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Running head: Lust

It's better to burn out than to fade away

Review of 'Leaders who lust'
by Barbara Kellerman and Todd L. Pittinsky

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(excluding references)

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And it came to pass in an eveningtide, that David arose from off his bed, and walked upon the roof of the king's house: and from the roof he saw a woman washing herself; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon.

~ 2 Samuel, 11: 2

The King is gone but is not forgotten.

~ Neil Young

To say that the literature on leaders and leadership is large would be the understatement of the year. A google search on November 21, 2020, yielded 2.8 billion hits and 2,85 billion hits respectively for 'leader' and 'leadership,' 3,95 million and 4,52 million hits on google scholar, and 90,000 hits for either term on Amazon.com. Yet, our ignorance about the nature of leaders and their -ship is as deep as the literature list is long. This is not to say that we have learned nothing about leaders and what they do. They lead, or at least give the appearance that they do. Some succeed and many fail. The most interesting ones succeed brilliantly before they fail tragically.

Our fascination with leaders is an empirical fact. We want to know about them and their secrets. Some aspire to be like these leaders or even outdo them, whereas others relish their own submission to them, to the point of being willing to die for them. Perhaps this is the ultimate mark of the successful leader: finding followers who are willing to expire for the leader's greater glory. This is not as farfetched as it may seem. Freud (1921) saw Jesus Christ and the military leader (he shied away from naming Scipio Africanus, Napoleon Bonaparte, or Paul von Hindenburg) as prototypical leaders. Such leaders can demand the ultimate sacrifice – and receive it.

Great leaders have a mystique. They cast a spell. They deindividuate their followers. The task of psychological science is to figure out the nature of this transaction between leaders and followers. This is hard, but one place to begin is to explore what prominent leaders do and why they do it. Then we can ask how their behavior attracts and transforms their followers. With *Leaders who lust*, Kellerman and Pittinsky (hereafter: KP) reopen the case for the hypothesis that great leaders are extraordinary and flawed human beings. In their flawed extraordinariness, these leaders grant us a glimpse into the raw core of our human nature. And this is enough to make KP's book a rewarding

read. KP radically break with the ordinary romance of leadership (Meindl, 1990) and the sanctimonious perfection-seeking paradigm peddled by some rational-agency enthusiasts (Mumford; reviewed in Krueger, 2020).

KP argue that **LUST** is baked into great leadership, or, in their words, “leadership and lust are mutually reinforcing” (p. 4). To ignore lust is to miss an essential drive propelling some individuals to prominence and influence, and to miss an essential element of their followers’ response. What then is lust? KP define lust as “a psychological drive that produces intense wanting, even desperately needing to obtain an object, or to secure a circumstance. When the object has been obtained, or the circumstance secured, there is relief, but only briefly, temporarily” (p. 2). Lust is a particularly intense and relentless drive. It differs from other drives only by degree, not in kind. The qualitative difference separates lust from goal-directed behavior that ceases when the goal is achieved. Julius Caesar, by all accounts, had that insatiable hunger for power, whereas Scipio Africanus – who was the greater general – did not. Thirsting to dominate Rome, Caesar crossed the Rubicon; honoring the republic, Scipio retired to his country estate when his political office ended. Lusty leaders carry on until they are stabbed, shot, or ferried to St. Helena. In this day and age, their punishment tends to be lighter. They get canceled.

Although KP restore lust as a concept of psychological significance, they are careful not to pathologize it. Some lusting leaders may cross the line into psychopathology, but this does not discredit the concept of lust. Lust lies on a spectrum ranging from everyday interests and drives to addiction and obsession; it cannot be reduced to either. As KP note, lust is “value neutral” (p. 9). Whether lust brings prosperity or destruction depends on many factors, and not in the least on time. Leaders, and the rest of us, don’t lust in a vacuum. Lust, like a Freudian drive, requires an object. In the narrow interpretation of the concept, sexual gratification is the object of lust; in KP’s broader construal, some of the world’s most notable leaders have lusted for at least one of the following: power, money, sex, success, legitimacy, and legacy. In this list, sex is not even *primus inter pares*; it’s just one of a number of things we might lust for. Power, on the other hand, leads off the charge,

and for good reason. Power is most tightly linked to leadership, particularly the kind involving dominance, coercion, and retribution.

