



Leadership in Modern Times

Reflections on Yves Cohen's Le siècle des chefs'

Moritz Föllmer

HCM 2 (1): 65–81

DOI: 10.5117/HCM2014.1.FOLL

Abstract

This review article discusses Yves Cohen's recent book *Le siècle des chefs: Une histoire transnationale du commandement et de l'autorité (1890-1940)*. Cohen provides an extensive analysis of discourses on leadership in France, the Soviet Union, Germany and the United States. He also studies how leadership was practiced, by French and Soviet factory directors as well as by Stalin himself. While giving due credit to the scope and sophistication of his book, the review article asks whether Cohen's focus on scientific discourses and highly structured organisations leaves sufficient room for contingency. It argues that interwar political leadership in interwar Europe was not least about seeing and seizing opportunities in unforeseeable circumstances, often thriving on a positive fascination with crises and states of emergency. It also points out that, contrary to what the combined title and subtitle suggest, "le siècle des chefs" hardly ended in 1939, and that the quest for leadership continues to preoccupy present-day societies, cultures and politics.

Keywords: leadership, Europe, organisation, individuality, politics

Introduction

The relationship between individuality and social organisation was among the key issues preoccupying social thought in the decades around 1900. Max Weber, along with other liberal thinkers, feared that the incessant growth of bureaucracy would eventually render individuals irrelevant, consigning them to the "shell as hard as steel" created by rationalisation.² By contrast,

Émile Durkheim, himself an impeccable French Republican, joined a chorus of conservative voices in worrying about the spread of individualism and the concomitant threat of social disintegration.³ Both concerns informed not just *Kulturkritik* and emerging sociological theory but also contemporary managerial discourse and political culture. How could companies reconcile their increasing size and internal bureaucracy with the need for personal decision and responsibility? How could politicians remain recognisable as individuals, in spite of the growing importance of party apparatuses and professional campaigning, and give complex societies purpose and direction? These questions motivated a myriad intellectual and practical answers and only gained in urgency under the impetus of the First World War as well as of the rise of the United States, the Soviet Union and the fascist dictatorships in the two subsequent decades.

The widespread search for leadership in modern times has, of course, not gone unnoticed by political, intellectual, cultural and business historians. Political leadership has been treated in transnational perspective, as in the veteran political scientist Archie Brown's recent blend of systematic comparison and historical analysis,⁴ but there have hitherto been few attempts to explore the topic beyond the confines of different subdisciplines. Historians of the twentieth century should thus take note of Yves Cohen's intellectually ambitious, methodologically versatile, geographically broad and extensively researched study of this crucial subject. Cohen is almost uniquely qualified for such a demanding task. While his early work was on business organisation in early twentieth-century France,⁵ he has since turned to Soviet history, with an emphasis on the era of Stalinism.⁶ In *Le siècle des chefs*, he complements this rare Franco-Soviet expertise by including entire sections on Germany and the United States. As one would expect from a historian based at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, Cohen is theoretically aware – in his case less in the sense of applying a specific body of thought to a historical context than in reflecting conceptually throughout the book. His weighty tome is therefore not merely a contribution to the historiography of leadership in the early decades of the twentieth century but also evidence of the continuing importance of French thought for the study of modernity more generally.

Yves Cohen on Leadership, 1890-1940

Between 1890 and 1940, authors as different as Gustave Le Bon, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and Charles De Gaulle saw a pressing “need for a *chef*”, as the

book's preliminary chapter explains. While the diagnosis was remarkably similar, the notions themselves differed. The German *Führung* united notions of leadership and management that were mostly kept separate in the United States. Both highlighted the ability to motivate and steer others, as did the Russian *rukovodstvo*, whereas the French *commandement* evokes formally defined titles and positions. Consequently, the role and behaviour of persons within organisations were discussed under the heading of *l'autorité personnelle*, in contrast to the frequent American insistence that leadership and authority were different realms. However, to Cohen such semantic differences matter less than the common preoccupation with the role of persons and personalities in an age that is often misleadingly identified with impersonal rationalisation (pp. 54-56).

In foregrounding “la culture du *leadership* et de la figure du chef” in the first part of his book, Cohen stresses underlying commonalities, which, he argues, are easily obscured by the fixation on the fascist and communist dictatorships' respective leadership cults. In all four countries, the decline of older hierarchies and the inclusion of ever greater numbers of people into industrial enterprises, the armed forces and national politics inspired fresh, cross-disciplinary thinking about social organisation. Military writers such as Hubert Lyautey pointed out that, in future wars, the old-style blend of formal qualifications and punitive measures would no longer suffice to mobilise and steer troops. Their interest in the personality factor overlapped with the preoccupations of early psychologists and management theorists, all of whom aspired to be “scientific” while engaging and interacting with social practice. They discussed the role and behaviour of leaders in conjunction with new forms of discipline, especially where the organisation of factories was concerned, and with the *gouvernementalité* (Michel Foucault) of stimulating and “caring for” the workforce or even entire populations. Notions such as “suggestion”, “influence” or “magnetism”, the latter especially cherished by Stalin, served to characterise the personal qualities deemed necessary to hold crowds and groups together. In an age of industrial rationalisation and mass participation, democracies and dictatorships alike searched for a new, more persuasive and efficient elite as well as for leadership at the intermediate level of lieutenants or engineers.

