

## Post-leadership leadership:

### Mastering the new liquidity<sup>1</sup>

Stewart Clegg

Miguel Pina e Cunha

#### Authors' bios

**Stewart Clegg** is Distinguished Professor at the University of Technology Sydney and a Visiting Professor at Nova School of Business and Economics and at Newcastle University Business School, UK. His research is driven by a fascination with power and theorizing, applied to a vast variety of topics, many of them with Miguel. Stewart is a prolific writer and is the author or editor of a number of books, including *Frameworks of Power* (Sage, 1989), *The Sage Handbook of Organization Studies* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2006), and *The Sage Handbook of Power* (2009).

**Miguel Pina e Cunha** is professor of organization theory and organizational behavior at Nova School of Business and Economics, Universidade Nova de Lisboa Lisbon, Portugal. His research deals, mostly, with the surprising (paradox, improvisation, serendipity, zemblanity, vicious circles) and the extreme (positive organizing, genocide). Miguel co-authored (with Arménio Rego and Stewart Clegg) *The virtues of leadership: Contemporary challenge for global managers* (Oxford University Press, 2012) and received the 2015 best paper award from the European Management Review.

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## Introduction

“the soft will trump the hard”

Kelly (2016, p. 83)

The world of organizations is in flux: new media generate business innovations, collaborative idea creations, forms of participation, exploitation and criticism. Distinctions between organizations and their environments as objective determinants fade into irrelevance as strategies increasingly focus on creating new environments rather than adapting to existing ones. Traditional forms such as markets and firms are replaced and hybridized by platforms and work digitalized and informed by “a liquid stream of facts flowing through the web” (Kelly, 2016, p. 279). The boundaries of the firm thus dissolve: Coase’s (1937) explanation for the existence of firms is increasingly revisited. Organization decompose or are formed anew as transactional: Uber, Airbnb, etc.

Strategy morphs into a co-produced socio-technical phenomenon where local practices transform globally available resources and professionals move between projects in a world that becomes post-organizational in at least two ways; first it is one that deviates from the norms of an organizational society premised on Weberian characteristics such as organizational careers, into a society where experts use organizations as temporary platforms; second, the organization, as a specific entity defined by those activities it envelops, is decomposing, fragmenting, reforming and deforming, globally. Control, once vested firmly within organizational pyramids, becomes distributed across a network of actors, including new media and their users.

The private sphere of management control as a peak activity enveloped in a tangible and specifically modernist form is dissolving. The private sphere of management control as a peak activity enveloped in a tangible and specifically modernist form of hierarchically dominated bureaucracy is dissolving, which has subsequent implications for the leadership dimensions of the managerial function'. Leadership is becoming dispersed and shared among actors, with the categories of leader and follower blurring, workers becoming globally sub-contracted, matrixed and fragmented. Boundaries, choices and control are all shifting in the direction of increasing fluidity and plurality. The times may be changing. Secrecy and boundaries are not what they once were, affecting leaders and leadership, potentially rendering traditional leadership theory obsolete (Fairtlough, 2005).

We discuss organizing in this digital age in terms of liquidly modern times, whose birth was announced by Zygmunt Bauman. We do so by introducing the notion of liquid times and discussing three liquid themes: liquid selves, liquid organizations and liquid aesthetics. Overall, we defend the hypothesis that if the leadership canon of the last fifty years disappeared, we would witness the construction of a Baumanian theory of liquid leadership.

### **Bauman and liquid organizing**

The major treatment of Bauman's implications for organizations and for leadership and strategy, implicitly, is to be found in *Liquid Organization: Zygmunt Bauman and Organization Theory* (Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2014), who characterize Bauman's later work as focusing on three main themes: the *dynamics of modernity*; the *possibilities of radical social change*, and the *ethics of compassion* – which they term 'sociological compassion'.

In terms of the *dynamics of modernity*, elements of these themes were anticipated in earlier works, such as the 1993 books on *Modernity and Ambivalence* and *Postmodern Ethics* and the 1998 book on *Work, consumerism and the new poor*. In the period before 2000, Bauman's reflections were cast in binary terms, influenced, suggests Jensen (2014), by Tönnies famous distinctions between *Gemeinschaft* (embedded and constraining community) and *Gesellschaft* (disembedded and liberating society), drawing contrasts between 'modernity' and 'postmodernity'.