Having staked their claim that lust matters in the prologue, KP dedicate a chapter to each of the six types of lust, with each chapter comprising an introduction and two case studies. The book closes with an epilogue, where KP conclude that their case studies corroborate the claims made in the prologue. In less than 220 pages, they come full circle and leave the reader to ponder the implications. Before I do just that, let's take a quick look at the cases. The lust for power, and specifically the power to influence others as opposed to the power to be autonomous and free from being influenced by others, is exemplified by Roger Ailes, the creator of Fox News, and Xi Jinping, the emperor-by-another-name of China. Here, as they do for each pair of exemplars, KP show that the object of lust is the same, although the tactics can vary dramatically. If Ailes represented the mad-dog subtype of the power-lusting leader, Xi represents the Neo-Confucian power-monger who skillfully exploits cultural patterns and sensibilities. KP note the relevance of experimental psychology of power (e.g., Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003) and classic political theory (Arendt, 1951). They add that great power (and lust) carries the seed of its own destruction. "History," they observe, "is cyclical. Whoever goes up, goes down" (p. 43). Aischylos would approve.

The lust for money is a lust for something that has no intrinsic value; yet money can stimulate behavioral addiction. In its lusty form, avarice is boundless. Using Warren Buffett and Charles Koch as their exemplars, KP distinguish the avuncular variant from the brutish one. Both Buffett and Koch have given money away, but the former's generosity is a motivationally irrelevant sideshow, whereas the latter's only stokes the lust for more money. In Koch's case, money and its acquisition have become matters of virtue. This transformation amounts to a perversion of the Calvinist ethic, which prizes productivity over the accumulation of money *per se* (Weber, 1904/1905). As libertarians, money-grubbing Calvinists like Charles Koch perfected 'virtue signaling' before it became a concern for the progressives.

The lust for sex is, if evolutionists can be trusted, the first lust nature has installed in us. If successful, sex-lusting leaders leave larger-than-life legends like King David or Jack Kennedy. Their sexploits, never a central part of their appeal or narrative, eventually fade from view. Leaders like these are remembered as great for other reasons, like bold deeds that are actually matters of leadership. Then what role does their lust play in their rise to prominence – if any? Here we meet a weak link in KP's project, a weakness they are well aware of. Can we assume that lust (for sex or money) is a necessary cause for great leadership to occur? The answer is probably 'no.' We can assume little beyond the weak notion of mutual reinforcement. Did, for example Silvio Ber-*lust*-coni succeed in business and politics only to then indulge in bunga-bunga parties? It seems unlikely. Once he had amassed enough money, he could have seduced (or worse) any number of minors. Being *primo ministro* was hardly necessary. Sex-lusting leaders raise harder questions about their followers than other lusters do. Berlusconi operated in a cultural climate that, to an extent, delighted in his irreverence and disinhibition, perhaps projecting its own lust onto him. KP note that the moral climate, particularly in the United States, has taken a puritanical turn. White House residents cannot today do what Kennedy did in his day. And still, the seedy misadventures of the 45th president are well known and not universally condemned.

The lust for success is harder to pinpoint, but KP review the life and times of Hillary Clinton and Tom Brady with good effect. Again, there is a fascinating contrast. Whereas Clinton was one of the most polarizing politicians in recent memory, Mr. Brady may have his detractors, but he hasn't brought out the haters as Ms. Clinton has. Another instructive contrast is that Clinton's success was defined with a view to lasting impact (as in the lust of legacy), whereas Mr. Brady's success evaporates as soon as it is achieved. There may be fond memories, but little else of consequence. As such, Mr. Brady is the purer exemplar of the lust for success. Alas, the linkage between lust and leadership is weaker here. The supreme leadership role in Mr. Brady's world probably fell to his coach, Mr. Belichick. Mr. Brady may have to settle for being remembered as a role model and latter-day star.

