its more radical technologies, where one of the effects, he states, is to force awareness of the degree to which working people are being exploited, and hence also creating the conditions for potential revolt. Moreover, as Harvey (2019a) reminds us, such places become sites of contradiction and competing priorities (Hambleton, 2015), where the interests of government actors and citizens' groups will frequently contradict capital's drive to move across and beyond boundaries as it grows and expands. Workers inquiry therefore offers us sight of how such spaces can be subverted by workers.

LSE's cleaners tell us that the cellular and distributed way in which they are dispersed across campus can generate a kind of 'busy loneliness' that 'prevents the everyday communication which

forms the basis of workers' power' ([Hughes and Campanile, 2018](): 4). However, it can also mean that:

> compared to say, a factory assembly line, cleaning work can allow for a degree of mobility around the workplace which escapes the levels of monitoring sought by management...The most militant cleaners used this to their advantage to organise the strike: discussing in person or through WhatsApp, convincing colleagues, and distributing union membership forms were all possible during work hours ([2018]():4).

Similar dynamics are found in the inquiry of [Buckley (2018)](), who describes the struggle of outsourced shoe factory workers in Vietnam, working for a company called 'Shoe Land' (a pseudonym). People were kept apart in separate workshops, yet strike action could be led by workers building the bases of shoes, without which all production ground to a halt. The segmentation of workers could therefore be overcome through the leadership acts of a group of 'base' workers in one space refusing to work and inviting the solidarity of their colleagues in other workshop spaces.

For Deliveroo and Uber Eats riders, the algorithm of the delivery app led workers in Brighton to a square in the city centre between deliveries ([Cant, 2019]()). This was initially reported as an impediment as it meant riders needing to cycle or drive unnecessarily back and forth across the city. [Cant (2019)]() believes that this pattern of work is informed by the need in piece-wage forms of employment (payment for product or service delivered rather than for time spent at work) to generate a surplus of labour, where a measure of idle workers is necessary to maintain demand for work and therefore also lower wages ([Marx, 1990]()). Yet workers who would otherwise have laboured as atomised individuals now had the possibility of assembly. Congregating around the bench of a local restaurant, the workers began sharing grievances and knowledge about the approach and structure of the company's leadership. By the time of the strike the square was transformed into a politically charged space, one where members of the public were enrolled as supporters, a meeting place to begin collective cycling processions through the city and a place where sympathetic but wavering workers could be talked around.

Workers discovered that the lack of rights entailed in a 'self-employed' rider's contract and the reliance of the companies on the flexibility of workers to appear (or not) in designated spaces meant that workers held considerable capacity for disrupting revenue. As workers were not designated as employees, the cumbersome spatial work of legally mandated consultations and postal ballots could be disregarded, with workers able to focus on the more direct tasks of building spaces where intelligence could be shared, tactics agreed and enthusiasm generated – in the square but also through chance meetings outside restaurants. Moreover, as workers did not need to notify the company of strike action, they could simply agree not to turn up on a particular day, meaning that leading an emptying of space took on a politically charged connotation. The 'ghosts' of the service economy become visible through their absence in space.

*Concretizing.* 'Concretizing' describes inquiries in which the urban geography of a place is re-imagined and turned into spaces of autonomy and empowerment through acts of leadership ([Spiller et al., 2020]()). Central within concretizing is how worker-researchers use and draw on their own and others' bodies to interact with and transform space ([Ropo and Salovaara, 2019](); [Ropo et al., 2013]()).

In this regard, [Cailhol and Kristanadjaja (2018)]() describe how workers at the hotel chain Hyatt in Paris went on strike over low pay and outsourcing. Central to the campaign was reinventing 'luxury' spaces for the wealthy as ones of worker voice. Hence, 'every morning, from 7 am, [the workers] bang instruments underneath the hotel's windows...we wake the clients' ([2018]():1). The street space

outside the hotel was appropriated as one in which a collective leadership of workers could be articulated, as they engaged passers-by and tourists, gathering donations and support. In Vietnam, the base workers initially re-appropriated spaces directly outside the workshops, calling colleagues to join them, but soon took their strike outside the factory gates. Here they doused scab workers passing through in pungent shrimp paste, '[leaving] a strong, unpleasant smell on clothes that is very difficult to remove' (2018:4). Located on a main road essential for the flow of capital in the city, workers were able to stop traffic, using 'physical bodies as a roadblock' (2018:4). The road was transformed into a space of demands and banners rather than for the through-flow of a capitalist economy.

