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АРТЫКУЛ

Дэмакратызацыя працы з перспектывы інтэлектуальнай гісторыі: тэорыя трансфармацыйнага лідарства

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Анатацыя. На фоне ўзрастаючых заклікаў да больш дэмакратычных падыходаў у арганізацыі працы, вяртанне да інтэлектуальных каранёў тэорыі трансфармацыйнага лідарства дае каштоўныя ўяўленні. Упершыню сфармуляваная амерыканскім палітолагам Джэймсам МакГрэгарам Бернсам у канцы 1970-х гадоў, тэорыя трансфармацыйнага лідарства хутка стала адной з найбольш уплывовых у даследаваннях кіравання і лідарства. У сваёй аснове яна падкрэслівае ролю лідараў як візіянераў, якія звязваюцца з вышэйшымі патрэбамі сваіх паслядоўнікаў, матывуючы іх дасягнуць выключных вынікаў, што выходзяць за межы руцінных арганізацыйных мэт. Аднак важны элемент першапачатковай канцэпцыі Бернса часта ігнаруецца ў сучасным менеджмент-дэскурсе яе дэмакратычны падмурак. Бернс разглядаў лідарства як узаемны, удзельніцкі працэс, заснаваны на дэмакратыі, дзе грамадзяне надаюць паўнамоцтвы лідарам праз выбары і здымаюць іх з пасады, калі яны не выконваюць сваіх абяцанняў. Такім чынам, лідарства было непадзельна звязана з адказнасцю, калектыўным удзелам і прынцыпамі дэмакратычнага кіравання. Аднак пры пераносе гэтай тэорыі ў сферу бізнес-даследаванняў дэмакратычны аспект у значнай ступені быў страчаны. Замест гэтага ўвага засяродзілася амаль выключна на харызме, бачанні і ўплыве лідараў на паслядоўнікаў, з меншай увагай да ўзаемнага, "нізавога" дынамічнага працэсу, які Бернс лічыў жыццёва неабходным. Такая інтэрпрэтацыя сфармавала дзесяцігоддзі менеджмент-практык, звузіўшы сферу трансфармацыйнага лідарства да арганізацыйнай эфектыўнасці, а не дэмакратычнага ўдзелу. Выкарыстоўваючы перспектыву інтэлектуальнай гісторыі, мы падкрэсліваем разрыў паміж арыгінальным бачаннем Бернса і яго адаптацыяй у менеджменце. Мы даследуем, як былі страчаны дэмакратычныя аспекты, чаму гэта мае значэнне для тэорыі і практыкі, і як аднаўленне гэтых каранёў можа ўзбагаціць сучаснае разуменне лідарства ў больш інклюзіўным і ўдзельніцкім ключы.

Ключавыя словы: Лідарства, трансфармацыйнае лідарства, гісторыя менеджменту і арганізацый, адукацыя ў галіне менеджменту

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ARTICLE

The Democratization of Work from an Intellectual History Perspective: A Transformational Leadership Theory

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Abstract. Amid rising calls for more democratic approaches to organizing, revisiting the intellectual roots of transformational leadership provides valuable insights. First articulated by American political scientist James MacGregor Burns in the late 1970s, transformational leadership quickly became one of the most influential frameworks in management and leadership studies. At its core, the theory emphasizes leaders as visionaries who connect with followers' higher-order needs, motivating them to achieve exceptional outcomes that transcend routine organizational goals. Yet, an important element of Burns' original conception is often neglected in contemporary management discourse, its democratic foundation. Burns envisioned leadership as a reciprocal, participatory process rooted in democracy, where citizens empowered leaders through electoral choice and removed them when they failed to uphold their commitments. In this view, leadership was inseparable from accountability, collective engagement, and the principles of democratic governance. However, when the theory was imported into business scholarship, the democratic dimension was largely stripped away. Instead, the focus shifted almost exclusively to leaders' charisma, vision, and influence over followers, with less attention paid to the reciprocal, bottom-up dynamic that Burns considered essential. This reinterpretation has shaped decades of management practice, narrowing the scope of transformational leadership to organizational performance rather than democratic participation. By employing an intellectual history perspective, we highlight the gap between Burns' original vision and its management adaptation. We examine how the democratic aspects were lost, why this omission matters for both theory and practice, and how recovering these roots could enrich contemporary understandings of leadership in more inclusive and participatory ways

