Organization

Profaning Leadership Studies through Fiction: Haruki Murakami's 'A Wild Sheep Chase' Read as Leadership Literature

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The leadership literature is full of stories of heroic self-sacrifice. Sacrificial leadership behaviour, some scholars conclude, is therefore to be recommended. In this paper we follow Keith Grint's (2010) conceptualization of leadership as necessarily pertaining to the sacred, but we highlight the need for organization scholars to profane (Agamben, 2007) the sacralizations embedded in leadership thinking. One example of this, which guides us throughout the paper, is *A Wild Sheep Chase*, by the Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami. By means of a thematic reading of the novel, we discuss how it can contribute to profaning particular notions of sacrifice and the sacred in leadership thinking and how it points to a radical inversion of the relation between sacrifice and leadership. In the novel, self-sacrifice does not function as a way of establishing a leadership position, but to avoid the dangers associated with leadership, and possibly redeem humans from their current collective urge to become leaders. Inspired by Murakami's fictional example, we call organizational scholars to profane leadership thinking and, in doing so, open new vistas for leadership theory and practice.

Keywords

leadership, literary fiction, profanation, sacred, sacrifice

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Introduction

Rather than being predictive or descriptive, leadership theories are perhaps better described as prescriptive (Ciulla, 1995). This would mean that leadership studies is less concerned with representation and explanation than with the provision of desirable models of leadership. In fact, many leadership theorists may even be characterized as sculptors of attractive images of leadership that are themselves fictional (Spoelstra and Ten Bos, forthcoming). Myths about great leaders from the past help to create these attractive models and often figure in academic texts on leadership (e.g. Burns, 1978; Gardner, 1997). Fictional characters may have the same effect. To give one example, articulating his conception of 'servant leadership', Robert Greenleaf (2002/1977) acknowledges that he was inspired by a fictional character in Hermann Hesse's *Journey to the East*.

Following Grint (2010), who has argued that leadership can only function by establishing sacred spaces, we suggest in this paper that leadership theories follow the same logic. They essentially create images of leadership that are sacred and therefore cannot be touched. For example, empirical tests of transformational leadership tend to suggest that this form of leadership is superior to its alternatives, namely, laissez-faire leadership and transactional leadership (Yammarino and Bass, 1990). Even when many scholars started to point out the dangers of charisma - which is one of the characteristics of transformational leadership - its proponents were quick to point out that 'authentic' transformational leadership could never be morally questionable (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999). In other words, the theory is not challenged when empirical facts render it problematic.

It is against this background that we read Haruki Murakami's novel *A Wild Sheep Chase* as a profanation of academic and popular notions of leadership. In particular, we focus on the ways in which leadership scholars have recently begun to advocate self-sacrificial leadership behaviour. We argue that these studies sacralize particular forms of leadership, and further that such sacralizations call for profanation because of the problematic effects they produce. *A Wild Sheep Chase* provides, perhaps surprisingly, strategies for a profanation of leadership.

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The nameless protagonist of the novel is a co-founder of a media and advertising agency. All of a sudden, he finds himself chasing a mysterious sheep who, by way of entering their bodies, turns ordinary people into leaders. The protagonist's friend, called 'the Rat', however, kills himself as the sheep finally attempts to take possession of him. We use this story to reflect upon the leadership literature. In our reading, Murakami's novel accomplishes two things. First, it displays the process of the sacralization of leadership by exaggerating that which separates leadership from mundane reality. Second, it offers its own take on the relation between leadership and self-sacrifice: the real hero in Murakami's novel is not some heroic leader, but the one who kills himself in the ultimate act of self-sacrifice, against the prospect of becoming a leader. We recognize in the novel a number of academic and popular notions of leadership, but because of the dramatizations, absurdities and reversed logic of the story these notions lose their sacred nature. This, we argue, is a strategy of profanation that neutralizes some potentially oppressing myths of leadership.

We proceed as follows. In the first section we provide an overview of the notions of sacrifice and the sacred in leadership literature, and argue that leadership studies thrives on the production of sacred spaces. We then introduce Giorgio Agamben's concept of profanation. After a discussion of our method, we provide an outline of the novel in terms of leadership. We continue by analyzing examples of profanations of notions of leadership found in *A Wild Sheep Chase*. We particularly focus on the self-sacrifice of the Rat, and relate this act to the concept of self-sacrifice in leadership studies. In the conclusion, we reflect upon Murakami's implicit profanation of leadership theories and our own explicit one, and call on organizational scholars to continuously profane sacralized notions of leadership. We also draw implications for the use of literary fiction in organizations studies.