For Bauman (1989) the apex of modernity is represented by the death camps that delivered the Holocaust in which the mass production of extinction by organizations delivered efficient termination through appropriate means attached to unquestioned ends. The thesis has been widely discussed (see Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips, 2006) but also criticised by scholars who have argued that the Holocaust was not organized by practices of bureaucracy (du Gay, 2000). The critics, namely du Gay, have sought to preserve the ethos of Weberian bureaucracy from what they regarded as its corruption by fascism. Bauman's espousal of the modernist auspices of the Holocaust has to be seen against his subsequent suggestion that modernity was being superseded by postmodernity.

Posing a dualism between modernity and post modernity, however, is inherently problematic. It leads to a problem of transition: how does one move from one state of existence to the other and how does one know that the transition has occurred? Such historical breaks are the exception rather than the rule, which is not to say that change does not occur, for it surely does, but more continuously, as a process of everyday life and living. The solidities of one time morph slowly into history, into something else, as they die of neglect or are extinguished or replaced. It is these moments of

unfolding that are captured by postmodernism as a moment in the unfolding of history.

As Lyotard (1993) noted, postmodernism is not the end of modernism, but its birth and rebirth, its constant coming into being. Modernity is a constantly shifting edge, struggles over the meaning of which define both modernism that seeks to condense its meaning and postmodernism that seeks to liquidate rather than consolidate. Still, the idea of a process, of a transition from one state to the other, still accompanies the very idea of there being a dualism, which is why, perhaps, in his later work, Bauman abandons the juxtaposition that served him well in the 1990s for a formulation that better captures this sense of an edge of uncertainty and introduces instead the idea of there being a liquid modernity.

Liquid spreads, seeps, leaches, moves by osmosis. Liquid modernity's other is not post but solid: being solid it does not melt or fade away but becomes a container, here more effectively, there less so, of a liquid edge that is forever spreading beyond its containment. The solid and liquid phases of modernity are implicated together: the one contains but that which it contains is never constrained by the form of the historical container; it shifts shape, it trickles off in new directions and new containers develop to try and restrict its viscosity, to discipline its flows, as it seeks to liquidate its containment.

Bauman distinguishes between solid and liquid modernity. Solid modernity represents the world of conventional organization and management theory. Its hallmarks are a concern with objective structure, rational strategy and normal equilibrium. It is a world stalked by uncertainty and equivocality – the evils to be minimized and avoided as best as is possible by formulating appropriate strategies and structures: uncertainty

as nemesis (Tsoukas, 2005). Stable bureaucracies, rational systems, orderly routines, formal leadership, long-range planning – these were the devices used to ward off evils. Even when change was envisaged it is seen as something the leader is able to control and ought to control, through ‘transformational leadership’, as if transformation was a smooth process.

The dominance of solid modernity defied much of the post-war era. Large bureaucratic organizations, characterized by rational planning and long-term careers for their cadres, were the norm, in both the state and civil society. But events conspired to unmake this solidity. From the early 1970s onwards, fuelled by the costs of maintaining the US warfare state, initially in Vietnam, the US state began to experience a fiscal crisis as it became more and more indebted due to deficit financing.

### **The dynamics liquid of modernity**

The organizations that flourished from the end of World War II through the 1970s, built on the long range planning that the US Army Chiefs of Staff engaged in when planning the campaign to defeat Hitler, starting with the Normandy Landings. A natural ecology for leadership was to be found in the very large firms, such as General Motors, that dominated predictable and stable markets that they sought to control through long range planning. Ironically, at the time that the Soviet bloc engaged in the same practices of long range planning – the Five Year plans – corporate America, the bastion of private enterprise, sought to do the same, albeit based on corporate as opposed to state planning. In the Soviet case it was the state that sought to plan; in the American case it was left to the corporations. In doing so they were assisted by the facts of post war corporate life: markets that were largely based in the United States,

protection from foreign competition by tariffs, standardization, regulation, subsidies, price supports and government guarantees. Keynesian demand management was not just a feature of the US. In Europe, especially in France with its *plannification*, there was a very explicit linking of centralist state and private sector interests by bureaucrats schooled in the Parisian *Grande Écoles*.

Keynesianism was allied with a strong central planning structure in the UK under the Wilson administrations of the 1960s and 1970s. The state, it was believed, could steer the white heat of technological revolution, a belief that died during the terminal stages of the Callaghan administration when the first fluttering of the new ‘monetarism’ emerged to assume full bloom in the Thatcher era of the 1980s, as Keynes was dismissed and Hayek became the new point of reference.