Keywords: Leadership, transformational leadership, management and organizational history, management education

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Introduction

In recent years, the call for more democratic organizational forms has intensified as a response to environmental degradation and widening social inequalities, both of which have been exacerbated by corporations' relentless pursuit of profit (Amis et al., 2020; Battilana et al., 2022; Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt, 2019; Wright & Nyberg, 2017). The Covid-19 pandemic further highlighted the central role of essential, yet often undervalued and underpaid, workers, prompting new debates on the future of work and governance. Against this backdrop, Harvard Business School professor Julie Battilana, together with Isabelle Ferreras and Dominique Méda, proposed restructuring the economy around three interrelated pillars: democratizing firms, decommodifying labor, and decarbonizing the environment (Ferreras et al., 2020). Central to this agenda is the democratization of firms, which entails granting employees a meaningful voice in corporate decision-making. Drawing on European traditions of work councils established in the 1940s, Ferreras et al. (2020) advocate for institutional reforms whereby councils hold equal authority to boards of directors in matters such as strategic choices, profit allocation, and even executive appointments. Their rationale is grounded in the principle that the personal investment of labor workers' time, health, and lives should confer collective rights to influence organizational outcomes.

Momentum for workplace democracy was building even before the pandemic. The U.S. Business Roundtable's 2019 statement redefining corporate purpose to serve "all Americans" was initially celebrated as a shift away from shareholder primacy. Yet empirical assessments suggest that these commitments were largely symbolic, intended to deflect regulatory scrutiny rather than drive substantive change (Bebchuk & Tallarita, 2022; Raghunandan & Rajgopal, 2020). Advocates thus argue that if firms genuinely aim to serve all stakeholders, employees must be granted greater control over governance (Rodgers, 2019), echoing Dewey's (1937: 218) assertion that democracy requires the participation of all those affected by social institutions.

This vision of workplace democracy fundamentally challenges mainstream assumptions about corporate leadership. Since the 1980s, transformational leadership has dominated leadership research and practice (Spector, 2016; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). Originating in James MacGregor Burns' (1978) political analysis, transformational leadership emphasized the role of "transforming leaders" in articulating visionary futures, contrasting with "transactional leaders" focused on short-term political bargains. When adopted into management studies by Bernard Bass, the concept was recast to highlight leaders as charismatic and inspirational figures capable of motivating employees toward extraordinary performance. Bass (2008) operationalized the theory through four dimensions idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration framing leadership as a process of inspiring and elevating followers to exceed expectations.

Mark Zuckerberg, the founder and CEO of Facebook, is frequently cited in management studies as a quintessential example of a transformational leader. His entrepreneurial success has been attributed to his passion, sense of purpose, and ability to cultivate a culture of innovation and empowerment (Walter, 2013). Leading management textbooks have also celebrated him as a leader with "immeasurable influence on shaping organizational culture" (Robbins et al., 2015: 98), recalling stories of Zuckerberg motivating employees with fist-pumping chants of "domination" during early company meetings (Robbins et al., 2015: 100). Yet the sheen surrounding Zuckerberg's leadership has dimmed. Facebook has faced repeated controversies over user privacy, most infamously the 2018 Cambridge Analytica scandal, which exposed the data of 87 million users without consent. More recently, Zuckerberg's unilateral commitment to

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building the "metaverse" despite a 75% collapse in share price and mounting investor criticism has fueled concerns about unchecked power, amplified by his majority voting control (Waters & Agnew, 2022). Critics such as Naughton (2021) describe Facebook as a "dictatorship entirely controlled by its founder," illustrating the risks when transformational leadership becomes insulated from accountability.

Such cases echo longstanding concerns about the "dark side" of transformational leadership theory (Tourish & Pinnington, 2002; Tourish, 2013). Tourish argues that business schools, through their uncritical valorization of celebrity CEOs, have perpetuated leadership models that privilege charisma and vision over accountability and democracy. While we share these concerns, we contend that transformational leadership need not be inherently anti-democratic. Returning to James MacGregor Burns' original conception in the late 1970s reveals that democratic institutions and mechanisms were central to his vision. However, when adapted into management studies by Bass and others, these democratic foundations were largely stripped away.