(Self-)sacrifice and the sacred in leadership studies

The theme of self-sacrifice is particularly strong in so-called 'heroic leadership approaches' such as transformational leadership and charismatic leadership, which have dominated leadership studies since the 1980s and 1990s (Parry and Bryman, 2006). Within these approaches, self-

sacrifice is primarily attributed to heroic leaders, who may sacrifice themselves 'in the service of a beneficial cause' (Shamir et al., 1993: 582). One typical example, often mentioned in the literature, is Lee Iacocca, who reduced his salary to one dollar in his first year as CEO of Chrysler. But self-sacrifice is not only a feature of leaders. It may also be seen among followers, since charismatic leaders often have 'expectations for follower self-sacrifice and for performance beyond the call of duty' (Shamir et al., 1993: 578). In fact, the self-sacrifice of the leader and self-sacrifice of followers stand in direct relation to one another: the leader's self-sacrifice may result in the charisma that inspires followers to sacrifice themselves in return (Conger and Canungo, 1987). In his autobiography, Iacocca described this exchange of self-sacrifices as 'equality of sacrifice' which, according to him, was the secret to Chrysler's much celebrated resurrection:

> When I started to sacrifice, I saw other people do whatever was necessary. And that's how Chrysler pulled through. It wasn't the loans that saved us, although we needed them badly. It was the hundreds of millions of dollars that were given up by everybody involved. (Iacocca 1984: 242)

Self-sacrifice among leaders has the power to trigger self-sacrifices among followers, which would then result in improved business performance. According to transformational leadership scholar Bruce Avolio, the 'utility of their sacrifices' is very much on the mind of most self-sacrificing leaders (Avolio and Locke, 2002: 177).

The first articles to systematically discuss self-sacrifice in leadership appear in the late 1990s but have since come to constitute a research topic in its own right (Choi and Mai-Dalton, 1998, 1999; De Cremer and Knippenberg, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c; Javidan and Carl, 2004; Matteson and Irving, 2006; Singh and Krishnan, 2008; Yorges et al., 1999). In these studies self-sacrifice is commonly defined as the abandonment of the leader's self-interest in favour of his or her followers, their organization or the common good. One representative definition is offered by Choi and Mai-Dalton (1999: 399): 'self-sacrifice in organizational settings is defined as the total/partial abandonment, and/or permanent/temporary postponement of personal interests, privileges, or welfare in the (1) division of labour, (2) distribution of rewards, and (3) exercise of

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power.' The subsequent question that these studies ask is: 'What are the benefits of self-sacrificing leadership behaviour for organizations?' Typical findings include that self-sacrifice leads to the attribution of charisma (Conger and Canungo, 1987; Choi and Mai-Dalton, 1999; De Cremer and Knippenberg, 2004c), the attribution of legitimacy (Choi and Mai-Dalton, 1999), the encouragement of follower reciprocity (Choi and Mai-Dalton, 1999), an increase in organizational commitment and team efficiency (De Cremer et al., 2004; Yoon, 2006), and a decrease in perceived autocracy (De Cremer et al., 2004). Most of these studies, then, confirm Iacocca's conclusion that self-sacrificial leadership behaviour can be a profitable strategy for organizations. Since the generation of organizational benefit is ultimately a business leader's main concern, this instrumentalization raises questions of whether any real sacrifice is taking place. As in Mauss' (1970) classic study *The Gift*, there is a question over whether the sacrifice is really freely given, or whether it is simply an investment or moment in a broader process of calculation and exchange (Dunne and Spoelstra, 2010).

However, the popularity of the theme of sacrifice in leadership studies is not limited to cost-benefit analysis. More normative-oriented studies also exist. Bass and Steidlmeier (1999), for example, have used self-sacrifice or the abandonment of self-interest as a way of distinguishing 'pseudo-authentic leaders', who 'profess strong attachment to their organization and its people but privately are ready to sacrifice them' (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999: 187), from authentic leaders who engage in self-sacrifice 'for the sake of attaining virtue and justice' (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999: 195). In other words, for Bass and Steidlmeier authentic leaders are not engaged in self-sacrifice to make a profit, but have a genuine orientation towards the good.

This normative approach towards sacrifice and self-sacrifice can also be read into some earlier work on transformational leadership (Burns, 1978) and servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977/2002). Even though these works rarely explicitly use the term sacrifice, they also portray ideal leadership as rooted in an abandonment of self-interest. For example, Greenleaf's idea of the leader as servant suggests that great leaders abandon their own interests when serving their followers. For Greenleaf it is not enough to make self-sacrifices that promise a good return on investment. To truly serve means that one gives without reciprocity in the form of power or

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status. Indeed, the 'genuine humility' that characterizes the great leader must also be 'open and ready to receive the gifts of others, whatever they may be' (Greenleaf, 2002: 325).

Similar images of successful and/or moral leadership can also be found in popular leadership books. In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins (2001: 21) argues that the leader releases him or herself from subjectively derived self-interest in order to exercise what he calls 'extreme personal humility'. 'Level 5 leaders', Collins' term for supreme leadership, 'channel their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company'. In popular segments of the leadership literature one also finds frequent references to great figures such as Socrates, Jesus and Gandhi, portrayed as the best examples of leaders who sacrifice their own interest for a higher ideal. Koestenbaum (2002: 128) even refers to Socrates when he concludes that 'the bottom line' for business leaders, as any other leader, 'is the willingness to die. To risk death is to risk oneself, even sacrifice oneself, for the sake of the company or the customer, the partnership or the client – for what is right'.