After 1980, with the rise of a new economic liberalism under the sponsorship of President Reagan and Prime Minister Thatcher, new competition was unleashed by the joint forces of creative destruction and liberal economic deregulation, liquidating the solidities of the modernist high water mark. The emergence of a new class of managers from the 1980s onward saw them greatly enriched in remuneration relative to all other wage and salary earners, in part by the adoption of agency theory as a strategy in practice widely used in the American corporate world (Bower & Paine, 2017). This new class of managers, often presented as neo-charismatic types, is expected to be able to dramatically shape and reshape their organizations as their environments shift, which presumably justifies their salaries. Peters and Waterman (1982) was the fountainhead for this shift to entrepreneurial exhortation, cultural creativity and the narcissism of leadership.

What agency theory added to narcissism was the idea that the corporate organization is merely an aggregation of individuals contracted as a legal personality, such that the corporate organization is a fictive collective individual that contracts real individuals to its purposes and is thus, presumably the principal with whom contracts are entered. The executives of the legal fiction are thus principals *and* agents. Fama and Jensen (1983) define the firm as a nexus of contracts between individuals in which the costs of enforcing contracts that are always incompletely stipulative will be a perennial problem. These contracts are incomplete because of uncertainty that cannot be predicted and covered by contract.

Corporations that were quite obviously social institutions, with organizational employees treated in the way that social democratic citizens would be, with family health care programs, decent wages, salaries and pensions, were being invited to deconstruct. '[T]he "nexus" imagery served as a useful provocation, a lever to bust up the unwieldy and shareholder-hostile conglomerates built up over the prior decades. This was a theory perfectly designed to legitimate a bust-up takeover wave' (Davis, 2016, p.509). Agency theory was an account that spawned in practice on a grand scale what it theorized.

The growth and application of agency theory to practice over the last 40 years or so, particularly but not exclusively in the financial sector (Mallaby, 2010), has seen agents become rewarded as principals that don't even have to risk their own capital. In tying their agency to that of the principals, they have voted themselves stock options, thus becoming significant principals in their own right. In most companies in the United States, the CEO tends to enjoy a considerable imbalance of power compared to the nominal authority of the board that appoints the CEO and to which



they are legally accountable. Hence, the growing control of CEOs in governance on company boards has vested them with an ability to set, up to a point, their own salaries as well as nominate stock options. The discourse of strategy works to legitimate such practices, among many others. Leadership in this context became a proxy for personal enrichment on a scale unprecedented in prior rational-legal organizations as the euthanasia of bureaucracy was accomplished by the triumph of the *rentiers*. Modern organizations were being liquidated (Davis, 2016a, 2016b).

There were corollaries to these processes of liquidation in terms of organizational changes: careers gave way to project portfolios; leaders give space to dispersed leadership and self-leadership that is, the identity of being leader was decentralised and devolved to many but the authority, power and rewards of leadership were more intensively centralised; bureaucracies became leaner as non-core elements of the business were outsourced; their operations became more global as it was realized that enhanced value could be captured in value chains that probed wide and far into production sites and subcontractors in far away places. The state also decomposed its bureaucracies in search for more efficient privatization of those goods and services once taken for granted as within its domain (Guillén & Ontiveros, 2012).

In solid modernity the major container was work and the relations of production that this entailed. Successful capitalism, however, successful in fulfilling and perpetually expanding material wants and needs, shifted its register inexorably from a productive container defined by relations of production modified by state interventions into the welfare of its labouring citizens to an infinitely plastic container that expanded with the accelerating fetishization of ever more phenomena, including work itself. Work that had equated with a lifelong career, in the sense of an unfolding, a linear

progression, of working, often in the same or very similar organizations, saw its meaning liquefied.

Liquid modernity increasingly replaces citizens with consumers (Nixon & Gabriel, 2016). Whereas solid modernity developed a whole program for citizens around the rights of labour (Abrahamson & Broström, 1980) the relations associated with being employees, having contracts, deploying capital, became more fluid, less secure, increasingly unstable. Liquidity was translated in terms of the prevailing political and economic ideologies into increased choice and freedom for the individual. These freedoms dissolved established commitments and senses of obligation and the institutions that supported these, such as mutual societies, trade unions, established religions and political parties. Identities founded in church and chapel, union and community, party allegiance and its tribal oppositions, weakened. The political process became more marketized, selling the message becoming more crucial than what was the message's substance. Universities weakened their collegial bonds and became increasingly sites for the mass production of knowledge workers and specialist boutique ventures for the creation of intellectual property that could be valorised.

The reality of liquid modernity is that the only certainty is change; uncertainty becomes the new norm; instability and insecurity the new order; identity a matter of choice, and choice a matter of improvisational ability and access to the resources available to sustain it. Identity becomes the major arena for struggle: entrepreneurial subjects can propel themselves from being local drug dealers to cosmopolitan hip hop stars, thus setting new norms of identity for others to struggle to emulate or exceed.