Although prior scholarship has noted divergences between Burns' and Bass' versions of transformational leadership (e.g., Burnes & By, 2012; Denhardt & Campbell, 2006; Yukl, 1999), the democratic dimension has been particularly underexplored. Some, however, such as Wilson (2016), have argued that now is an opportune moment to revive this neglected foundation and reconnect leadership with workplace democracy. Building on this line of thought, our study revisits the intellectual history of transformational leadership theory to uncover its forgotten democratic roots. By doing so, we offer an alternative representation of the theory that carries important implications for both the teaching and practice of leadership. If students and practitioners recognize that transformational leadership was originally conceived as a vehicle for democratizing work, it opens the possibility of reshaping leadership practice in more participatory and inclusive ways. In what follows, we briefly introduce intellectual history as the methodological lens guiding our inquiry into the origins of transformational leadership theory.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts an intellectual history approach, which Gordon (2012: 1) defines as "the study of intellectuals, ideas, and intellectual patterns over time." Intellectual history emphasizes the importance of situating ideas within the broader social, cultural, economic, and political contexts in which they emerge (Higham, 1961). In leadership studies, the use of this approach has been advanced most notably by Bert Spector. His book Discourse on Leadership: A Critical Appraisal (2016) offers a comprehensive critique of how leadership as an idea has been constructed, contested, and disseminated over time. Spector's central claim is that ideas have consequences: they are not neutral, but powerful, subjective forces that can either reinforce existing structures or catalyze change (Spector, 2014, 2016). From this perspective, leadership is best understood not only through academic texts, but also through the discourses of practitioners, journalists, and other actors who shape how the concept is received and applied.

Spector's work aligns with a broader movement in management and organization studies often described as a "historic turn" (Clark & Rowlinson, 2004) or an increasing "sensitivity to history" (Suddaby, 2016). This movement stresses that organizational ideas and practices must be examined in relation to their historical conditions and trajectories (Coraiola et al., 2021; Mills et al., 2014; Rowlinson et al., 2014). Within this tradition, two distinct streams can be identified. The first explores the uses of the past how organizational actors strategically construct and mobilize

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historical narratives in the present (Lubinski, 2018; Paludi et al., 2021). The second, to which this study contributes, investigates how management scholarship engages the past in order to imagine possible futures.

A core concern in both streams is the distinction between the past and history. As Jenkins (1991: 14) observes, history is always a construction, shaped by the historian's perspective and purpose, rather than a neutral reflection of the past. This challenges objectivist notions of history as a simple recitation of facts (Munslow, 1997). In management studies, such subjectivity has often manifested in sanitized, conservative narratives. For example, Cooke's (1999) historiographical critique of change management showed how the field was constructed as technocratic and ideologically neutral by excluding more radical perspectives. Similarly, Cummings et al. (2016) demonstrated that the widely cited "three-step model" attributed to Kurt Lewin was in fact a later reconstruction that reinforced a managerialist, top-down view of organizational change.

Scholars have increasingly drawn attention to the omissions and silences within management history, noting how the contributions of marginalized groups including enslaved peoples, African Americans, Latinos, and women thought-leaders have often been neglected or erased (Cooke, 2003; Desmond, 2019; O'Connor, 2000; Prieto & Phipps, 2019; Rosenthal, 2018; Wanderley et al., 2021; Williams & Mills, 2017). Uncovering these omissions, along with misrepresentations of foundational theories, is not merely an exercise in historical correction. Rather, it serves as a pathway for critical reflection. As Cavanagh et al. (2023: 9) argue, cultivating "historical sensibility" an appreciation of possible pasts in shaping future, action-oriented decision-making can stimulate more imaginative and innovative thinking. In the same spirit, Bridgman and Cummings (2021: 122) contend that "if we can think about theory differently, there is a possibility we can act differently too."