In spite of these commonalities, the quest for leadership responded to different challenges, depending on the respective national and political contexts. In Germany, the discussion centred on the figure of the political *Führer*. This created a yardstick against which Wilhelm II himself was measured (with considerable initial hopes but ultimately disappointing results) and that, in spite of Max Weber's hopes for a democratic *Führertum*,

subsequently undermined the legitimacy of the Weimar Republic and its protagonists. Companies foregrounded *Menschenführung*, in order to compensate for the depersonalising effects of rationalisation and counter the growing influence of the trade unions. While the debate on leadership was politically broad, the trend to link *Führer* and *Volk* and contrast both with the principles of democratic selection and the rule of law greatly contributed to the rise of Adolf Hitler. It subsequently lay at the centre of Nazism as a political and social practice, promising opportunities for *Führertum* to any “Aryan” who demonstrated personal initiative and performance.

The Bolsheviks also profited from a perceived lack of leadership, a staple of political discourse in late Tsarist Russia. Starting with Lenin’s pamphlet *What Is To Be Done* (1902), they even defined themselves as professional leaders (*vozhdia*) directing the labouring masses towards revolution. What was absent was any theoretical justification of why the revolution should be led by a single person. Hence the official denial that a personality cult existed and the rather twisted rhetoric accompanying Stalin’s ascent to power. But the scope of leadership (*rukovodstvo*) was much broader, especially during the 1930s, at the time of forcible industrialisation and agrarian collectivisation. Frequent and decisive personal intervention was expected of party officials and company directors. Any setbacks were blamed on the failure or corruption of leadership, mostly due to residual bureaucratic or, worse, bourgeois attitudes. The Great Terror thus ushered in a new generation of leaders who had come of age in Soviet times. And it reinforced the cult around Stalin, which united different logics ranging from the highest party circles to cultural professionals to many ordinary Russians with their vernacular desires for veneration. The incessant emphasis on leadership was, Cohen argues, not merely symbolic but became part and parcel of political and social practice in the Soviet Union.

The French preoccupation with *commandement* and *autorité* stood out for the importance of military perspectives as well as the inspiration provided by the emerging discipline of social psychology. Majority opinion held that the *rôle social* of officers in a conscript army and under the conditions of technological warfare depended on personal qualities such as the ability to take and foster initiative. Analogously, engineers in factories were ascribed a social and moral as well as a technical and professional role, necessitating self-control in order to lead by example. Military and business writers responded to increasing democratic pressures, as did Gustave Le Bon in his seminal *Psychologie des foules* (1895). According to Le Bon, crowds could be steered by politicians who understood their irrational, essentially feminine psychology and who possessed suggestive capacities. This thinking inspired

industrialists and managerial writers to reflect on what constituted a *chef*. At the same time, their views formed against the backdrop of actual contention, as during strikes at Eugène Schneider's armament factory in Le Creusot in 1899, which prompted a blend between reassertion of entrepreneurial sovereignty, a heightened emphasis on personal interaction with workers, and new, pre-Taylorist forms of social control.

The First World War and its conflict-ridden aftermath triggered further reflection, which ranged from a homosocial emphasis on reciprocal love between leaders and their subordinates to a more systematic approach stressing overview, coordination and decision-making. Factory engineers were advised to know their staff while steering them through surveillance, material incentives, sanctions and clear orders, as well as by conveying a sense of constant personal presence. The search for the *grand chef*, modelled on the wartime general Ferdinand Foch or the industrialist Louis Renault, counterbalanced a parallel trend toward encouraging men from all walks of life to uncover and cultivate their own leadership capacity. Industrialists reinforced previous efforts at systematic leadership training as a reaction to the strikes under the Popular Front in 1936. The late Third Republic was thus characterised by an interplay between further democratisation and new forms of reasserting vertical authority.

The American discourse searched for empirical psychological knowledge almost from the outset, inspired by the French author Alfred Binet's emphasis on *suggestibilité* but focusing on the profile of leaders rather than the emotional outlook of their followers. Group experiments with pupils reinforced prevailing assumptions about "natural" qualities and hierarchies. The relevant publications, predictably emanating from Ivy League universities, blended (white, Protestant and male) elitism with the democratic promise of mobility. They held that American leaders distinguished themselves from monarchs or dictators by being attentive to the views and needs of the majority while simultaneously offering an alternative to the weak democracies of interwar Europe. This basic theme proved attractive to proponents of "scientific management", who used it to defend themselves against the charge of impersonal rationalisation, as well as to educational researchers, who shifted the emphasis from youthful leaders' "natural" to their acquired, and thus trainable, qualities. It was also taken up by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who communicated his insights to a popular audience through the radio while also reassuring the elite from which he originated. Roosevelt's reliance on a circle of advisors underscores that, more than elsewhere, leadership in the United States was understood as embedded in complex social relations.