This line of argument directly links (self-)sacrifice and scapegoating (as argued also by Grint, 2010). It is either implicitly or explicitly expressed by the collective, who have been led astray into for instance economic or moral crisis: the leader who either gives up his *(sic)* wages or leaves office takes on a collective guilt, and become himself the sacrificial victim (Grint, 2010: 99). In René Girard's (1977, 1987) theory of mimetic desire, the organization of the social rests upon a repeated ritual that can restore order in the crisis where everyone mimes the desire of everyone else. This ritual is the sacrifice of a scapegoat who, for instance during the carnival, is made king and after that ceremoniously executed. Girard (1977) further argues that the sacrifice of Christ is (the beginning of) the end of sacrificial killings, since it produces redemption: Christ's death concerns everybody and intends to break with the logic of scapegoating. This redemptive event has already, in Girard's (Catholic) view, had social consequences in the West's history and its development of, for instance, the welfare states. In some fundamental (if Girardian) sense, such sacrifice is also the end to heroic theories of leadership, since these are bound to continue the vicious circle of making and breaking a king/CEO/manager.

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More recently, then, leadership studies has started to develop post-heroic approaches to leadership (Collinson and Collinson, 2005; Fletcher, 2004; Parry and Bryman, 2006). These approaches attempt to break with the assumption that effective leadership is dependent on one single heroic figure. Instead, they argue for collective forms of leadership, emphasizing the role that followers play in the constitution of leadership (Howell and Shamir, 2005; Shamir, 2007), or arguing that 'self-leadership' has become important for all organizational members (Manz and Sims, 2001). One example of a post-heroic approach is 'shared leadership' (Pearce and Conger, 2003; Raelin, 2003), which proposes leadership without leaders, or at least without one central leader. This idea lies also at the heart of so-called 'distributed leadership' (Gronn, 2002), which holds that leadership can be found 'not solely in the individual at the top, but in every person at entry level who in one way or another, acts as a leader' (Goleman, 2002: 14, cited in Grint, 2010: 90).

One may question, however, whether it still makes sense to use the term 'leadership' when the subject of analysis can perhaps be better understood with reference to other topics within organization studies, like group behaviour, team building, team work, spontaneous organization and synergy, horizontal control, or alternative forms of organization. In other words, the problem with post-heroic approaches to leadership is that they might be said to make the very concept of leadership disappear. Grint's analysis of leadership explains why this may be the case, and this pertains directly to our interest in sacrifice and the sacred in this paper. For Grint (2010: 89) leadership *is* the social space created by sacralization: the sacred is 'not so much the elephant in the room but the room itself – the space that allows leadership to work'. Self-sacrificial leadership behaviour, as advanced in leadership studies, has precisely this function: it attempts to map the organizational advantages of sacralizing the leader. Post-heroic leadership approaches, in contrast, attempt to think leadership without sacralization, hence contradicting the very nature of leadership. Grint therefore questions the very possibility of post-heroic leadership, suggesting that conceptually it is at worst oxymoronic and at best unrealistic.

However, Grint's critique of post-heroic leadership is not limited to this conceptual point. His thesis that we cannot dispose of leadership by replacing it with other functions also has an important ethical and political dimension. In referring to the 'execution of distasteful but

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necessary tasks by leaders' (2010: 94, emphasis added), Grint assumes that there is something inherently desirable in leadership that organizations should not do without. But this alleged necessity of leadership is never justified. Furthermore, he suggests that leadership causes a form of inequality, legitimated by the sacralization of leadership, that is 'mutually beneficial' (2010: 95). From such a position, the ideal of a democratic, post-heroic leadership is not only conceptually impossible – because 'leadership' is defined by the sacred space that it occupies – but is also empirically undesirable. Finally, Grint argues that post-heroic leadership is unsustainable in practice because it would 'undermine the sacred nature of leadership' and thereby 'destabilize the ability of an organization to function' (Grint, 2010: 103).

To summarize, Grint shows that the forms of self-sacrificial leadership behaviour promoted in leadership studies (and by business leaders such as Lee Iaccoca) are directly linked to the nature of leadership itself: by means of self-sacrificial behaviour a sacred space is established that is constitutive of leadership practice. This is a valid point and an important insight for the study of leadership. However, we take issue with Grint's claim that these scared spaces are beyond contestation. The fact that sacred spaces are needed *for leadership* does not mean that they are needed for, say, organizations or society. Indeed, leadership scholars have for a long time pointed towards some of the negative effects associated with leadership practices. The power structures that the sacred spaces of leadership can consecrate are well-known, though relatively 'silenced' in the leadership literature. For example, one early study of leadership (Tead, 1935: 211) notes that 'when people are in a position to exercise power over others, certain dangers are likely to creep in'. These dangers include 'emotional instability', 'obsessive fears', 'inferiority feelings' and 'sadistic tendencies' (Tead, 1935). Some of these dangers resonate with more recent writings that associate leaders with narcissism (Kets de Vries, 1985), followership with helplessness and alienation (Gemill and Oakley, 1992), and leadership with masculine bias and gender discrimination (Calás and Smircich, 1991). Others have pointed towards the negative cultural effects of a strong belief in the charismatic leader as some kind of 'saviour' (Khurana, 2002; Rieff, 2007). Grint's insight that leadership phenomena by definition include sacred spaces reminds us that these dangers are not only to be explained in terms of the personality of the leader, but are also actualized through the sacred spaces in which the relation between leaders and followers is consecrated.