Our study takes this perspective by re-examining the intellectual origins of transformational leadership theory. We begin with James MacGregor Burns' Leadership (1978), a detailed monograph that illuminates his original thinking. From there, we analyze how Burns' conception was brought into management studies by scholars such as Bennis and Nanus (1985), Tichy and Devanna (1986), and Tichy and Ulrich (1984), who positioned transformational leaders as visionary figures capable of rescuing organizations from decline. Central to our analysis is Bernard Bass, widely regarded as the leading figure in advancing transformational leadership in management research, and founding editor of Leadership Quarterly.

To trace how the theory evolved, we examined the sources Bass and others drew upon, including books, articles, and scholarly debates, supplemented by non-academic materials such as interviews, obituaries, news accounts, and organizational websites. We also turned to management textbooks as cultural artefacts that both reflect and shape dominant organizational logics (Calás & Smircich, 1989; Lynch & Bogen, 1997; Stambaugh & Trank, 2010). Textbooks construct the very definition of management, socialize students into accepted practices, and legitimize particular theoretical frameworks (Cameron et al., 2003; Cavanagh et al., 2023; Cummings et al., 2017; Williams & Mills, 2019). Our analysis includes 18 editions of Robbins' Organizational Behavior. Although Robbins published the first edition just a year after Burns' Leadership, transformational leadership did not appear until the fourth edition (1989), coinciding with its popularization by Bass, Tichy, Ulrich, and Devanna. Tracking its treatment across successive editions allows us to see how its representation has shifted over time in response to changing managerial and academic contexts.

Through this methodology, we offer an alternative history of transformational leadership theory. By contrasting its origins in political science with its later reformulation in management studies, we reveal how the democratic

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foundations of Burns' conception were stripped away. In doing so, we suggest that rather than abandoning transformational leadership, re-engaging with its neglected roots provides an opportunity to reframe it as a resource for advancing workplace democracy.

Results and Discussions

James Macgregor Burns' transforming leadership theory

> *"Ultimately the moral legitimacy of transformational leadership, and to a lesser degree transactional leadership, is grounded in conscious choice among real alternatives"*
>
> (Burns, 1978: 36, emphasis in original)

James MacGregor Burns' Leadership (1978) remains a landmark text in leadership studies, awarded the Pulitzer Prize and cited more than 40,000 times on Google Scholar. In it, Burns introduced a critical distinction between transactional and transforming leadership. Transactional leadership, he argued, is grounded in exchanges such as jobs for votes or subsidies for political support. By contrast, transforming leadership is more complex, engaging followers' deeper motives and higher needs in ways that elevate both leader and follower. Burns described this process as one that "raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leader and led" (1978: 20), pointing to Mahatma Gandhi as a vivid exemplar.

For Burns, transforming leadership was fundamentally moral leadership. This involved three key elements. First, relationships between leaders and followers should be built upon mutual values and aspirations rather than coercive power. He equated brute power with dictatorship, where authority rests on force rather than consent. Second, followers must have the ability to make informed choices among competing leaders and programs. In his view, democratic elections epitomized this principle, exposing citizens to alternative visions so they could identify their true needs and interests. Burns emphasized that leadership was inherently reciprocal, shaped by opposition, competition, and conflict, which he regarded as necessary for moral accountability. Third, leaders had to accept responsibility for their promises and outcomes, ensuring that leadership was anchored in ethical obligation rather than charisma or personal dominance.

Burns remained consistent in these convictions. In later reflections, he stressed even more strongly the role of conflict in democratic leadership, cautioning against leadership theories that prioritize consensus over contestation (Bailey & Axelrod, 2001). In Transforming Leadership: A Pursuit of Happiness (2003), he reiterated that empowering followers could generate tension, as followers might surpass their leaders or become leaders themselves. For Burns, this was not a weakness but evidence of democratic participation. Importantly, he expressed deep suspicion of charismatic leadership, viewing it as antithetical to empowerment because it discouraged dissent and risked creating passive, obedient followers a condition he associated with tyranny.