Having offered an extensive tableau and analysis of the discourses on leadership, Cohen moves on to explore “les chefs en action” in the second part of his book. His focus is on the operational practices of French and Soviet factory directors – as well as those of Stalin – during the 1930s, including the status of plans, the relationship between presence and distance, and the respective roles of oral and written communication. Drawing on aforementioned discourses, the *chefs* under study acted as “guides of action”. They defined objectives, anticipated obstacles, stimulated or stifled the activity of others, maintained a credible personal presence within large-scale organisations and/or across vast territories, asserted themselves against subordinates as well as other leaders, and – certainly in Stalin’s case – imposed their vertical authority through carefully dosed written interventions. Hence, Cohen’s broader claim behind what one might label a historical microsociology of leadership is that these practices responded to some of the twentieth century’s key challenges and, conversely, contributed to shaping it.

Ernest Mattern, director of factories and technical services at the car manufacturer Peugeot from 1928, exemplifies planning. Benefitting from strong leadership credentials from a previous stint with the same company and supported by the Peugeot family, Mattern immediately introduced a massive reorganisation project, followed by a series of implementation plans. While he did consult with factory directors, he managed to identify what was essentially a Fordist drive for productivity gains with his own agenda, personally providing it with unity and cohesion. Designing and writing the plan constituted an action and at the same time established a programme for, and justification of, future actions. Mattern possessed the authority to define objectives as well as the capacity to anticipate difficulties and understand circumstances on the ground. Hence he was in a position to present any subsequent changes as mere adjustments and, when necessary, redefine the initial plan retrospectively. The symbiotic relationship between *chef* and *plan* at Peugeot amounted to a highly successful way of reducing and steering the complexity of a vast company. To bridge the spatial distance between his office and the factories, Mattern, like other contemporary directors, devised a system of regular reports, often in the shape of tables and graphs, and corresponded tirelessly. At the same time, he insisted on the importance of frequent visits to the shop floor in order to spot mistakes, solve problems and convey the plan’s latest adjustments. In this way, he asserted his personal authority while also enabling (limited) initiative on the part of his factory directors and engineers – an anti-bureaucratic approach whose unity he saw threatened by the telephone, arguing that it encouraged bypassing vertical communication channels.

The Putilov factories in Leningrad did not possess a director with anywhere near the power that Ernest Mattern was able to exert at Peugeot. What is interesting about them is the debates on what constituted effective leadership that were held and minuted between 1929 and 1931, after the first five-year plan. Even by Stalinist standards, the sole producer of tractors at the time of agrarian collectivisation came under severe pressure to increase output whatever the obstacles. This prompted an unusually open discussion of internal problems and conflicts, especially the thorny relations between the heads of the different workshops on the one hand and the functionaries of the party organisations and administrative departments on the other. The former demanded greater autonomy in their respective realms in order to control and retain a transient workforce, against the restrictions on wages imposed by the intensely despised Office of Technical Norms. These intermediate leaders thus insisted on their role in negotiating between the provisions of the plan and the circumstances they grappled with on the ground. When the Putilov factories attracted critical attention from on high, including from Stalin himself, for failing to meet the targets, accusations abounded. The head of the Office of Technical Norms was taken to task for a lack of personal presence and direct communication. Since neither the “scientific” planning of the economy nor the “enthusiastic” workers could be at fault, any difficulties needed to be blamed on bad leadership.

What of the supreme *Vozhd'* with a capital V? Cohen offers a detailed analysis of how Joseph Stalin developed his own leadership style, which amounted to inextricable and highly personalised links between control, repression and the political agenda.⁷ His preferred method consisted of conveying a sense of his own presence through frequent written interventions, both letters and standardised forms only requiring his signature. Stalin thus related the respective policies to Marxist theory, concentrated the actions of regional authorities on specific targets (chiefly the kulaks), secured a constant flow of information between centre and periphery, conveyed his own emotional state and issued thinly veiled threats to the recalcitrant, lukewarm or overly bureaucratic. He thus replaced any horizontal collectivities by a direct vertical hierarchy, held together through disciplinary power, a set of communicative practices and technical means such as the telephone. This system of personal rule enabled Stalin to instigate and steer the massive drive for agrarian collectivisation and anti-kulak repression in spite of massive famines. It was also at the heart of the Great Terror of 1937/38, which he fuelled by constantly requesting critical, i.e. denunciatory, reports from below, hereby tying communist subjectivities to his murderous project.