The lust for legitimacy features Messrs. Nelson Mandela and Larry Kramer as exemplars. Both were fighters, and fighters for their people. Both were in some sense prototypical of their group, perhaps even representing some sort of collective ego-ideal (Ullrich, Christ, & van Dick, 2009). Both lived and strove in difficult intergroup contexts, where their own groups were delegitimized. These were leaders who struggled, not only for themselves, but also for others. The legitimacy they sought and found was in the first place the legitimacy of their group. Here we see, at least in theory, a point at which the supreme goal might actually be achieved, at which point, and contrary to KP's definition of lust, there would be nothing left to desire. Alas, this is only a theoretical limitation.

The lust for a legacy has a transcendent aspect. In the Gateses (Bill & Belinda) and George Soros, we see a thirst for a better world they desire to outlive their own lusting selves. KP make the important psychological observation that self-interest and beneficence are not mutually exclusive (Krueger, 2013). Their legacy-lusting paragons are in their own way quite narcissistic; yet, their narcissism is temporarily gratified by bettered lives (the Gateses) or improved societies (Soros). The case of George Soros is instructive because of its tragic dimension. As a pupil of Karl Popper's, Soros has sought to promote open societies. He has "poured," as KP put it, billions of dollars into projects promoting the cause of liberal democracy, only to experience painful setbacks and betrayals. Viktor Orbán's turn towards tribalistic totalitarianism is the most distressing of these disasters. Orbán, KP remind us, was once a follower of Soros's, who supported him with a scholarship. In recent years, however, Orbán has viciously portrayed Soros as a power-obsessed conspiratorial Jew. Many good deeds, Dante notwithstanding, are punished in this life. Even the Gateses have been charged with conspiratorial machinations (Wakabayashi, Alba, & Tracy, 2020). Perhaps there is a lust KP have ignored: the lust to malign, destroy, and ruin. It is to be hoped that this dark lust is also, like the other lusts, rare in its extreme form.

In the epilogue, KP wrap up their extraordinary story. They reserve their most cutting criticism for the bourgeois and self-satisfied mainstream literature on leadership. That literature has badly misconstrued human nature by failing to see that we all lust, and some of us lust in a big way.

Careful as they have been not to commit themselves to a specific causal model of lust and leadership, KP finally let the cat out of the bag. “It is leaders who lust who make history” (p. 205) they declare. “To avoid lust [. . .] is to avoid the human condition” (p. 206). This conclusion evokes what used to be called the great-man theory of history (Carlyle, 1841/2013), a theory polite contemporary scholarship either ignores or disparages. Perhaps Carlyle was onto something (see Spector, 2015, for a partial resuscitation).

Two claims of the great man (person) mythos KP appear to endorse is that lust can neither be measured nor taught. With that, they poke the leadership industry in the eye, an industry that is staked on the assumption of the measurability and teachability of leadership and its critical ingredients. Perhaps KP may be going too far here. There is no logical barrier to the measurability of lust or the teachability of lust-based leadership. The more interesting questions are pragmatic and theoretical. A pragmatic question is whether we want more lusty leaders, and whether we can afford them. Our own desires for identification, submission, and abdication of responsibility hardly justify a tolerance for more lusters. A theoretical question is how, now that we have taken a look into the irrational underground of human nature, we are to think about the role of lust in our lives. Like the Roman poet Lucretius, we might want to ask ourselves why we “work hard to satisfy [our] ungrateful minds’ endless cravings for all the sweet things of life? No matter how much we have, are we ever satisfied?” (Lucretius, 2008, p. 134).

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