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The negative effects of the sacralization of leadership cannot, however, be effectively countered through the way leadership studies currently treats notions of leadership. Instead of problematizing them, it tends to reproduce or create sacralized conceptual spaces, within which the necessity of leadership and the unequal power structures within the leader-follower relation are romanticized (Meindl et al., 1985) and uncontested (Gemmil and Oakley, 1992; Rost, 1991). For this reason, some leadership scholars have called into question the taken-for-grantedness of heroic notions of leadership, and have interrogated them through interpretive and conceptual studies (e.g. Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Barker, 2001; Gabriel, 1997). Our paper contributes to these efforts: drawing upon Giorgio Agamben's concept of profanation, we argue for the importance of profaning leadership studies and through our reading of Murakami's *A Wild Sheep Chase*, explore what happens when this is done.

From the sacred to the profane

The relationship between the sacred and leadership is intimate. The Greek root *hierós* of the very notion of hierarchy means holy or divine (see for a discussion, Grint, 2010: 91; Parker, 2009). According to Agamben (1998), the figure of the sacred is the first political paradigm of the West. It is only later that Christianity pairs it with the opposition 'the secular'; its ancient opposition is the profane (de la Durantaye, 2009: 378). Agamben further mistrusts the most widespread understanding of the term religion, namely, that it derives from the Latin *religare*, which refers to the act of relating and uniting. He argues that the word instead stems from *relegere*, which refers to the hesitation one must observe when faced with the separation between the sacred and the profane: '*Religio* is not what unites men and gods but what ensures they remain distinct' (Agamben, 2007: 75). The sacrifice is then the event that perpetually re-instantiates the sacred space as an important but basically useless place, since what is destroyed in sacrifice is the very usefulness of the thing (Bataille, 1989). Only by cutting a thing off from its worldly bonds, and thereby its possible utility, can an object (e.g. an animal or in our case a leader) be lifted from the world to the divine, otherworldly or unreal. To sacrifice, i.e., to make sacred, is to destroy the reality of a thing in order to give it a higher, divine, status (Agamben, 2007: 73).

Where sacralization separates something from the ordinary (e.g. the leader from the followers), profanation goes the other direction. Profanation neutralizes the power structures that are activated through the sacred: 'once profaned, that which was unavailable and separate loses its aura and is returned to use' (Agamben, 2007: 77). The 'return to use' is an important aspect of profanation: profanation does not annihilate the sacred, it rather incorporates the sacred in daily practices and thereby, at least temporarily, neutralizes its power effects.

In practice profanation occurs through 'touching' that which is considered sacred (and, for that reason, is considered to be 'untouchable'). Sometimes this can be taken literally: a participant in a sacrificial slaughter, for example, can profane organs that are meant for the gods by touching them with the hands, which causes 'a profane contagion, a touch that disenchants and returns to use what the sacred had separated and petrified' (Agamben, 2007: 74). In a secular context, the national flag, e.g. of the United States, may not touch the ground. But the sacred can also be touched in less literal ways. For Agamben (1993, 2007), one of the most effective forms of profanation occurs through play. 'Playland', Agamben (1993: 79) writes, 'is a country whose inhabitants are busy celebrating rituals, and manipulating objects and sacred words, whose sense and purpose they have, however, forgotten.' The rituals and separations are maintained but the sacralizations that once instantiated these separations has become powerless.

Elaborating his important distinction between profanation and secularization, Agamben (2007) sees secularization as a form of repression that 'leaves intact the forces it deals with by simply moving them from one place to another' (2007: 77). In other words, in secularization sacred spaces are not challenged; they remain operative but in a secular sphere. This is also why Grint's analysis of leadership in terms of the sacred should not be understood metaphorically: much of popular and academic thinking of leadership accepts basic religious notions and structures, but places them in a business (i.e. secular) context. As also Barker (2001: 472) notes, 'conventional understanding of leadership has been systematically constructed from other conventional knowledge about social hierarchies, and about their command and control structures'. These social hierarchies are more often than not of religious origin (e.g. they mobilize the notion of charisma, the visionary, or the divine right of kings) (Parker, 2009; Sørensen and Spoelstra, 2010). But even when these hierarchies are not of explicit religious origin, they still remove

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someone or something from ordinary life, and are in this sense established by the creation of sacred spaces. This, however, also shows why we cannot (and should not) accept Grint's assertion that the sacred within secularized forms of leadership is to be understood as necessary for organizations. Just like some religious laws deserve contestation (e.g. laws against abortion, euthanasia, suicide and the use of condoms, because of the sacred status of life), so do a range of leadership phenomena and theories call for profanation.