Even an extensive summary cannot do full justice to Cohen's breadth of research and depth of interpretation. However, some conceptual points he makes along the way need mentioning. One concerns the notion of charismatic leadership, first developed in Max Weber's sociology of rule and still widely used, especially by historians in Germany.⁸ Rather than adopting it for analytical purposes, Cohen advocates historicisation. He points out that Weber's reflections on leadership, not unlike those of some of his French or American contemporaries, were part of his search for a political role for the individual as a counterweight to the emerging parliamentary system (pp. 21, 105, 130-135). Cohen's constant attention to the multi-facetedness of leadership discourses and practices is more congenial to another concept, namely that of *gouvernementalité* as proposed by Michel Foucault. Endeavouring to understand the revival of liberalism in the 1970s, the French thinker foregrounded the emergence of *dispositifs*, ensembles of discourses, institutions and measures geared towards large-scale behavioural change with the manufactured consent of the governed.⁹ Cohen reviews the definition and exertion of leadership against the backdrop of these *dispositifs*, but still regards it as a separate domain, one marked by hierarchical discipline alongside persuasive governance (pp. 15-16, 721-722, 812).¹⁰ A further important aspect is gender. It is obvious throughout the book how strongly "leaders", *Führer* or *chefs* were associated with notions of masculinity, especially with regard to qualities such as rationality, decisiveness and "natural" authority. Cohen stresses this repeatedly, while also discussing how the American author Mary Follett advocated a more group-based approach to leadership that could have subverted male predominance, or how the emergence of company-based social services offered some French women opportunities to lead other women (pp. 94, 276-277).

Leadership in a Contingent World

What kind of broader reflection might *Le siècle des chefs* stimulate, beyond the many specific issues that warrant elaboration and debate? The crucial question is whether or not there are alternative approaches to the history of leadership between the late nineteenth century and the Second World War. Cohen's focus, admirably broad though it is, reflects one of several possible choices, even though this is not made explicit. His study foregrounds scientific discourses and highly structured organisations, both of which aimed at minimising contingency. In many ways, this is a logical outcome of choosing France, the United States, Germany and the Soviet Union of

the 1930s. Among the authors Cohen includes, some Americans conceived of leadership as being situational and dependent on the contributions of others, while the talented but then little-known officer Charles de Gaulle stressed that the *chef* of a military unit needed to master a contingent reality (pp. 372-373, 296). But at the centre of his sections on discourses are psychologists and management theorists, whose ambition was to acquire certainty about the features and roles of, respectively, effective leaders and their loyal followers. Analogously, the chief protagonists of the sections on practices, Eugène Mattern and Joseph Stalin, appear as strikingly efficient “control freaks” operating within enormous apparatuses that they themselves had decisively shaped.¹¹ The fascinating account of Stalin’s communicative style, for that matter, could be complemented by studies that highlight how the Soviet dictator created states of emergency, invented putative conspiracies, and enjoyed others’ emotional uncertainty and physical suffering.¹²

Beyond such specific points, this emphasis has a broader conceptual and historical significance. Leaders who, like the military *chefs* envisioned by De Gaulle, possessed a knack for seeing and seizing opportunities in unforeseeable circumstances remain outside of Cohen’s focus. Revolutionary leaders, to cite one obvious example, might have had major organisational efforts to their credit, but their paramount contribution lay in spearheading the overthrow of previous governments, shifting political allegiances and ushering in a transformation of deeply ingrained structures.¹³ Moreover, it might be worth pondering the implications of Cohen’s – perfectly legitimate – concentration on Europe and the United States. A brief side glance at, for instance, Asia would bring out how anti-colonialist leaders placed themselves outside colonial structures, reconnected with (often invented) traditions and strove to create alternative moral and political worlds. Their own itineraries were designed to epitomise these alternative worlds, most prominently in the case of Mahatma Gandhi with his continuous emphasis on spiritual and bodily authenticity in conjunction with all-Indian unity and protest against British rule. As one study puts it, “it is perhaps not an exaggeration to claim that Gandhi’s fasts became synonymous with his style of leadership”.¹⁴ While the Vietnamese Communists’ emphasis on party organisation in the manner of Lenin was obviously very different from Gandhi’s politics, they too stressed personal sacrifice and bodily experience, chiefly in conjunction with imprisonment. This highlighted the violent injustice of French rule, boosted the heroic reputation of current or former inmates and legitimised their claims to leadership positions – so much so

that Ho Chi Minh, who lacked a similarly impressive record, felt compelled to publish a diary of his stint as a Chinese warlord's captive in 1942.¹⁵