Taken together, Burns' work makes clear that democratic institutions and practices were central to his theory of transforming leadership. Leadership, in his view, was not about cultivating unquestioning loyalty to visionary figures, but about fostering accountability, contestation, and shared responsibility between leaders and followers. This

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grounding in democratic politics becomes especially significant when examining how his ideas were later appropriated in management studies. In the next section, we turn to this adaptation, exploring how Burns' emphasis on democracy was overshadowed by a narrower focus on inspiration, charisma, and organizational performance.

The transformation of transforming leadership theory

This section unfolds in three parts: first, we examine the state of management studies prior to the publication of Burns' Leadership; second, we consider the social, economic, and political context that influenced the theory's translation and evolution within management studies; and third, we analyze what transpired and what was overlooked during this translation, particularly the erasure of Burns' emphasis on democratic processes.

Before: Management studies in the 1970s

The 1970s were marked by deep economic and social turbulence in the United States. Inflation prompted President Nixon to impose wage and price controls in 1971, followed by a global oil crisis in 1973 that pushed the economy into recession. These economic shocks coincided with a period of heightened labor unrest, as unions resisted employer attempts to roll back hard-won gains, leading to militant strikes and confrontations. Unsurprisingly, intellectual debates of the period mirrored these struggles, with renewed attention to concepts such as industrial democracy and participation in management. As shown in Figure 1, interest in these ideas peaked in the 1970s, echoing earlier cycles of labor conflict between 1910 and 1930.

Bernard Bass, later central to the development of transformational leadership theory, was already engaged in this discourse. Together with Shackleton, he examined American and European approaches to participative management and industrial relations, distinguishing the more formal, legalistic nature of industrial democracy from the more informal, interpersonal model of participative management (Bass & Shackleton, 1979). At the time, they optimistically predicted that employee participation in organizational decision-making would continue to expand. Yet this vision was soon overtaken by changing political and economic conditions.

The resurgence of neoliberalism in the late 1970s and early 1980s, culminating in Ronald Reagan's election, shifted intellectual and managerial priorities. Guided by Milton Friedman's advocacy for free markets and shareholder primacy (Friedman, 1970), corporations reoriented around profit maximization, leaving little room for experiments in industrial democracy. At the same time, concerns over the decline of American competitiveness dominated managerial discourse. Hayes and Abernathy (1980) warned in Harvard Business Review that U.S. firms were "managing their way to economic decline," while comparisons with Japan's success highlighted the appeal of shared values and collective organizational culture (Ouchi, 1981; Pascale & Athos, 1982).

Another important intervention came from Abraham Zaleznik (1977), who contrasted "managers" with "leaders." Managers, he argued, were cautious administrators content with maintaining order, while leaders were bold, imaginative risk-takers who challenged existing constraints. This framing helped fuel dissatisfaction with existing management models and created demand for new leadership paradigms. Even leading textbooks of the time reflected the stagnation of leadership research: Robbins' first three editions of Organizational Behavior (1979, 1983, 1986) described the field as fragmented, contradictory, and lacking a unifying idea (Spector, 2016).

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It was within this climate of economic decline, the ascendance of neoliberalism, and the search for fresh leadership frameworks that Burns' Leadership (1978) entered management studies. By shifting attention to visionary "statesmen who moved and shook the world" (Bass, 1993: 375), Burns offered a compelling new lens. His theory of transforming leadership appeared to fill a theoretical and practical void, providing management scholars with a grand idea at a moment of intellectual and organizational crisis.

During: Translating transforming leadership theory

The translation of Burns' theory into management studies began in earnest with Tichy and Ulrich's (1984) article in Sloan Management Review. They attributed the decline of major U.S. corporations to "transactional managers" who lacked vision and clung to outdated practices. The solution, they argued, lay in a "new brand of leadership" (p. 59), exemplified by transformational leaders capable of revitalizing organizations such as General Motors, AT&T, and General Electric. Their chosen model was Lee Iacocca of Chrysler, who was portrayed as rescuing the company from bankruptcy through bold vision, decisive downsizing, and cultural transformation. They articulated three elements of transformational leadership: creating a vision, mobilizing commitment, and institutionalizing change. In their view, the vision was generated by the leader alone, not collaboratively, and implemented through decisive top-down actions, including workforce reductions of 60,000 employees.