Apart from secularization, profanation must also be distinguished from demystification (Sørensen and Spoelstra, 2010). Demystification, a popular objective among critical leadership scholars (e.g. Guthey et al., 2009; Jackson and Parry, 2008), aims at the annihilation of that which is demystified: to demystify myths of the heroic leader would amount to showing that these leaders do not really exist. This is one of the central ideas behind Alvesson and Spicer's (2011) recent collection, for example. In the introduction, the editors argue that in depth case-studies of managers could 'disturb some of the heroic and damaging images of what a leader is and what they might do' (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011: 5). The separation between the real and the higher real, upon which notions of heroic leadership rest, is annihilated in the process. Profanation, in contrast, does not annihilate the separation between the follower and the leader. The divisions that separate the leader from the follower cannot simply be made to disappear, but they can, as de la Durantaye (2009: 379) argue in his reading of Agamben, be 'rendered inoperative and thereby deprived of their destructive power'.

Profanation, as far as leadership is concerned, can occur both in leadership practice and in relation to leadership concepts as developed in leadership studies. In practice, the sacred aura of a leader could be damaged, for example, when he or she is 'photographed in an "undignified" situation' (Žižek, 2004: 209). Our focus in this paper is not practice, but rather the concepts of leadership as they are used and developed in leadership studies. Our centre of attention is the idea of the self-sacrificing leader, which, as we have pointed out, is often implicit in popular leadership concepts such as charismatic leadership and transformational leadership. In our reading, Murakami's *A Wild Sheep Chase* profanes both scholarly and popular concepts of leadership that are deeply ingrained in Western culture. This does not mean that the separation

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between the leader and the follower is annihilated, but the mystical aura of self-sacrificing

leaders is neutralized in ways that may best be termed political or ethical.

The novel as method of profanation

There is now an established literature on the use of narrative fiction and other forms of popular

cultural artefacts within the study of organization (Bell, 2008; Beverungen and Dunne, 2007; De

Cock, 2000; De Cock and Land, 2005; Hassard and Holida,y 1998; Land and Śliwa, 2009;

Patient et al., 2003; Phillips, 1995; Rhodes and Westwood, 2008). It was the publication of

William Whyte's (1956) classic *The Organization Man*, where two chapters are dedicated to

'The organization man in fiction', that first brought the idea of using literary fiction into the

study of organization. Since then, organization studies can boast of a plethora of publications

using fiction, theorising its relevant application, or questioning its value. In the arena of teaching

it has been suggested that literary fiction can provide vicarious access to the lived experiences in

organizations and as such can function as a counter-balance to rationalist and reductionist

representations of organization (Śliwa and Cairns, 2007; Czarniawska-Joerges and Guillet de

Monthoux, 1984; Knights and Willmott, 1999).

In research it has also been argued that literary texts can help researchers to access and

understand the non-rational in organization, for example, the unconscious (Case, 1999), socially

unacceptable emotions (Patient et al., 2003), or pain and suffering (Burrell, 1997). Underlying

these uses of literary fiction within organization studies is the idea that both academic texts and

novels are forms of performative writing, often deploying structurally similar, if not identical,

genre conventions. Rhodes and Brown (2005: 469), write that:

> fiction has emerged as a methodological concern in three related ways: (1) fictionality
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> can be seen to be a characteristic of research writing in general and therefore; (2)
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> explicitly fictional stories can be regarded as appropriate empirical material for
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> organizational research; and (3) fictional genres can be used as a legitimate mode for the
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> writing of research.

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In this paper we follow the second of these approaches, taking Rhodes and Brown's idea that fiction can function as empirical material for analyzing organization. Yet, we want to broaden their point since fiction, as is the case with Murakami's novel, can also in itself contribute analytically and conceptually to the field of organization studies. In the broadest of terms this approach is justified by the recognition that organizational phenomena as well as the activity of thinking about them are always in a reciprocal relationship with a social and cultural context. Representations of leadership and management in popular culture thus directly shape the ways that people behave in organizations and make sense of their organizational lives (Bell, 2008). In relation to leadership, we might also note that representations of leadership both within the academic literature and within the field are often characterised in terms of myth, fiction and storytelling (Bourne, 2008; Gemmill and Oakley, 1992; Munro, 2005).

In our reading of *A Wild Sheep Chase* we find representations of leadership that are parallel to how leadership is conceptualised within the academic literature. However, at each turn of the story Murakami unsettles the sense that had been made in the previous sections and in the end offers no simple reading that can be mapped directly onto leadership theory. In our analysis, we argue that the novel profanes the concepts set up by leadership theory. It is in its capacity to profane our very understandings of the sacralizations that it works with and to enable a more playful engagement, more messy and less certain in its outcomes, that we see the real power of *A Wild Sheep Chase*.

As we show in our discussion below, the novel exaggerates, parodies and deconstructs notions of sacrifice and sacralizations within leadership studies. While it does not provide an answer to the question of what leadership should look like, it offers an evocative confrontation with our own assumptions of leadership and opens the possibility of thinking about it in new ways.

A Wild Sheep Chase: **Introducing the novel**

A Wild Sheep Chase, first published in Japanese in 1982, tells the story of a young advertising executive, who remains unnamed in the novel, thrown into a surreal world in which a shadowy right wing political leader, 'the Boss', controls the Japanese media. The Boss has derived his

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unsurpassable leadership skills from the spirit of a mystical sheep with a star on its back, which has taken possession of him.

