

Political and Civic Leadership: A Reference Handbook

Edited by Richard A. Couto (2010) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc.

Review by Jonathan Reams¹

In his introduction to the handbook, Richard Couto indicates that he was motivated by the lack of good, recent material in the field of political and civic leadership that scholars and teachers could use to engage in dialogue about this topic as something more than authority and hierarchy. As well, he states an aim of bridging a gap that has existed, where leadership does not want to get its hands dirty by discussing politics and political science avoids the embarrassment of leadership. Making politics, civic life and leadership relevant for a wider range of people is a worthy ambition. Giving future students of both subject areas a rich resource to understand the core issues, this handbook offers a benchmark and starting place for future efforts to understand the practice of leadership in politics and civic life.

This is indeed a handbook on leadership. The scope of work included is comprehensive. With 120 chapters, it covers just about everything you could imagine in relation to political and civic leadership. It does not attempt to be comprehensive about leadership, steering clear of areas such as business and organizations. The 11 parts to the two volume set cover a range of topics clearly focused on politics and civic life such as philosophy and theories, purposes, failures, processes, institutions, contexts, psychology, tasks and tools, and finally depictions.

From this vast collection of material, I choose to focus on a few names known to me to get an indication of the flavor, tone and substance of the volume. From Part I, *Introduction to Politics and Civic Leadership*, I read the first three chapters, *Politics* by Richard Couto and *Leadership and Leadership and Values* both by Ronald Heifetz. From Part II on *Philosophy and Theories of Political and Civic Leadership* I read chapters seven, on *The Hero Myth* by Betty Sue Flowers, *Social Origins of Authority* by Nathan Harter, and *Integral Leadership Theory* by Russ Volckmann. I will attempt to provide a brief overview of the approaches and contents of these chapters, make a few remarks regarding them and some summary remarks about the impression they give of the volume as a whole.

Couto starts off his handbook by introducing his view of politics through the story of a young soldier he met on an airplane trip who disliked politics because in her experience it was primarily about the abuse of power. It serves to illustrate the common view wherein “Politics ... equals hypocritical self-serving and inequality of freedom among different groups” (p. 3). This allows Couto to draw his initial broad lines on the subject, that in essence politics is about power to make and enforce decisions, requires legitimation and that this gives authority to thus use power.

¹ **Jonathan Reams** is Editor-in-Chief of Integral Review, an associate professor at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, as well as an organizational consultant and leadership trainer. Jonathan@Reams.com



The chapter then goes on to lay out how these core constructs of legitimacy, authority and power have been viewed, shaped and used in society.

After going on to lay out the hidden dimensions of power involved Couto begins to point towards a “new politics of truth” (p. 7). This takes us through the territory of narratives on the collective good. “Power established regimes of truth about the nature of community, who belongs and who does not, and the legitimacy of the claims that communities can make upon their members for the goods and resources to produce and sustain it” (p. 9). This brings him to politics as leadership, rather than politics as power. In this, he shows that we each have “a degree of responsibility to advance narratives we prefer as true and just” (p. 10). Thus politics is indeed personal.

I came away from my reading feeling educated about the realities of how civic or community life is inherently impacted by politics and the political and how we live and act in those domains with or without knowing it. The depth of complexities of how the issues of power, legitimacy and authority are woven into the fabric of our lives comes through well and sets the stage for the volume that follows.

I then turned my attention to Heifetz’s chapters on leadership. Having long been a student of his work, I was looking forward to see how he might synthesize his work in a short chapter. He begins by clarifying the distinction between leadership and authority, both formal and informal. His analysis clearly decouples these conceptions, leaving the way open to find more viable reference points for the leadership. He does this by pointing out that “Most problem situations do not call for leadership. Authoritative systems are sufficient” (p. 14). Yet when situations demand adaptation from a group or community, the tried and true authority systems most often fail, leading to a need for something more – leadership. Using this reference point, Heifetz is also able to make a clear distinction between leadership and management. In his frame, management refers to “the activity of coordinating complex systems in the efficient production of solutions to routine or technical problems” (p.14).

Understanding how to recognize adaptive challenges and decoupling leadership from authority enables Heifetz to analyze a number of questions relevant to understanding the practice of leadership. This includes leadership with or without formal authority. He illustrates how this can look with stories both familiar and new, large scale, at a community level and within a family system. This allows him to make clear another distinction, that leadership is not a personality trait, but an activity.

In his brief chapter on *Leadership and Values*, Heifetz makes a clear case for leadership being an inherently value laden activity. He examines James MacGregor Burns’ conception of transformational leadership and finds that it falls prey to at least three issues related to the normative values frameworks it implies. Heifetz addresses this by proposing to go “further by building a normative conception of leadership that starts with the work of meeting these [internal contradictions in values held by a community] challenges” (p. 26). From this he identifies one of the core tasks of leadership to be building holding environments, or containers that allow for the pressures of those challenges to enable a community to do adaptive work on itself. This work is inherently value laden, but this approach does not prescribe a normative set of values to be

sought, but a process for communities to go through the process of creating their own higher order values.