Consumption can never be sated when global capital roams. Every day, in every way,

new, improved, and breakthrough delights for consumption will be tantalizingly available to those that can afford to sample them, disposing of out-dated, inferior and unfashionable modes of consumption and of stuff already consumed. No thing is sacred; nothing is secure; every thing can be made redundant, become more liquid – including the leaders of products past. Identity increasingly resides not in being who one is, defined by the old materialities such as work and place, so much as in who and what one might become through the consumption of things in the desire for expressing selfhood. The injunction that by one’s work(s) one shall be known is replaced by the exhortation to buy now and become what one might be.

In liquid modernity life is lived increasingly in public: notions of private life cease to have the same meaning when one’s becomings are routinely displayed in Facebook, when one’s thoughts are tweeted incessantly, when one’s smartphone becomes a McLuhanite extension of one’s nervous system as by which we create and consume content, in which the medium is more constant than the content it produces (McLuhan, 1964). Leadership becomes an exercise in external and internal PR, intended to cope with surveillance.

### **Leadership in liquid times**

What does it mean to lead in liquidity? In this section we discuss liquid selves, liquid organizations and liquid aesthetics, as three facets of a post-canonical theory of leadership relations. Leadership changes in liquid spaces: a form of post-leadership leadership.

#### *Liquid selves*

Life lived in public increasingly pervades people’s experiences in organizations. It

does so in two ways: one is through an enhancement of the panoptical tendencies of solid modernity, where the few exercise surveillance over the many; the other is through the development of new forms of synoptical power, where the many watch each other and the ambitious among them watch the few. The two systems of power combine within liquid modernity. Organization studies developed a term to capture this combinatorial effect when it accepted the idea of the ‘emotionally intelligent’ subject (Goleman, 1995; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). The emotionally intelligent subject displays emotional competencies (Goleman, 1998), learned capabilities for outstanding work performance. The key competences are in being liquid about innovation, commitments, adaptability and achievement (Clegg & Baumeler, 2014): each of these is viscous, shifting and redefinable – in a word, liquid. Liquid in the sense of being quick to liquidate not only tasks performed but also how they are performed, where they are performed, with whom they are performed. Liquidity requires autonomy, spontaneity, creativity, adaptability, communicative and relational competence, as well as significant capacities to invest in social and educational capital and a capacity to develop swift trust in switches from project to project, as liquid life in organizations is lived not in a linear career but in a succession of projects experienced in the moment. Being, self and actants are organized in a series of reflexive autopoietic loops, in a system capable of reproducing and maintaining itself and existential angst about the success of the project: managing it on time, on budget, as innovative and in accord with KPIs.

The most acute and stubborn worries that haunt liquid leaders are fears of not being in the moment. Organizationally, liquid life is a mess of contradiction: it proposes a series of new beginnings, yet is full of worries about swift and painless endings as this project fails to morph into another, as this contract expires. Liquidly modern leaders

(of the self) have to be perpetually constructing and reconstructing themselves; they are forever reassembling the pieces of their own identity, refining themselves day after day (Bauman, 2005). Inadequacy in this new liquidity involves an inability for those who aspire to become leaders' to acquire the desired image with the existential doubt always being that theirs is a leadership without appropriate content and compass. Adequacy is having the ability to be simultaneously the plastic subject, sculptor and object of one's self, of becoming both the onlooker of self-work and the teacher of that self, a voyeuristic self, engaged in a process in which watching self watching others watching self becomes the liquid centre of self-existence and leaderly achievement (Clegg & Baumeler, 2014; pp 51, 52). In short, leaders become strategists of their self to succeed in liquid times. Impression management rules (Goffman, 1959), mediated through the media extensions of the self as Linked In, Facebooked, tweeted, etc. (Jensen, 2014, p.24) suggests a prime fear of the liquid organizational member is to be unseen – especially when one occupies a position of visibility, such as that of a leader, an anxiety seen, not least, in the most powerful positional leaders, such as the President of the United States. People engage in self-surveillance and self-discipline making the self one that is as visible, calculable and evaluable as possible (also Maravelias, 2009).