Even within the confines of European political history it would be possible to tell a rather different story of leadership from that presented by Cohen. As stated at the outset of these reflections, the advent of the twentieth century triggered new concerns about an impersonal, rationalised and technology-driven modernity. The discourses and practices that Cohen describes responded to these concerns. They reasserted the role of the outstanding individual while at the same time subjecting it to rationalisation, as suggested by the need to identify and train leaders suitable for heading large-scale organisations. However, there was another strand in the history of leadership, one based on a view of modernity as a barely controllable juggernaut, dominated by short-term shifts and radical ruptures. Rather than inspiring universal fear, such a view also held great fascination, not least because it promised to narrow the gap between the leader and the adventurer. The latter had increasingly appeared a figure of the past, a heroically masculine character in nostalgic tales about a world not yet divided up, bureaucratically controlled and gender-neutral.¹⁶ But the drastically transformed political, social and cultural landscape in large parts of post-First World War Europe opened up opportunities for adventurous outsiders to become political leaders. The longing for such figures had been present before 1914, especially in Germany and Italy, but it had been frustrated by personal shortcomings and, more important, complex political systems and media dynamics.¹⁷ Now, however, the world seemed ripe for new protagonists, men who did not deplore uncertainty but thrived on it, exploiting or even ushering in the crises they subsequently purported to solve.¹⁸

The longing for leaders capable of simultaneously embracing and overcoming contingency was, of course, not universally shared, nor did it necessarily prompt contemporaries to endorse dictatorship rather than democracy. But it did become part and parcel of interwar political culture. The Weimar Republic, for instance, could have stabilised and lasted, difficult circumstances notwithstanding. However, the limited latitude that even its most skillful representatives enjoyed was at odds with the widespread expectation of a *Führer* capable of radical and surprising action.¹⁹ In other countries, decisiveness in unprecedented situations and full-blown crises was claimed by leaders who continued to operate within a democratic framework. Thus, Hendrik Colijn, prime minister of the Netherlands between 1933 and 1939, made much of his military past in the colonial East Indies while also styling himself as a reassuringly conservative politician steering the

ship of his country through the heavy winds of economic depression.²⁰ As French prime minister in 1938/39, the long-standing Radical Republican Édouard Daladier provoked and defeated a general strike and governed by decree in matters of defence, economic policy and immigration control.²¹ Both Colijn and Daladier transformed democratic leadership by adopting authoritarian images and methods, simultaneously reducing parliamentary influence and keeping the extreme right at bay.²²

If democratic politicians of the interwar period proved better at mounting a defence against the dictatorial challenge than is often acknowledged,²³ the power especially of the Nazi leadership model is not in doubt. Here too contingency was paramount. As recent biographies of some of the Third Reich's most important protagonists have demonstrated, there was nothing pre-determined about their careers. They joined the Nazi movement when it had already begun or even when it was in full electoral swing. Equipped with a self-understanding as heroic fighters, albeit mostly without actual combat experience, they combined a knack for exploiting unprecedented and open situations with a talent for rapid institution-building. Unwilling to accept any boundaries to their self-realisation (save those set by Adolf Hitler), they established highly personal leadership styles that rested on activating their subordinates' initiative while at the same time making them dependent. Expanding their own realm within the highly competitive environment of the Third Reich became tantamount to the definition, persecution and eventually murder of an ever broader range of "enemies".²⁴ It is thus worth supplementing the relevant section in Cohen's book by considering how *Führertum* worked on a subjective and practical level. It was closely linked to the notion of the *Volk*, as he rightly stresses, but it also mediated between extreme-right ideology and a modern society with its bureaucratic and individualist aspects.²⁵ This syncretistic character of *Führertum* was a major reason for Nazism's capacity to mobilise towards inclusion and exclusion along racial lines, both within the German borders and, during the Second World War, across the Nazi Empire. At the same time, it helps to explain why so many former Nazis could assume leading positions in the Federal Republic with apparent ease – and why the former SS functionary Reinhard Höhn could make a second career out of promoting collaborative forms of *Führung* as part of "modern management".²⁶

The picture of leadership in the interwar period is thus even more diverse than that offered by Cohen, especially with regard to the tension between thriving on contingency and, in some cases simultaneously, reducing it by institutional means. This should also prompt us to think about the decades post 1939. It would be ungenerous to criticise a book with such a broad

scope for not covering more ground, but it needs to be pointed out that, contrary to what the combined title and subtitle suggest, “*le siècle des chefs*” hardly ended in 1939. For instance, the comeback of Churchill and the rise of De Gaulle, political outsiders with military pasts and a talent for dangerously contingent situations, might be placed within the broader context of European societies facing the challenge of Nazi Germany. Moreover, one should consider complementing the brief connections Cohen draws to the “leaderless” post-1968 years. Particularly rewarding would be an analysis of what leadership meant in the 1950s, when unassuming politicians such as Willem Drees in the Netherlands or Antoine Pinay in France inspired trust and promised security.²⁷ The 1960s and 1970s have been aptly labelled a period of “leadership without leaders”, with the Dutch prime minister Joop den Uyl or the West German chancellor Willy Brandt as cases in point.²⁸ However, they also ushered in a renewed demand for decisive leaders, such as Brandt’s successor Helmut Schmidt, who boosted his popularity by fighting off a terrorist challenge in the autumn of 1977; Margaret Thatcher, who deliberately exacerbated social tensions and skillfully exploited the Argentinian invasion of the Falkland islands in order to demonstrate her resolve; or indeed Charles de Gaulle, who mastered the revolt of 1968 and has remained a powerful model ever since, a yardstick against which subsequent French presidents were bound to disappoint.