Going in to work, the protagonist is visited by a 'strange man', who is the representative of the Boss's organization. From him we learn that the Boss has become terminally ill, leaving his organization in a serious crisis. The strange man believes that this crisis is caused by the departure of the mystical sheep from the Boss's body. He is convinced that the sheep has to be found in order to ensure the continuity of leadership and the integrity of the organization.

The protagonist is charged with finding the sheep since he has recently published a photograph in a small-circulation pamphlet produced by his agency that, on closer inspection, contains this mysterious sheep. The photograph is considered as evidence that the sheep exists and that there is something exceptional about it that distinguishes it from other sheep on the photograph and from all other sheep in the world:

> Aside from that particular sheep, all the others are ordinary Suffolks. Only that one sheep differs. It is far more stocky than the Suffolk, and the fleece is of another colour. Nor is the face black. Something about it strikes one as howsoever more powerful. I showed this photograph to a sheep specialist, and he concluded that this sheep did not exist in Japan. Nor probably anywhere else in the world. So what you are looking at now is a sheep that by all rights should not exist. (Murakami, 2003: 112)

Whilst bemused by his encounter with the strange man, and the absurdity of the task he is presented with, the protagonist of the novel is left with no choice but to embark upon the search because he is blackmailed by the threat that should he not find the sheep, his business will be bankrupted and his professional future destroyed.

He starts his search for the mysterious sheep. As the story progresses we discover that the sheep is now in the process of taking control of a character called 'the Rat', a childhood friend of the protagonist and - as we later find out - the son of the Boss. After arriving at a house up in the

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mountains, where the sheep has been tracked to and is now trying to take of possession of the Rat, the narrator discovers that the Rat is not there.

In one of the final episodes in the novel, we encounter the Rat in the guise of 'the Sheep Man'. The Rat has taken on the appearance of half-sheep half-human, changing his height, posture, voice and behaviour. He appears before the protagonist's eyes at will; his actual whereabouts, however, are difficult to determine: 'The Sheep Man was just like an animal. Approach him and he'd retreat, move away and he'd come closer' (Murakami, 2003: 254).

Having shed the appearance of the Sheep Man, the Rat visits the protagonist one evening and, drinking a beer together, they discuss the sheep and the Rat's reasons to resist being possessed by it, despite all of its temptations. The Rat explains that he has refused the sheep that would turn him into a leader, by committing suicide. His appearance that night at the bar is hence quite mystical. The protagonist asks him:

> "Did you have to go that far?"
> "Yes, I had to go that far. If I waited, the sheep would have controlled me absolutely. It was my last chance." (Murakami, 2003: 281)

Profaning the sacred in leadership

The narrative of the novel *A Wild Sheep Chase* stands in contrast to the main tenets of leadership literature in which the question whether leaders are born or made is a reoccurring theme (e.g. Bennis, 1989; Avolio, 2005). In the novel, leadership is neither an inherent, inborn quality nor an acquired skill. Rather, the capacity to lead is premised on being possessed by a sheep. Thus, the leader can be seen as a follower, not of an eagle or a lion, but of a sheep. The novel deploys a tone parodying that of a scientific ethnological discourse when the reader is informed about the source of the Boss's charisma. It owes its existence to a mystical sheep that, throughout the centuries, has been taking possession of various individuals, granting them special powers, including that of immortality.

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In parts of Northern China and Mongol territory, it's not uncommon to hear of sheep

entering people's bodies. Among the locals, it's believed that a sheep entering the body is

a blessing from the gods. For instance, in one book published in the Yuan dynasty it's

written that a 'star-bearing white sheep' entered the body of Genghis Khan... The sheep

that enters a body is thought to be immortal. And so too the person who hosts the sheep is

thought to become immortal. (Murakami, 2003: 188)

Charged with the task of finding the mystical sheep, the protagonist is put in a situation where

his business, his career and his entire life are invested in and dependent on the wild sheep chase

– a quest that in fact may be entirely futile, as the strange man who commissions him with this

assignment readily acknowledges:

"Do I have any choice?" I asked. "And what if no such sheep with a star on its back ever

existed in the first place?"

"It is still the same. For you and me, there is only whether you find the sheep or not.

There are no in-betweens... You hold the ball, you had better run for the goal. Even if

there turns out not to have been any goal." (Murakami 2003: 123)

The nameless protagonist is also referred to as '*imperius rex*' 'in the kingdom of

generalizations' (Murakami, 2003: 284), and his situation appears close to that of the reader. The

implication is clear: the protagonist as well as the reader are, together with everybody else,

caught up in what Girard (1977) above refers to as 'mimetic desire': we are all on a wild sheep

chase, relentlessly chasing the same sheep. The end goal ('even if there turns out not to have

been any goal') is to succeed in the quest for social climbing and become a leader: an individual

ontologically separated from the mass, touched only by the divine, secured in the sacred space of

leadership.

The Boss's separation, due to his position as a leader, from ordinary life is repeatedly profaned in

A Wild Sheep Chase. The novel suggests that the Boss is so unique that he has direct access to

the divine providences – access that he can share with the chosen by giving them God's

telephone number, in this case his chauffeur:

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"The Boss is an honorable man. After the Lord, the most godly person I've ever met."