I found that these two chapters summarized the core elements of Heifetz's concepts of leadership in a succinct and well-illustrated manner. As a way of setting the frame for leadership for the rest of the volume, these two chapters do an excellent job. The process or activity of leadership is shown to require a high (if not "integral") level of thought from leaders as they must orchestrate the interactions of multiple complex systems of values through a collectively reflective process. This is a tall order indeed, and maybe shows why in public life we feel a real lack of—and thus cry for—leadership.

This lack of leadership may be connected to the deeply embedded view of leaders as heroes, which is the subject of Betty Sue Flowers chapter on *The Hero Myth*. She begins by laying out the four part structure of such myths; the call, crossing the threshold to adventure, facing a supreme ordeal and returning with a gift. She then points to how the hero myth has been and is currently used in leadership literature, from which there are many examples to pick. While many of these examples can be viewed as not the best examples of the kind of leadership called for by today's thought leaders, she also shows how the hero myth can illustrate a leader's journey in a positive way.

In line with many current views, Flowers then points out that the "hero myth is fundamentally individualistic" (p. 58). The shortcomings of the hero myth are shown in light of understanding how many leaders contribute to enabling the success of the leader who is mythologized. She also shows how the hero myth can marginalize women's roles. In the end, while noting that the popularity of the hero myth of leadership will continue "as long as we find tales of individual heroes more compelling than tales of groups or systems" (p. 59). Flowers points out that the "problems of this century's complex, globally interconnected world are unlikely to be solved by individualistic heroic leadership" (p. 59). This then brings us back to the gap that is felt today for leadership that goes beyond conventional mythologies embedded in our society.

Nathan Harter follows next with his chapter on *Social Origins of Authority*. In his usual thorough philosophical style, he digs deeply into the ways in which followers willingly constrain their choices by granting authority to others. After showing the blurring boundaries that exist between rulers and followers, he digs into the motivations of followers. This reveals that such motivation for giving authority is dynamic, ambivalent, paradoxical and often a group phenomenon. All of this is further compounded by a set of nonconscious factors such as habit and subconscious influences. Here Harter draws on Freud to illuminate the depths of how such issues can influence the granting of authority.

In further investigating his theme, Harter moves from authority to legitimacy. "Authority is a residual sentiment, a sense of legitimacy rooted in a present day belief adopted previously" (p. 65). He then draws on Weber's three sources of legitimacy, rationality, tradition or charisma and Mary Parker Follett's ideas to flesh this out. After this journey through the social sources of authority Harter ends with the kind of phrasing that simplifies the complexity: "People want rulers for conscious and unconscious reasons, but at the same time, they also do not want them,

or they go for long periods of time when they do not really think about it” (p. 67). Such is the reality faced by leaders and those trying to put attention on these issues.

The final chapter I choose to review is Russ Volckmann’s *Integral Leadership Theory*. For readers of this journal, the inclusion of this topic being relegated to one brief chapter might seem a loss of the potential perceived for it to contribute to the field. However it can also be viewed as an achievement that the topic is included in such a mainstream handbook. Then there is the daunting task facing Volckmann of trying to do justice to the topic in roughly six pages. He begins by noting that integral is used in two main ways; first as a stage development theory, second as a meta-theory. He does a good job of explaining both and showing how each of these usages of integral can contribute to leadership studies. He even gives some nice examples to illustrate the concept of holons.

Volckmann goes on to show how integral (meta)theory can be useful as a framework in mapping the breadth of disciplinary concepts related to leadership. He demonstrates the utility of the integral model in providing categories that lend themselves to sorting various models and concepts of leadership. In addition he covers how various methods can be drawn on to enable an organized and coherent methodological pluralism. He also surveys the growing body of research and publications bringing the application of integral theory to the field of leadership studies. In pointing to the future of how this can be used, he notes that “these elements of the theory are used as mapping tools designed to help us learn more about the relationship between multiple intelligences and the capacity of individuals to handle higher and higher levels of task complexity” (p. 126). He closes by noting that this is a lifelong task of constantly learning, not only specific skills, but learning to develop the whole person in an integrated manner.

I believe that this chapter exemplifies the challenge that integral theory faces in making its contribution to leadership studies in general. Brief overviews must necessarily suffer from truncated explanations that cannot do justice to the depth and complexity that is possible. The devil is in the details, and to realize the potential of integral theory requires a significant investment of time and energy, not to mention word counts. In contrast to some of the other chapters surveyed here, whose themes are relatively focused, Volckmann by necessity must cover a broad scope to begin to convey the topic.

Having now surveyed a small handful of chapters of this handbook, I can give some overall impressions based on that selective reading. First of all, I believe that if the rest of the volume carries on with the level of writing displayed here, that it would be a worthy investment. It is a reference volume, not designed to break new ground in the particulars, but in the whole by addressing head-on the gap in the literature about political and civic life in relation to leadership. It appears to meet the goal set out by Couto in his introduction. To then remedy this gap by gathering a very thorough and comprehensive set of scholars to provide rich descriptions of the multitude of issues involved demonstrates the passion and commitment Couto brought to the project.