This critical excursion is by no means meant to detract from the strengths of *Le siècle des chefs*, which lie not merely in the book’s considerable intrinsic merit but also in its capacity to inspire further research and debate. While the focus here has been on a slightly different reading of the political history of twentieth-century Europe, future scholars of leadership should heed Cohen’s call for methodological and thematic versatility. Politicians, company directors and military officers alike strove, or were expected, to be leaders, and their qualities and roles were the object of psychological research, sociological reflection and media construction. Hence, notions that spanned different realms and fields should be historicised, as should the practices involved in heading large-scale companies, military units or polities. Beyond these historiographical challenges, we should reflect further on how to integrate the analysis of leadership into broader theories of modernity. Cohen’s findings and interpretations square with Anthony Giddens’s theory. According to Giddens social relations become, on the one hand, “dis-embedded”, i.e. more spatially distant and dependent on abstract systems, but are, on the other, “re-embedded” through trust in persons.²⁹ In this vein, leadership appears as a counterweight to modernity’s deindividualising tendencies, something Max Weber already hoped for in

the context of early twentieth-century Germany. However, an alternative reading might emphasise that modernity has been inextricably linked with contingency and crisis,³⁰ a dimension that leaders have capitalised on and reinforced as much as reduced and compensated for.

Finally, like many important historical studies, *Le siècle des chefs* can stimulate reflection on our time. We are currently witnessing a proliferation of “leadership”, which is now expected even of traditionally bumbling academics or prospective entry-level police officers, who are encouraged “to recognise that leadership is about the role that you do, not the rank that you hold”.³¹ Consequently, leadership in democracies appears “dispersed” amidst a bewildering array of institutional constraints, popular expectations and media priorities.³² Yet, there is a continuing expectation that leaders be ubiquitous and decisive while also offering authenticity and identification (the latter fuelled by populist movements). Such expectations have recently led to widespread disappointment, both with the *hyperprésident* Nicolas Sarkozy and his emphatically “normal” successor François Hollande, with the charismatic figures Tony Blair and Barack Obama as well as with the rather diminutive Austrian chancellor Werner Faymann (the widely popular Angela Merkel with her knack for avoiding major decisions is a notable exception). The political scientist Stein Ringen’s admonition that democratic leaders need to be visionary and steady in equal measure in order to ensure that civil servants and citizens obey them is plausible enough, as is his colleague Archie Brown’s contention that presidents or prime ministers are successful not so much when they live up to what he calls the “myth of strong leadership”, but when they succeed in collaborating effectively with others.³³ Then again, both are arguably at odds with the reality of media hypes and volatile electorates, which keep simultaneously calling for leaders and undermining them. What is clear is that leadership will continue to preoccupy the societies, cultures and politics we are a part of, and this should prompt us to follow Yves Cohen’s lead in thinking about it historically.

Notes

1. Yves Cohen, *Le siècle des chefs: Une histoire transnationale du commandement et de l'autorité (1890-1940)* (Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2013). 872 pp. € 25,00 (paperback). I should like to thank Camille Fauroux for first pointing out this book to me, Willemijn Ruberg for her encouragement, the anonymous reviewer for some useful comments, Mark B. Smith for advice on the transcription of Russian terms and William Gould for his briefing on Gandhi.