Although celebrated at the time, later critiques exposed the romanticized nature of this portrayal. Spector (2014) described Iacocca less as a transformational visionary than a "macho bully," suggesting that Tichy and Ulrich's narrative was misleading. Nonetheless, their framing resonated with management scholars by linking organizational decline to weak leadership and offering heroic CEOs as the solution. This interpretation also aligned with the emerging field of change management, where leadership and transformation were treated as inseparable. Their three-stage model bears strong resemblance to Kotter's (1995) later "eight steps" and other frameworks of the period (Cummings et al., 2016). Yet what was conspicuously absent in this managerial adaptation was Burns' concern with morality and democracy, elements that were not easily reconciled with the corporate emphasis on performance and turnaround strategies.

While Tichy and Ulrich introduced Burns' ideas to a managerial audience, Bernard Bass became the scholar most closely associated with transformational leadership theory in management studies. In Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations (1985a), Bass outlined clear departures from Burns' original conception. Burns (1978) had insisted that transforming leadership must be morally elevating, rejecting Hitler as an exemplar. Bass, by contrast, argued that Hitler was indeed transformational because he achieved large-scale change, even if in destructive ways. This reframing stripped Burns' model of its normative grounding, embedding transformational leadership more firmly in the language of organizational change rather than moral progress.

Bass later revised his position. In Ethics, Character, and Authentic Transformational Leadership Behavior (1999), co-authored with Steidlmeier, he distinguished authentic transformational leaders from "pseudo-transformational" ones. Authentic leaders, they argued, were grounded in moral principles, while pseudo-transformational leaders were intolerant of dissent and more likely to exploit followers. Bass admitted his earlier mistake in suggesting that transformational leaders could be "virtuous or villainous." However, the article also revealed his stance on worker

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voice. Responding to critics who claimed transformational leadership was antithetical to shared leadership and participative decision-making, Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) pushed back, yet their defense emphasized leader morality rather than genuine structural empowerment of followers.

> *"For human relationists, the coming together of the values of the leader and followers is morally acceptable only if it comes about from participative decision-making pursuing consensus between leaders and followers. Whether a leader is participative or directive, however, is not a matter of morality. It is a matter of the naivete or experience of the followers and many other contextual considerations. In many ´ cases, directive leadership is more appropriate and acceptable to all concerned".*

What is particularly striking in the writings of Bass and other management scholars who adapted Burns' theory is the absence of recognition that Leadership (1978) was grounded in the relationship between politicians and voters. Stripped of this context, readers could easily assume that Burns had corporate leaders and employees in mind all along. Nowhere do we find sustained critical reflection on the parallels or the stark differences between democratic politics and business organizations. Instead, management accounts largely took for granted that the corporate domain operated on fundamentally different terms: employees do not elect their leaders, organizations are not designed to function democratically, and leadership is understood primarily as a top-down process of driving change to enhance performance. Within this framing, participation or dissent is permitted only insofar as it reinforces the leader's vision and facilitates organizational transformation. In translating Burns' ideas into management studies, Bass and others effectively erased the democratic foundation of transforming leadership, despite Bass's own earlier engagement with debates on industrial democracy and participative management.

After: Burns' response to transformational leadership theory

The 1980s witnessed a surge of interest in transformational leadership, as illustrated in Figure 1. Yet, as the theory gained prominence in management studies, enthusiasm for industrial democracy and participative management declined. Importantly, the version of transformational leadership that flourished in business was markedly different from Burns' original political science conception. This raises the question of how Burns himself responded to the theory's reconfiguration.

Burns was certainly aware of Bass's influence. In the foreword to Transformational Leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006), he recalled a gathering of leadership scholars at the University of Maryland nearly a decade earlier, where debate centered on whether Hitler could be considered transformational. Bass initially argued that transformational leaders were defined by their capacity to effect change, regardless of morality. Burns, however, reaffirmed his conviction that leadership must be reserved for the "forces of good." While this stance highlighted his commitment to morality as the foundation of leadership, what remains notable is the absence of any defense of the democratic dimension that was central to his earlier theorizing.