"You've met God?"

"Certainly. I telephone Him every night."(…)

"The Boss gave me it a few years ago," said the chauffeur out of nowhere.

"Gave you what?"

"God's telephone number." (…)

"He told just you, alone, in secret?"

"Yes. Just me, in secret. He's a fine gentleman. Would you care to get to know Him?"

"If possible" I said.

"Well, then, it's Tokyo 9-4-5-..." (...)

"Thanks. I'll give him a call."

"That's the spirit," said the chauffeur. (Murakami, 2003: 127-128)

The introduction of a very mundane object, a telephone number, into the narrative about the
second 'most godly person' in the chauffeur's universe, serves as 'a profane contagion, a touch
that disenchants and returns to use what the sacred had separated and petrified' (Agamben, 2007:
77). The telephone is also used to create the silence necessary to uphold the sacred space of
leadership, i.e. quelling 'the anxiety of followers in and through the provision of safety and
security' (Grint, 2010: 101). On the phone, you can talk with the Lord about everything:

"All you have to do is to speak honestly about whatever concerns you or troubles you. No
matter how trivial you might think it is. God never gets bored and never laughs at you."
(Murakami, 2003: 128)

In the novel's representation of the Boss's leadership, we also encounter several instances of
sacrifice. The strange man, for instance, demonstrates a willingness to sacrifice himself in the
pursuit of the sheep, 'not for reasons of my personal loss, but for the greater good of all'
(Murakami, 2003: 121). Similarly, the Boss himself, by being possessed by the sheep – a notion
which, as we have argued above, profanes leadership as such – becomes sacrificed to the purpose
of empire building and organization. These examples remind of the way in which self-sacrificial

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leadership behaviour is advocated in normative strands of leadership studies. Just as, in normative accounts of self-sacrificial leadership behaviour, it remains unclear what the 'greater good' would involve and whom it would benefit. But in contrast to leadership studies, and Grint's argument for the importance of sacred spaces in organizations, the self-sacrifices presented in the novel do not establish the sacred as 'an essential mechanism for the performance of all forms of leadership' (Grint, 2010: 100). Rather, they discomfortingly hint that something is not right with, and perhaps is even 'unfortunate and embarrassing' (Grint, 2010: 100) about the role of sacrifice in leadership. In the representations of self-sacrifice in *A Wild Sheep Chase* we see a playful engagement with concepts of sacrifice and leadership as we find them in leadership studies, and through this engagement these concepts lose some of their sacred aura.

The profanations that take place in the novel are not limited to providing exaggerated, comic or absurd representations of leadership. Perhaps even more importantly, the novel also profanes the concept of sacrificial leadership behaviour through the mechanism of subversion. It shows how self-sacrifice of the (prospective) leader – which, as we have argued earlier, commonly serves as a way of exercising leadership and enhancing the position of the leader within the organization – can be turned against leadership and mobilised as a way to avoid it. Specifically, profanation through subversion is evident in the Rat's act of suicide, which is his final refusal to accede to his allotted place as the new Boss.

We read the Rat's suicide as an act of self-sacrifice necessary to effectuate – in an extreme and irrevocable manner – his unwillingness to be put in the position of leadership by submitting to the will of the sheep. Through self-destruction, then, the Rat paradoxically manages to maintain his right to self-determination.

The Rat's suicide is another test to the notions of sacralization permeating leadership thinking: the Rat sacrifices himself not to become a better leader and to instigate sacrificial behaviour in the followers, but to avoid taking on the position of leadership. In the narration of the Rat's suicide, we find several examples of profanation of self-sacrificial leadership behaviour in leadership studies. The very act of the Rat's suicide is described in grotesque terms:

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> "What happened was this," said the Rat. "I died with the sheep in me. I waited until the sheep was fast asleep, then I tied a rope over the beam in the kitchen and hanged myself. There wasn't enough time for the sucker to escape."

In line with Girard's (1977) theory of scapegoating, we first see that the Rat's self-sacrifice restores the social order: the carnivalesque Sheep Man (the Rat in disguise) has been sacrificed, and social order is temporarily reinstalled. Yet something more profound has also taken place: the Boss's son, the Rat, has been sacrificed and with him the magical sheep. The sheep is, according to the Rat, 'hair-raising evil. Give your body over to it and everything goes' (Murakami, 2003: 283). Not only has the social order been temporarily reinstalled, but the very cosmic order, in which rivalry and the ceaseless quest for social climbing are the dominant tropes, is being brought to an end. The wild sheep chase, as an image of social organization locked in a continuous pendulum of change between a relentless social rivalry and unrest, and a quasi-stable hierarchy (holy order) installed through the sacrificial scapegoating, has ended.

The Rat, then, returns after his self-sacrifice as a ghost, in order to give advice to the nameless protagonist. This does not mean that sacred spaces should be abolished *per se*, but that it is through their continuous profanation that their real value is recognized, all the way to the redemptive insight that any such wild sheep chase is, in the final analysis, futile and empty, and must be abandoned. In the end, the Rat advises the protagonist to rush down the mountain before ice and snow closes off his return, that is, before the icy separation between the heavenly and the profane is permanently consecrated.