Crucial in concretizing is the internationalisation of space. The spaces from which immigrant workers have migrated flow into the workplace, generating energy and agency. Cant (2019), for example, describes the international composition of delivery riders, who bring with them the often militant norms and practices of their countries of origin. The initial plan of the largely British-born executive of the union for a patient building up of a branch prior to strike action was disrupted by a group of Brazilian workers who had decided that they would move quickly to a strike, the energy for which led the formal leaders of the union's local executive to move with them. In the LSE dispute, samba bands and dancing introduced by the strong contingent of Latin American workers energised protests and picket lines (Hughes and Campanile, 2018). For NGO workers, internationalisation of space can mean bringing the presence of those they are supposed to be helping into the corporate and technocratic spaces of their organisations. For example, Somani (2018) describes how the staff at Save the Children in the UK gained an apology from their organisation for bestowing a 'global legacy' award on the former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, who had been instrumental in the invasion of Iraq.

*Expanding.* Here we look for leadership in instances where workers inquiry stretches leadership spaces beyond the here and now of physical environments. Leadership studies usually focuses on the interactions of face-to-face groups and, probably for practical reasons of ease of data gathering, rarely offers glimpses into the leadership of and within digital spaces, with some exceptions (Carroll and Simpson, 2012). Workers inquiry can provide insight, however, into how leadership is enacted in both digital and hybrid spaces.

Digital space can be gamified by workers inquiry to generate an embodied sense of consciousness about the agency of workers to lead. 'Momentum' (Parkes, 2019), for example, portrays in metaphor form the feeling of moving and gaining traction in space that comes with workers' movements winning – through the player controlling a ball that absorbs workers and grows in size, strength and speed. 'A worker's guide to espionage' (Colestia, 2019), more subtly, teaches players about the relational practices needed by worker-leaders. Players navigate the geography of an office, inviting conversations with colleagues in various spaces, seeking to map where support for, and resistance to, a union and collective action may lie. Such games provide spaces for experimentation, fun and learning with low real-world stakes.

Perhaps the real strength of workers inquiry, however, is in demonstrating the potential of the leadership that can emerge in hybrid digital-physical spaces. Buckley's (2018) account of the Vietnam shoe factory describes the role of private Facebook groups in the dispute. These allowed communication across otherwise separated workshops. Workers pooled ideas and reminders of practical tasks, all in a way that was 'leaderless', according to the inquiry, but, we would add, 'leaderful' (Raelin, 2011), in the sense that leadership here can be envisaged as the emergence of direction (Crevani, 2018) through a digital space. The digital, however, merged with the physical in powerful ways at significant moments. For example, as the base workers walked out and others

joined, some workers were unaware of what was unfolding and their supervisors locked them in their workshops. Through engaging with their Facebook groups, workers were able to see what was underway and to force their managers to unlock the doors, allowing them out to join the strike. Food delivery riders of course are already adept at navigating hybrid digital-physical worlds, governed as their daily work patterns are by apps and algorithms but also by the geography of cities. Intimate knowledge of a city, mediated through the directions of an app, has the helpful side effect of making workers aware of where and how they can leverage disruption within the physical geography of their workplace (the city) (Cant, 2019).

To summarise our account of *re-placing*, workers inquiry offers a way of building up knowledge of spatial forms of leadership from the basis of first-hand worker experiences. Crucial here is being able to see how, even under challenging circumstances, workers can subvert the most conceived of spaces and enact alternative forms of leadership – turning some of the assumed strengths of capital back in on themselves. Our knowledge of embodied forms of spatial leadership is expanded through learning how workers use their bodies to creatively assert their agency through alternative conceptions of space, ones that are often rooted in internationalising and diversifying practices of leadership. Finally, workers inquiry offers us an important means of discovering how notions of space and place are expended through the imaginative and responsive use of technology.