Why did Burns remain silent on this point? One possibility is disciplinary boundaries. In an interview, Burns admitted he did not regard himself as an authority on organizational leadership and hesitated to intervene in management scholarship, even while praising Bass and predicting his enduring influence (Bailey & Axelrod, 2001). Another

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explanation may be gratitude. Bass and other management scholars had popularized Burns' work far more widely than political science had. Indeed, leadership was largely neglected by political theorists, who prioritized debates on democracy, equality, and justice (Peele, 2005). Tintoré and Güell (2015) found that while "transformational" became a dominant term in business and education research, it scarcely appeared in political science literature.

Institutional developments further illustrate this shift. Although a Center for Political Leadership and Participation was established in Burns' name at the University of Maryland in 1981, by 2017 the James MacGregor Burns Academy of Leadership had relocated to the Møller Centre in Cambridge, an executive education hub. This trajectory underscores how Burns' intellectual legacy became more firmly embedded in business and management than in political science. Against this backdrop, it is perhaps understandable though significant that Burns did not contest the democratic deficit introduced in the managerial translation of his theory.

Recovering the democratic origins of transformational leadership

Why does it matter that management scholars ignored Burns' democratic foundations when popularizing transformational leadership? We propose three reasons.

- It matters because transformational leadership remains one of the most enduringly influential theories. It continues to feature prominently in executive education programs, management textbooks, and popular discussions of leadership. Our analysis of mainstream and critical textbooks (Buchanan & Huczynski, 2019; Clegg et al., 2019; Griffin, 2019; King & Lawley, 2019; McShane et al., 2019; Robbins et al., 2022; Schermerhorn et al., 2020; Williams, 2022) reveals a striking pattern: all present Bass's representation of transformational leadership as a model of visionary leaders inspiring followers to surpass expectations. Some acknowledge the moral dimension Bass later endorsed (e.g., Schermerhorn et al., 2020; Williams, 2022) and others recognize its "dark side" (Buchanan & Huczynski, 2019; Clegg et al., 2019; King & Lawley, 2019; McShane et al., 2019). Yet none mention Burns' democratic grounding of the theory, nor explore how it might inform workplace democracy.
- Tracing the evolution of transformational leadership highlights that management theories are neither fixed nor value-neutral. Like history itself, they are constructed through selective interpretation of contexts, people, and events. Management writers in the 1980s appropriated Burns' emphasis on visionary leaders, mobilization of followers, and transformational change, crafting a new leadership manifesto for corporate America in response to economic decline, strained labor relations, and perceived managerial weakness. In doing so, they consciously disregarded elements that did not serve their agenda namely Burns' insistence on morality and, most crucially, his claim that moral leadership requires followers to choose their leaders.
- Revisiting Burns' original conception opens the door to reimagining transformational leadership for today's pressing challenges: climate crisis, widening inequality, and renewed calls for democratizing work. Just as management scholars reinterpreted Burns' ideas for their time, we can transform the theory again, aligning it more closely with its democratic roots.

For Burns, democracy was integral to leadership. Morality, power, conflict, and the role of followers were inseparable. Leadership was moral only when followers selected their leaders, when opposition and contestation restrained excessive authority, and when followers held leaders accountable for fulfilling their promises. Recovering this

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dimension allows us to see transformational leadership not as the antithesis of workplace democracy, but as a potential mechanism for advancing it.

In contrast, the conventional representation of transformational leadership is silent on Burns' democratic foundations. Leaders are expected to act with morality and integrity, yet they are not accountable to followers in the way Burns originally envisaged. Responsibility lies with leaders to craft a vision, inspire employees to transcend their self-interest, and mobilize commitment toward organizational goals. While listening to dissenting views is encouraged, it is only legitimate when it strengthens the leader's vision and enhances organizational performance. In this framing, transformational leadership serves an instrumental purpose improving organizational effectiveness rather than advancing the broader social outcomes Burns associated with moral and democratic leadership.