Liquid selves are valorised as free selves: free to choose, free to take responsible action for their self, free to construct their own biographies and projections of self. These are all self-centred, even as they project synoptically to others. The chief responsibility owed is to and for one's self (Bauman, 2007, p. 92). The organization provides arenas in which scenes may be staged that enable the aesthetic projection of the self. As Clegg and Baumeler (2014, p. 38) suggest, liquidly modern leaders are entrepreneurs of their selves: they must manage with enthusiasm and with passion and

expect to share an ethos of immediacy, playfulness, subjectivity and performativity (Hjorth & Kostera, 2007; Bauman, 2008). Between the performance and presentation of self and the reaction of significant others yawns a chasm of uncertainty as the subject, still of surveillance but now also committed to being passionate, must choose how to present their self in a way that secures their profile as the kinds of subjects they anticipate that their followers and significant others expect them to be (Jackall, 1988). Being in the liquid state is an unfolding project in which constant vigilance and perpetual effort must be expended, with no guarantees that the performance will pay off, as Bauman states (Bauman, 2000, p. 8). The kind of relationship this leader self forges with its ‘followers’ presents an interesting paradox: this self-serving self must, simultaneously, appear to *present* themselves as acting in the service of others, of being concerned with the needs and interests of others but this is a matter of appearance only, of the presentation of self, because to remain truly liquid a concrete commitment to acting in accordance with certain values or achieving certain outcomes would act as constraints.

### *Liquid organizing*

The cornerstone of the liquid organization is an absence of moral concern (Clegg, Kornberger & Rhodes, 2007). Liquid organizations are adiaphoric, i.e., subject to *adiaphorization*, “[M]aking certain actions, or certain objects of action, morally neutral or irrelevant – exempt from the categories of phenomena suitable for moral evaluation (Bauman, 1995, p. 149).

Especially, this will be the case in the top management team: while each member may ontologically be a moral subject, the organization cannot be. This is the essence of leaderly strategies. They may well be formulated within governance structures, rules,

guidelines and policies but it is essentially ethically blank in its representations. As Bauman (2014, p. xvi) has most recently expressed it: “Organizations ... serve the process of adiaphorization – of excising large swathes of human behaviour and human habit from the realm of moral evaluation and ethical obligations and thereby rendering them less sensitive to moral impulses.”

Strategic imperatives are seen to flow from this process of adiaphorization: one is not so much responsible for a generalized set of other selves as responsible to the order in which one is employed - its rules, its authorities; its definitions of what is right according to the rules and what the rules make wrong. Necessarily, this invests considerable synoptic power towards the hierarchical ordering of judgments and their expression as imperatives designed to manage meaning and transmit bold visions translated into mundane action through vertical command-obedience sequences; simultaneously, it makes of one a specimen subject to the multitude of panoptical powers used to exercise surveillance over one’s self at work. Devices such as audit (Power, 1999), human resource management (Townley, 1993), CCTV, and those ubiquitous recordings of customer interactions that call centres suggest may be used for training purposes, are all oriented towards the latter.

The combination of synopticism, panopticism, and responsabilization/accountability pump and transfer the moral responsibility of the executors of commands upwards, to the command givers (Bauman, 2014). Those that enact, the subordinates, ‘are excluded from the authorship of their acts’ (Bauman, 2014, p. xvi). Those that command do not enact – that is the responsibility of those subject to the imperative commands. ‘As a consequence, neither bears full, undivided responsibility for their acts. Absolute moral responsibility is thereby ‘deconstructed’’ (Bauman, (2014,

p.xvi). There is a myth about in the Academy, the Academy of Management that is, that leaders and followers share common interests: to this myth we would respond with an account of exploitation as the necessary bargain entered into between employer and employee where the latter rent their time, creativity, labour and commitment to the control and benefit of the other's goals.

What remains is the ethical pose of the individual subject, only judged according to organization rules. Responsibility floats and ethics are defined largely in terms of the contracts that leaders have entered into with stockholders, such that, in principle, no leader can be perceived as a moral subject *qua* organizational membership. Their moral responsibility is to be found in service of organization strategies, strategies turned towards abstractions of the market and their manifestations in analysis and share values, not their questioning.

In the past, before modernity became so liquid, this was efficient enough when composed wholly within the envelope of an all-encompassing organization that organized itself along classical bureaucratic lines, to cultivate virtue. Members were expected to express a vocation, to display character, respect an ethos. Careers in the service of the organization and its solid composition as a bureaucracy reinforced a sense of disciplined ethical virtue expressed in deference to routines, rules, and rationalities. However, as a result of what Bauman (2014, p. xvii) refers to as the 'second managerial revolution', the solid organization has decomposed. It is not that bureaucracy is being superseded but it is becoming embroiled in complex processes of hybridization (du Gay, 2000; Courpasson & Reed, 2004), simultaneously decomposing and recomposing. The notion of post-truth captures the movement.