Having made a case for the cross-fertilisation of leadership studies, workers inquiry and Marxism for better understanding leadership space and place, we conclude by summarising the importance of our contribution to the field and also offer some reflections on the challenges this approach may present for researchers. First, however, we summarise our workers inquiry practices in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Practices and dimensions of a workers inquiry approach.

| Practice | Dimension | Dimension description |
|---|---|---|
| Exposing: questions and contradicts the official account of leadership offered by senior organisational leaders through the spatial engagement of workers. | Suffering | Articulates the ways in which workers experience the top-down place-shaping of executive leaders as oppressive, offering a counter to corporate rhetoric. |
| | Deciphering | Ways in which workers make sense of the bewildering and often distributed spatial hierarchies of organisations. |
| | Embodying | The rich and lived experiences of workers articulated through their embodied accounts of working within certain corporately shaped spaces and places. |
| Re-placing: the generative ways in which workers inquiry can re-purpose places as ones that hold the possibility for alternative forms of leadership practice. | Subverting | Articulating how working from within neoliberal spaces can erode and repurpose them for workers' ends. |
| | Concretizing | Showing how the urban geography of a place can be re-imagined and turned into spaces of autonomy and empowerment. |
| | Expanding | The creation of new spaces through merging digital and in-person spatial experiences as a means of fostering worker consciousness and imagination. |

## Conclusion

Workers inquiry, in dialectical conversation with leadership studies and Marxism, offers a much-needed injection of class antagonism and conflict. It presents us with a way of learning about the lived realities of leadership as it is enacted upon workers – a practice of workers inquiry we referred to as *exposing* through direct and first-hand accounts. This is a perspective that is sorely needed within mainstream leadership studies, which remains largely the domain of celebratory accounts of executive leaders, and also for more critical accounts that yet tend to stop short of following through on the insight that 'followers' and 'leaders' usually do not have shared material interests. Workers inquiry is one important way in which we can learn about the lived material experiences of workers who operate in spaces that organisational leaders would have us believe are positive, flexible and emancipatory, yet very often in practice appear to be defined by stifling control and the dispersion and delegation of unwanted managerial tasks.

Importantly and in contrast, workers inquiry offers a vital means by which we can expand knowledge of how workers generate leadership through dialectically re-envisaging their lived spaces – a practice we referred to as *re-placing*. We lack empirical accounts of leadership as practiced in the everyday routine spaces of work in general, and rich, immersive and ethnographic accounts in particular (Sutherland, 2018). Workers inquiry goes a step further still in prioritising a particular kind of knowledge and spatial engagement that is currently barely even at the 'margins' of the field (hooks, 2015). Workers inquiry also instructs us to step beyond the conceived spaces of executive leaders and into the lived leadership spaces of workers. Here we find a wealth of vibrant place-shaping leadership that is filled with rich conflict, embodied drama and dynamic, liquid movement between digital and physical spaces. Workers inquiry offers a dialectical account of leadership space and place, where the act of research is in and of itself potentially also a leadership act, one that contributes to a larger collective leadership of workers globally.

To be sure, however, a workers inquiry approach to studying leadership space and place offers its own challenges to researchers employed in traditional higher education institutions and to leadership researchers in particular. These institutions are increasingly defined by their tendency to commercialisation and instrumentality, in particular in relation to research. Workers inquiry necessarily cuts against this grain, as its primary goal is achieving worker solidarity and emancipation – journal rankings are irrelevant within this logic. Further, whether we like it or not, ideas of leadership usually come packaged in cultural norms and myths of individualised executive power, and leadership researchers can be viewed through such a prism by employers, funders and organisational stakeholders: informal pressures amongst mainstream leadership scholars and within the workplace may be acute, therefore. In practical terms, workers inquiry requires research skills of generating worker-led knowledge that are informed by a shared political commitment. Presenting such work within more notionally politically neutral settings, such as prestigious academic conferences, may be uncomfortable for the audience, given that militant researchers' contributions seek to undermine the current consensus. Workers inquiry, after all, does not try to make existing spaces of organisational leadership more effective and efficient and only grudgingly seeks to make them more hospitable. Ultimately, the goal of workers inquiry is to build towards entirely new spaces and places led by workers, and as such it offers researchers an opportunity not only to generate new knowledge but also to help transform the world.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

## Funding

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## Note

1. This quote is from an online transcription of the English translation, published in *The New International* in 1938. The original was published in French by Marx in *La Revue Socialiste* in 1880.

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