2. Max Weber, "Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus," in Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie I* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1920), 17-206. Weber's term *stahlhartes Gehäuse* is commonly translated as "iron cage", but see the critical discussion in Peter Baehr, "The 'Iron Cage' and the 'Shell as Hard as Steel': Parsons, Weber, and the *stahlhartes Gehäuse* Metaphor in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*," *History and Theory* 40 (2001): 153-69.
3. Émile Durkheim, *On Suicide* (London: Penguin, 2006 [1897]).
4. Archie Brown, *The Myth of the Strong Leader: Political Leadership in Modern Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 2014). See also Henk te Velde, "Charismatic Leaders, Political Religion and Social Movements: Western Europe at the End of the Nineteenth Century," in *Charismatic Leadership and Social Movements: The Revolutionary Power of Ordinary Men and Women*, ed. Jan Willem Stutje (New York: Berghahn, 2012), 141-154 and the rich comparative reflections in te Velde, *Stijlen van leiderschap: Persoon en politiek van Thorbecke tot Den Uyl* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 2002).
5. Yves Cohen, *Organiser à l'aube du taylorisme: La pratique d'Ernest Mattern chez Peugeot, 1906-1919* (Besançon: Presses Universitaires Franc-Comtoises, 2001); Cohen, "Fayol, un instituteur de l'ordre industriel," *Entreprises et histoire* 34 (December 2003): 29-67.
6. Yves Cohen, "The Cult of Number One in an Age of Leaders," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and European History* 8 (2007): 597-634; Cohen, "Circulatory Localities: The Example of Stalinism in the 1930s," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and European History* 11 (2010): 11-45.
7. Sarah Davies and James Harris, "Joseph Stalin: Power and Ideas," in *Stalin: A New History*, ed. Davies and Harris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 16, state that the issue of the dictator's "political practices [...] requires more systematic study". See also, in the same volume, J. Arch Getty, "Stalin as Prime Minister: Power and the Politburo," 83-107 and now his *Practicing Stalinism: Bolsheviks, Boyars, and the Persistence of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 182-268. In contrast to Cohen, Getty interprets Stalin's leadership as the ruthless domination of a deeply ingrained patrimonial, clan-based social structure.
8. Max Weber, *Grundriß der Sozialökonomik, III. Abteilung: Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1922), 122-76. Recent contributions by historians are gathered in, inter alia, *Virtuosen der Macht: Herrschaft und Charisma von Perikles bis Mao*, ed. Wilfried Nippel (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2000); *Charismatische Führer der deutschen Nation*, ed. Frank Möller (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2004); Stutje, *Charismatic Leadership*.
9. See Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller eds., *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality. With Two Lectures by and an Interview with Michel Foucault*, ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991); Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
10. See also, beyond the theme of leadership, Yves Cohen, "Foucault déplace les sciences sociales: La gouvernementalité et l'histoire du XX^e siècle," in *Les sciences camérales: Activités pratiques et histoire des dispositifs publics*, ed. Pascale Laborier et al. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2011), 43-79.
11. Cohen's interpretation of Stalin's leadership stems from a broader, highly interesting and innovative engagement with administrative practices in the Soviet Union of the interwar period. See Yves Cohen, "Administration, politique et techniques: Réflexions sur la matérialité des pratiques administratives dans la Russie stalinienne, 1922-1940," *Cahiers du monde russe* 44 (2003): 269-307; Cohen, "Circulatory Localities".
12. See especially Jörg Baberowski, *Verbrannte Erde: Stalins Herrschaft der Gewalt* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2012).

13. See the survey in Brown, *Myth of the Strong Leader*, 194-249.
14. Tim Pratt and James Vernon, "Appeal from this fiery bed..." The Colonial Politics of Gandhi's Fasts and Their Metropolitan Reception," *Journal of British Studies* 44 (2005): 92-114, 97 (quotation). See also Judith M. Brown, "Gandhi as Nationalist Leader, 1915-1948," in *The Cambridge Companion to Gandhi*, ed. Brown and Anthony Parel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 51-68; Joseph Alter, *Gandhi's Body: Sex, Diet, and the Politics of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).
15. Peter Zinoman, *The Colonial Bastille: A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 264-266, 287-288, 299-301. On the rise of the Vietnamese leader, which was due to his ideological conviction, his skills as an organiser and networker as well as his ability to address different audiences, see Pierre Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1-94.
16. See the excellent book by Sylvain Venaille, *La gloire de l'aventure: Genèse d'une mystique moderne (1850-1940)* (Paris: Aubier, 2002), 100-280.
17. Christopher Clark, *Kaiser Wilhelm II: A Life in Power* (London: Penguin, 2009); Martin Kohlrausch, *Der Monarch im Skandal: Die Logik der Massenmedien und die Transformation der wilhelminischen Monarchie* (Berlin: Akademie, 2005); Christopher Duggan, "Il culto dell'Uno dal Risorgimento al fascismo," *Passato e presente* 83 (May-July 2011): 76-97.
18. The widespread fascination with "crisis" has been highlighted especially for post-1918 Germany, see Peter Fritzsche, "Landscape of Danger, Landscape of Design: Crisis and Modernism in Weimar Germany," in *Dancing on the Volcano: Essays on the Culture of the Weimar Republic*, ed. Thomas Kniesche and Stephen Brockmann (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1994), 29-46; Moritz Föllmer and Rüdiger Graf eds., *Die "Krise" der Weimarer Republik: Zur Kritik eines Deutungsmusters* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2005); Graf, "Either-Or: The Narrative of 'Crisis' in Weimar Germany and its Historiography," *Central European History* 43 (2010): 592-615.
19. See Thomas Mergel, "Führer, Volksgemeinschaft und Maschine: Politische Erwartungsstrukturen in der Weimarer Republik und dem Nationalsozialismus 1918-1936," in *Politische Kulturgeschichte der Zwischenkriegszeit 1918-1939*, ed. Wolfgang Hardtwig (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 91-127, here 105-121.
20. Te Velde, *Stijlen van leiderschap*, 107-152.
21. Olivier Dard, *Les années trente: le choix impossible* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1999), 213-36; Gilles Le Béguec, "L'évolution de la politique gouvernementale et les problèmes institutionnels," in *Édouard Daladier chef de gouvernement Avril 1938-Septembre 1939*, ed. René Rémond and Janine Bourdin (Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1977), 55-74.
22. See also, with regard to Belgium, Czechoslovakia and Finland, Giovanni Capoccia, *Defending Democracy: Reactions to Extremism in Interwar Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 179-220.
23. See, by contrast, the overly gloomy chapter on interwar democracy in Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London: Allen Lane, 1998), 1-39. For an example of a democratic leadership cult stressing adherence to ideals of liberty, justice and cosmopolitanism alongside humble origins, military bravery and national identity, see Andrea Orzoff, "The Husbandman: Tomáš Masaryk's Leader Cult in Interwar Czechoslovakia," *Austrian History Yearbook* 39 (2008): 121-137.
24. See Peter Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Longerich, *Goebbels: Biographie* (Munich: Siedler, 2010); Robert Gerwarth, *Hitler's Hangman: The Life of Heydrich* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); Catherine Epstein, *Model Nazi: Arthur Greiser and the Occupation of Western Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), and