Such redemptive events save, in *A Wild Sheep Chase*, a certain fragile humanity:

> "The key point here is weakness... Moral weakness, weakness of consciousness, then there's the weakness of existence itself." (Murakami, 2003: 282)

This weakness is not just a human quality, but also the vulnerable spot where the sheep may enter. This insight fundamentally profanes the idea that a heroic leader is a particularly strong individual. According to the Rat's narrative, only because of his weakness would he have been

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tempted to allow himself to live possessed by the mystical sheep of leadership, which is 'like a blast furnace that smelts down everything it touches' (Murakami 2003: 283). While this weakness is the precondition for leadership, an idea that Land et al. (2011) ironically refer to as 'The Weak Man Theory of leadership', it is also, perhaps paradoxically, what the Rat wants to retain and redeem: he will not allow leadership to cover human weakness up. So while human weakness is a necessary precondition for the existence of self-sacrificial leadership, such weakness must be kept, the Rat seems to argue, as an existential challenge to be tackled. No sacred space can deliver us from that challenge.

Conclusion

The theme of self-sacrifice has become popular in organizational leadership literature and is portrayed as both functionally and ethically desirable. With Grint (2010) we have argued that its importance has something to do with the nature of leadership itself: leadership can only exist through sacred spaces, and self-sacrificial leadership behaviour is one way in which these sacred spaces are created. In contrast to Grint, however, we have argued that these sacred spaces can, and should, be contested. This contestation can take different forms. One of these is demystification. The logic behind demystifying leadership is that showing that our images of leaders or leadership do not correspond to reality will result in aborting some of their undesirable effects. In our paper, we have also sought to contribute to the contestation of the sacred in leadership studies, in particular through the analysis of self-sacrifice, but in a way that differs from demystification. Instead, we have drawn upon *A Wild Sheep Chase* to argue, using a central concept from Agamben (2007), for a *profanation* of sacred notions of leadership.

Whilst having the same object of critique, demystification and profanation bring about different outcomes. In contrast to demystification, profanation does not seek to annihilate the myth or image of leadership that demystification is directed against. We agree with Grint that sacralizations (and myths, fantasies, fictions) are an indispensable part of organizations and social life in general. Indeed, the very point is that these sacralizations are themselves constitutive of reality. In this context, the demystification of leadership, in our view, underestimates how deeply embedded our beliefs in leadership are. They come with our cultural

and religious heritage, which cannot be fully challenged by showing the discrepancy between leadership practices and our concepts of leadership. A confrontation with 'reality' does not simply change this.

Demystification, then, is not a sufficient way of challenging our deeply held, culturally and religiously conditioned notions of leadership. They have developed over a long time, and do not appeal only to the rational within us. Through a playful, but thereby not less serious, engagement with the sacred, the idea of profanation reminds us how difficult it is to destabilize sacred spaces. We have suggested that profanation is a more powerful way to destabilize the sacred spaces of leadership than demystification. In contrast to demystification, profanation takes place in the same discourse in which concepts of leadership become sacralized. Since this sacralization relegates the profane into an untouchable sacred space, the discourse is immune to empirical argumentation, however well-founded. Profanation does not suffer from this problem: it touches our sacralizations, which – after all – are in our thinking directly through illegitimate use.

Although in our discussion, we have mostly focused on heroic approaches to leadership, much of what we have argued also applies to different versions of post-heroic leadership (Gronn, 2002; Goleman, 2002). Post-heroic leadership theory points to the 'distributed' nature of leadership; in fact, it also seeks to leave the sacred nature of leadership untouched, but it wants to inculcate this feature into all and everyone. Staying with *A Wild Sheep Chase* we should all – according to the now popular notion of 'self-leadership' (Manz and Sims, 2001) – have, as the Boss's chauffeur implies, God's telephone number, i.e., we should all become (small scale) sacralized leaders, perhaps even go down the road of self-sacrifice in order to adequately (and heroically) take up our leadership task. Such implication is, of course, already by way of its artistic presentation, profaned in the novel.

As a matter of fact, our reading of Murakami's novel may even suggest that profanation of leadership studies is more present in literary fiction than in organization studies *per se*. If this is true, we are witnessing a dramatic reversal of the traditional relation between fiction and critical theory. After all, as Alan Liu (2006) provocatively claims, in many ways popular management books, and leadership studies we may add, are more fantastic than many of the novels of our

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time, and the traditional function of the *Bildungsroman* has been taken over by management authors and 'us', management scholars:

> In a sense, the search for the 'great American novel' is over. The winner is business literature. I can't easily think of another genre of blended realism and fantasy, gritty concreteness (case studies, character studies) and sweeping vision, objective description and moral designs upon our soul that has such wide cultural impact. (Liu 2006: unpaginated)

Murakami's book suggests that there might also be some truth in the reverse: perhaps the most critical studies of leadership are today found in fiction, rather than in academic texts. As we have shown in this paper, Murakami's novel *A Wild Sheep Chase* subtly profanes any all-too-smooth and self-confident leadership discourse.

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