The third reason why revisiting Burns' original conception matters is that teaching management students a version closer to his intent could open pathways to democratizing work. We acknowledge that extending democratic structures to organizations raises complex questions. Critics might argue that employees, lacking ownership stakes, could elect leaders who prioritize short-term personal benefits over organizational health. Others caution that voting on leaders and strategic decisions might paralyze firms in volatile markets. These are valid concerns, but they should not preclude serious debate. Indeed, including both the conventional and alternative representations of transformational leadership in textbooks would foster critical reflection and stimulate dialogue about the role of democracy in organizational life. While best-selling texts often reflect a unitarist and managerialist worldview, critical-oriented management scholarship has a responsibility to broaden the conversation.

This debate has tangible implications. Earlier we discussed Mark Zuckerberg, frequently celebrated in management textbooks as a visionary leader (Robbins et al., 2015), yet increasingly criticized as the autocratic controller of a company unable to move beyond his fixation on the metaverse (Naughton, 2021). Amazon's Jeff Bezos has likewise been lauded as a leadership exemplar (Robbins & Judge, 2015), while little attention is given to reports of exploitative working conditions, excessive physical demands, a harsh corporate culture, and workplace fatalities. The way leadership is taught shapes how students understand their future roles as employees and managers (Calás & Smircich, 1989; Cavanagh et al., 2023; Stambaugh & Trank, 2010). If leadership theory continues to be presented through a narrow, performance-driven lens, future managers are likely to replicate those assumptions. Conversely, if students are introduced to Burns' original democratic framing, there is potential for leadership practice to evolve in more participatory and accountable directions.

Conclusions

The case of transformational leadership offers yet another illustration of what Cooke (1999) described as "writing the left out" of management theory. Burns' own politics leaned firmly to the left he once ran for Congress as a Democrat and later reflected that opponent accused him of being an "atheistic communist" (Bailey & Axelrod, 2001: 114). His deep concern with democracy and the abuse of power infused his scholarship, especially Leadership (1978). For Burns, the moral essence of transforming leadership lay in whether followers possessed a genuine "conscious choice amongst real alternatives" (1978: 36). Yet, this democratic component so central to his theorizing was sidelined when the concept was imported into management studies. Instead, the theory was appropriated to promote top-down visions of organizational transformation. Bass, who had earlier championed participative management, became increasingly

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focused on the figure of the heroic leader, dismissing concerns about checks and balances and defending directive leadership as the more appropriate model in most cases (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999).

Revisiting the origins of transformational leadership is significant because the theory continues to shape contemporary thinking. Even though interest has peaked (see Figure 1), its leader-centric orientation underpins related approaches such as authentic, ethical, servant, and positive leadership (Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Robbins & Judge, 2018; Spector, 2014). Beyond academia, it remains influential in public discourse, with political figures such as Volodymyr Zelensky (Fox, 2022) and Jacinda Ardern (Grant, 2021) hailed as "transformational leaders." At the same time, the field has come under strong critique. Van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) argue that 25 years of research have produced a construct riddled with conceptual flaws, lacking a definition independent of its effects, and overlapping with other leadership theories. While they call for transformational leadership to be dropped from scientific inquiry, they also acknowledge that useful insights remain within the charismatic–transformational tradition. We concur that, despite its flaws, the theory is worth re-examining in new and more critical ways.

Critical scholars, however, have shown limited enthusiasm. Tourish (2013), for example, warns that the theory fosters "cultish" organizations dominated by charismatic leaders with compelling visions, where followers are rewarded for conformity and punished for dissent. This critique is primarily directed at Bass's version of transformational leadership, especially the dimension of idealized influence, which promotes follower identification with charismatic leaders. Yet, for Burns, charisma was not a requirement; indeed, he cautioned against it, precisely because it risked silencing opposition.

Tourish favors Burns' pluralist conception of transactional leadership, where leaders and followers acknowledge divergent interests and engage in reciprocal negotiation. We contend that this perspective can be integrated into Burns' framework of transforming leadership, which explicitly emphasizes opposition, contestation, and accountability. Importantly, Burns viewed the ability of followers to choose and, if necessary, replace their leaders as a safeguard against the dangers of concentrated power. This insight opens space for a reconsideration: what if employees, like citizens in a democracy, were granted the right to elect and hold their organizational leaders accountable? Such a move could revive Burns' original democratic vision and connect transformational leadership to the contemporary project of workplace democracy.

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