- the discussion in Moritz Föllmer, "The Subjective Dimension of Nazism," *Historical Journal* 56 (2013): 1107-1132, here 1111-1117.
25. Armin Nolzen, "Charismatic Legitimation and Bureaucratic Rule: The NSDAP in the Third Reich, 1933-1945," *German History* 23 (2005): 494-518; Moritz Föllmer, "Wie kollektivistisch war der Nationalsozialismus? Zur Geschichte der Individualität zwischen Weimarer Republik und Nachkriegszeit," *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus* 29 (2013): 30-52; MacGregor Knox, "The 'Prussian Idea of Freedom' and the Career Open to Talent: Battlefield Initiative and Social Ascent from Prussian Reform to Nazi Revolution," in Knox, *Common Destiny: Dictatorship, Foreign Policy, and War in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 186-226.
 26. Reinhard Höhn, *Verwaltung heute: Autoritäre Führung oder modernes Management* (Bad Harzburg: Verlag für Wissenschaft, Wirtschaft und Technik, 1970), esp. VIII, 121, 421; see Michael Wildt, "Der Fall Reinhard Höhn: Vom Reichssicherheitshauptamt zur Harzburger Akademie," in *Rückblickend in die Zukunft: Politische Öffentlichkeit und intellektuelle Positionen in Deutschland um 1950 und um 1930*, ed. Alexander Gallus and Axel Schildt (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2011), 254-271.
 27. Te Velde, *Stijlen van leiderschap*, 155-88; Sylvie Guillaume, *Antoine Pinay ou la confiance en politique* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation des Sciences Politiques, 1984); see also the important article by Martin Conway, "The Rise and Fall of Western Europe's Democratic Age 1945-73," *Contemporary European History*, 13 (2004): 67-88.
 28. Te Velde, *Stijlen van leiderschap*, 191-240.
 29. Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990).
 30. For some pertinent sociological reflections, see Michael Makropoulos, *Modernität und Kontingenzt* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1997).
 31. The quotation is taken from a recent advertisement by the Merseyside Police Force, www.merseyside.police.uk/join-us/merseyside-police-officer-recruitment.aspx [accessed 20 August 2013].
 32. John Kane, Haig Patapan and Paul 't Hart eds., *Dispersed Democratic Leadership: Origins, Dynamics and Implications* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). For a particularly pertinent example, see JeDon Emenhiser, "California Governors and the Obstacles to Transformative Leadership," in *Who's the Boss? Leadership and Democratic Culture in America*, ed. Hans Krabbendam and Wil Verhoeven (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2007), 55-73.
 33. Stein Ringen, *Nation of Devils: Democratic Leadership and the Problem of Obedience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); Brown, *Myth of the Strong Leader*. As a stark contrast to Ringen's both normative and practice-oriented approach and Brown's blend between historical account and assessment of leadership quality, see the detached sociological analysis of political decision-making in Niklas Luhmann, *Die Politik der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2002), 140-169.

About the Author

Moritz Föllmer is Associate Professor of Modern History at the University of Amsterdam. His interests lie in the cultural history of twentieth-century Germany and Europe, with particular emphasis on individuality and on urban societies. Among his publications is *Individuality and Modernity in Berlin: Self and Society*

from Weimar to the Wall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). Email: m.foellmer@uva.nl



© 2014 Föllmer / Amsterdam University Press.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.