Decomposition takes us to the world of supply chains and outsourcing, with their



avoidance of regulation (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2015). Recomposition takes us into the world of new organizational designs. In the former, there are some very familiar politics of surveillance and control; in the latter there are more innovative developments that centre on the replacement of the central figure of the bureaucrat with that of the project leader and the central life experience of the occupational career followed largely in one organization being replaced by that of individual's leadership achievements in projects. The politics of the project become the testing ground for elite reproduction (Clegg, 2011; Clegg & Courpasson, 2004).

What is distinctive about leading and working in the contemporary liquid decomposed organization is that the major mechanism of the career has undergone a substantial change. Careers are increasingly project-based, flowing now like mercury and then reconsolidating in a new plane of activity (Schein & Van Maanen, 2016). The project – whether innovation, R&D, engineering, marketing or whatever, becomes the major vehicle for organization networks and alliances and developmental tasks within specific organizations – although, increasingly these will involve team members from other organizations. In such hybrid and often-unclear situations, conflict and confrontation are inevitable, so managing emotions becomes a crucial skill. Leaders need to create learning environments—via coaching, hands-on-teaching and mentoring—to stimulate and develop their employees – and to manage expectations about evolving roles in projects (Garvin, 2013).

If one follows the direction of decomposition, it is clear that in the new margins located on the global peripheries of modernity, in the electronic panopticon of the call centre or the outsourced production line, bureaucracy is alive and well in a particularly centralized, standardized and routinized form. Here the bureaucratization

of the shopfloor has proceeded into the heart of the white collar, pink blouse, and colourful indigenously attired digital factory. If, on the other hand, one follows the recomposition route into the upper echelons of leaner and more entrepreneurially oriented organizations, a surprising observation emerges. Leaders are no longer responsible subjects – at least not for performance in all its manifestations: ethical, financial, production, etc. The more they are able to do less of the work of the organization the more efficient they become as well as becoming less responsible. Leadership is hyper-symbolic but increasingly empty of substantive impact when decomposition is widespread. Efficiency is measured in simple terms as value considered only in costs and profits. Responsibility is pushed down and out. Pushed down it is subsidiarized by being constituted as empowerment of the subaltern workforce who become panoptical governors of their employment relations (Barker, 1993). Pushed out it is outsourced, sub-contracted, and embedded in a supply chain whose governing mechanism is invariably contractually expressed in financial terms with no special attention to local practices (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2015). Should those financial terms be delivered in ways that seem ethically dubious, where people die, become ill, poisoned or incapacitated, in a necrocapitalist variation of capitalism (Banerjee, 2008), then the responsibility does not reach the top of the chain: the buck stops where the contract remotely resides. Gains flow upwards through the circuits of power; costs are pushed downwards. Greater responsibilities are no longer attached to higher remuneration: “Chief executive officers have by now gained a nearly comprehensive insurance against punishment for failure to deliver results, including failures caused by their indolence, incompetence, neglect or downright sloth” (Bauman, 2014, p. xviii).

Leaders self-manage and convince their subordinates to do the same; in doing so they bring to bear all their emotional intelligence and attachment, using digital devices that register their participation in working panoptically as they project their efforts synoptically to all their Linked In network and Facebook ‘friends’, interpolating work achievements into life lived outside official confines, outside of the office (Clegg & Baumeler, 2010; 2014). Those leaders that become most successful are measured by their wealth. As Pfeffer (2016) put it, money trumps everything.

### *The aesthetics of liquidity*

The truly liquidly modern organization announces itself to be so at street level and in the disposition of its internal spaces. Not for it the bland boxes and skyscrapers of solid modernity. There are several ways of being liquidly aesthetic. For early and start up organizations it is typical that they will rent a funky, slightly distressed space, perhaps part of an old factory or warehouse, preferably with valid heritage features: the location of design companies such as Advanced Digital Institute in the remains of Salt Mill in Saltaire, Bradford, a World Heritage Site, is typical of a liquidly aesthetic workplace statement. The employees sought are those whom Warren (2014, p. 71) terms ‘liquid employees’ – individuals who choose their jobs as they would a commodity, as a statement, an affirmation, a badge of identity, then the liquid organization seeks to make the workplace one that offers aesthetic fulfilment and proximity to good transport links and housing. Being in a conventional edge of the city industrial park just doesn’t cut it in these terms.

More established liquid organizations will prefer a signature architect, preferably a starchitect. To be a starchitect the designer must have achieved celebrity and critical acclaim that has transformed them into major figures in the world of architecture,

usually indicated by the award of major prizes and the commissioning of landmark buildings. Those that are best known have a name recognition that extends to a degree of fame amongst the general public. To become a starchitect requires some pretensions to the avant-garde – nothing classical or classically modern will do. The essential feature is the aestheticization of the workplace, whereby ‘aspects of objects, places, events, people and experiences of everyday life are made more appealing through the decoration, enhancement or other embellishment of their appearance’ (Warren, 2014.p.71). *De rigueur* are highly designed spaces and finishes, coupled with laid back open spaces, bicycle spaces and the provision of quality fit outs in terms of kitchens, cafes, coffee ports etc. The occasional sculpture or modern art piece helps also, which an art consultancy can supply on lease; occasional musicians, artists, poets or writers in residence can also help create a suitably funky sense of place.

Hancock (2003) suggests that liquid organizations will seek to structure fun, novelty and excitement into the experience of being at work. The work itself becomes liquid – it spills over into downtime, occupies the wakeful creative moments of the organizational members, travels with them as they use their portable digital devices. Above all, the spaces must be flexible: it should not be solidified into structures that cannot adapt and change easily. Open spaces, hot desking, bookable meeting rooms, no anchoring in offices – these are all preferred. Of course, the opportunities for both synoptical and panoptical power increase as visibility and transparency of working conditions increases. Nonetheless, these characteristics signify ‘coolness’ – the accolade that a liquid organization and its liquid leaders must express (see Lancione & Clegg, 2015). The contrast is with the constructions of earlier modes of organization such as factories, modernist towers and desolate warehouse spaces of the industrial park. Aesthetically liquid organizations cannot be authentic if they occupy such

spaces. Authenticity has to be signified by style and the style must be cool. The implications for the aesthetics of leadership performance are notorious. The black and white image of Steve Jobs (the bully but visionary leader) in his roll neck sweater, so 'cool' that he could wear something from the 70s and still evoke a sense of being at the cutting edge. The former Uber CEO Travis Kalanick, also hardly ever appears to wear a tie, with the absence of a tie in buttoned-down and buttoned up Corporate America sufficient to symbolise the disruptive nature of Uber. Style fuses with substance.

### **Towards post-leadership?**

From a liquid perspective, leadership is becoming post-leadership, a process of mutual influence with highly porous borders but also with very clear limits. In the liquid world leading and following blur, leadership de-materializes and hierarchies apparently give way to organizational landscapes of flatness (see table 1). But the elites are as powerful as they ever used to be and the implicit hierarchies are still there. Everything appears different while the underlying contours of relations of production and administration remain structurally the same.

Table 1 about here

In liquid modernity, agility prevails. The solid bureaucracies of the past, in which order is an everyday production in explicitly hierarchical spaces (Zhang & Spicer, 2013), gives way to agile systems rich in expectations of self-leadership. The long-term advantages of the past are replaced with a succession of short-term advantages, as sustainable advantages are an idea of the past in the world of hypercompetition (D'Aveni, 1995). Orderly routines, founded upon repetition give way to the

preponderance of dynamic capabilities (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000) and even routines themselves are rediscovered as incubating change *and* adaptability – recent emphasis on the latter.

Person-organization relations reflect the trend. The traditional sense of obligation gives way to free selves. Employment is replaced by employability. Labour relations made uniform by labour unions are replaced by i-Deals (Rousseau, Ho, & Greenberg, 2006) and frequently by gig work in a gig economy supported by platforms (Spreitzer, Cameron & Garrett, 2017). Apparently the long-term career is dead as we celebrate the protean career! Leadership, as traditionally devised, founded upon power asymmetries, is seemingly dissolved in cultures sculpted with soft power. Leadership loses its *gravitas* and becomes a form of apparent collegiality, with leaders posing as *primus inter pares*. Leadership seemingly becomes an act of consent rather than a form of coercion, an exercise of articulating an array of stakeholders' rights in such a way as to recognise that while all stakeholders are apparently equal some will always be more equal than others. Some stakeholder issues just have more salience than others; some issues are more meaningful than those that can be marginalized as largely non-issues: in this way some interests are marginalized and others reproduced as normalcy.

This liquid world is part fact, part fantasy. Organizations do sometimes appropriate the rhetoric and the logic of liquidity. They move past traditional practices and empower people. But fluidity comes at a price: people are often empowered to align, such that the façade of new organizational designs hides forms of organizational continuity (Pfeffer, 2013). As Jensen (2010, p.429) explained, old forms now assume “many disguises” and power, freed from old pyramid structures, gains a digital edge, a

change reflected in the growing interest of organization theory for the digital (Bodrozic & Adler, 2017). There is more: employability comes with the spectre of unemployment; i-deals dig deeper inequalities; shareholder value creation trumps sustainability; global value chains hide inhumane labor conditions, sometimes close to modern forms of slavery (Crane, 2013), some of them in highly visible projects such as the Qatar 2022 Football World Cup (Reinecke & Ansari, 2016).

After the leadership of the few, new forms of leadership of the many liquefied the traditional representations, introducing a number of paradoxical effects. Common citizens upgrade their status towards leadership identities and the elites downgrade theirs': presidents describe themselves as normal persons and the ordinary folk gains leadership credit. The world of liquid modernity is one of post-leadership: a synoptical space in which everybody's leadership is under the constant surveillance of the multitude of leaders. Leaders are less necessary because (self)leadership is everywhere. The liquid world is a world of leaders free to follow the crowd: leading by watching self watching others watching one's self.

### **Conclusion**

From the perspective of the leaders, they know that they are over the threshold where the golden chains are evident. The largest problem that they must deal with is using the project shape shifting that goes on outside the threshold as the basis for competitions and tournaments that will decide who of the subaltern may cross the threshold into leadership. Looked at from below, from the perspective of the subaltern, contemporary organizations are shape-shifters, project-based, with teams composing and decomposing, locations shifting as projects are completed, KPIs changing with projects, and one's individual organizational future uncertain.

The hybrid political structure of liquid organizing needs both leadership differentiation to ensure a credible competition among various centres of power (individuals and/or sub-groups) and unification to ensure a relative consensus on basic values and on the legitimate rules of the internal political arena. Leaders are differentiated from sub-elites who, in turn, are distinguished from the population of knowledge workers, experts, and professionals, with regard to values, demographic characteristics and types of aspirations. Beyond everyday concern are the distant global margins where the objects of desire are produced.

Corporate leaders have a direct interest in shaping, grooming and educating selected aspirants, constituting what might be called subjects with an appropriate comportment, etiquette, and equipage to qualify as disciplined. Running projects with paradoxical criteria of performativity (on time, on budget, on specification, efficient while delivering innovation) successfully hints, in a weak way, that one has been spotted as someone with potential which the elites wish to test out, to see if the project leader can display certain indispensable characteristics for the leadership elite.

Mostly, these characteristics pertain to an ability to accept and work creatively with an existing order and existing rules; thus, they go far beyond merely technical and professional expertise. They are the new way of re-invigorating *habitus* when organizational borders have become porous, careers liquid, and leadership identities contingent.

What the conditions of liquid organization and leadership offer those ostensibly being led is a great propensity for anomie. Anomie is usually taken to mean a state of normlessness, detachment and non-solidarity created by a mismatch between personal or group standards and wider social standards. The gap occurs because of the lack of



social ethics integrating individuals into broader moral sentiments. When behavioural norms of leadership practice spread indifference to the fate of others, when the decomposition of the corporation becomes the norm, when social relations become predominantly digitally mediated, anomie will escalate not only as existing corporate ranks are diminished through increasing culls on membership but also as, in the digital 'sharing' economy, the vast majority of people working become self-employed, precarious and marginal employees or are outsourced sub-contractors of the corporate behemoths remaining (Clegg, Cunha & Rego, 2016). The corporation becomes an increasingly remote Kafkaesque citadel that few can breach. When there are few people left to lead and many that feel cast asunder by the leaders of the past and present, through increasingly liquid states and organizations, leadership as an ethical claim to significance and difference tends to be an option with diminishing prospects other than the inflation of rhetoric with which to Trump.

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Table 1. Organizations in light of solid and fluid modernity

	Solid modernity	Liquid modernity
Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rational system</li> <li>• Long term planning</li> <li>• Orderly routines</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agile organism</li> <li>• Short-term advantages</li> <li>• Dynamic capabilities</li> </ul>
Person-organization relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sense of mutual obligation</li> <li>• Labor contracts</li> <li>• Regulation and uniformity</li> <li>• Long term careers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Free selves</li> <li>• Gig economy</li> <li>• i-Deals</li> <li>• Protean careers</li> </ul>
Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Top down</li> <li>• Authoritative</li> <li>• Formal</li> <li>• Gravitas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Networked, dispersed</li> <li>• Consented</li> <li>• Personal</li> <li>• Collegial</li> </ul>
Control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Panoptical</li> <li>• Hard power</li> <li>• Bureaucratic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Synoptical</li> <li>• Soft power</li> <li>• Cultural</li> </ul>
Society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Citizenry</li> <li>• Shareholders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consumers</li> <li>• Stakeholders</li> </ul>