

THE  
PALGRAVE KETS DE VRIES LIBRARY



MANFRED F. R. KETS DE VRIES

# LEADERSHIP UNHINGED

ESSAYS ON THE UGLY, THE BAD,  
AND THE WEIRD



## The Palgrave Kets de Vries Library

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries, Distinguished Professor of Leadership and Development and Organizational Change at INSEAD, is one of the world's leading thinkers on leadership, coaching, and the application of clinical psychology to individual and organizational change.

Palgrave's professional business list operates at the interface between academic rigor and real-world implementation. Professor Kets de Vries' work exemplifies that perfect combination of intellectual depth and practical application and Palgrave is proud to bring almost a decade's worth of work together in the Palgrave Kets de Vries Library.

More information about this series at  
<http://www.palgrave.com/gp/series/16661>

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries

# Leadership Unhinged

Essays on the Ugly, the Bad,  
and the Weird

palgrave  
macmillan

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries  
INSEAD  
Fontainebleau, France

ISSN 2730-7581

ISSN 2730-759X (electronic)

The Palgrave Kets de Vries Library

ISBN 978-3-030-79344-9

ISBN 978-3-030-79345-6 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-79345-6>

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2021

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Cover credit: eStudioCalamar

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG. The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>The Dark Cloud of Crowds</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Let's Install Leaders for Life</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>The Little Drum Boy or the Rise and Fall of a Flawed Leader</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>A Strange Tale of Hatred</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>I Won't, Therefore I Am</b>	<b>101</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Life Lessons from the "Great Mother"</b>	<b>119</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>When Lions Are Led by a Donkey</b>	<b>139</b>
	<b>Index</b>	<b>143</b>

## About the Author

**Manfred Florian Kets de Vries** brings a different view to the much-studied subjects of leadership and the psychological dimensions of individual and organizational change. Bringing to bear his knowledge and experience of economics (Econ. Drs., University of Amsterdam), management (ITP, MBA, and DBA, Harvard Business School), and psychoanalysis (Membership Canadian Psychoanalytic Society, Paris Psychoanalytic Society, and the International Psychoanalytic Association), he explores the interface between management science, psychoanalysis, developmental psychology, evolutionary psychology, neuroscience, psychotherapy, executive coaching, and consulting. His specific areas of interest are leadership (the “bright” and “dark” side), entrepreneurship, career dynamics, talent management, family business, cross-cultural management, succession planning, organizational and individual stress, C-suite team building, executive coaching, organizational development, transformation management, and management consulting.

The Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development and Organizational Change at INSEAD, he is Program Director of INSEAD’s top management program “The Challenge of Leadership: Creating Reflective Leaders,” and the Founder of INSEAD’s Executive Master Program in Change Management. As an educator, he has received INSEAD’s distinguished teacher award six times. He has held professorships at McGill University, the École des Hautes Études Commerciales, Montreal; the European School for Management and Technology (ESMT), Berlin; and the Harvard Business School. He has lectured at management institutions around the world. *The Financial Times*, *Le Capital*, *Wirtschaftswoche*, and *The Economist* have rated Manfred Kets de Vries among the world’s leading management thinkers and

among the most influential contributors to leadership studies and human resource management.

Kets de Vries is the author, co-author, or editor of more than 50 books, including *The Neurotic Organization*, *Leaders, Fools and Impostors*, *Life and Death in the Executive Fast Lane*, *The Leadership Mystique*, *The Happiness Equation*, *Are Leaders Made or Are They Born? The Case of Alexander the Great*, *The New Russian Business Elite*, *Leadership by Terror*, *The Global Executive Leadership Inventory*, *The Leader on the Couch*, *Coach and Couch*, *The Family Business on the Couch*, *Sex, Money, Happiness, and Death: The Quest for Authenticity*, *Reflections on Leadership and Character*, *Reflections on Leadership and Career*, *Reflections on Organizations*, *The Coaching Kaleidoscope*, *The Hedgehog Effect: The Secrets of High Performance Teams*, *Mindful Leadership Coaching: Journeys into the Interior*, *You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger: Executive Coaching Challenges*, and *Telling Fairy Tales in the Boardroom: How to Make Sure Your Organization Lives Happily Ever After*, *Riding the Leadership Roller Coaster: A Psychological Observer's Guide*, *Down the Rabbit Hole of Leadership: Leadership Pathology of Everyday Life*, *Journeys into Coronavirus Land: Lessons from a Pandemic*, *The CEO Whisperer: Meditations on Leadership, Life, and Change*, and *Quo Vadis: The Existential Challenges of Leaders*.

In addition, Kets de Vries has published more than 400 academic papers as chapters in books and as articles (including digital). He has also written more than a hundred case studies, including seven that received the Best Case of the Year award. He is a regular writer for various magazines. Furthermore, his work has been featured in such publications as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Fortune*, *Business Week*, *The Economist*, *The Financial Times*, and *The Harvard Business Review*. His books and articles have been translated into more than 30 languages. He writes regular blogs (mini articles) for the *Harvard Business Review* and *INSEAD Knowledge*. He is a member of 17 editorial boards and is a Fellow of the Academy of Management. He is also a founding member of the International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations (ISPSO), which has honored him as a lifetime member. Furthermore, Kets de Vries is the first non-US recipient of the International Leadership Association Lifetime Achievement Award for his contributions to leadership research and development (being considered one of the world's founding professionals in the development of leadership as a field and discipline). In addition, he received a Lifetime Achievement Award from Germany for his advancement of executive education. The American Psychological Association honored him with the "Harry and Miriam Levinson Award" for his contributions to Organizational Consultation. He is also the recipient of the "Freud Memorial Award" for his work to further the interface between



management and psychoanalysis. In addition, he has also received the “Vision of Excellence Award” from the Harvard Institute of Coaching. Kets de Vries is the first beneficiary of INSEAD’s Dominique Héau Award for “Inspiring Educational Excellence.” In addition, he is the recipient of two honorary doctorates. The Dutch government has made him an Officer in the Order of Oranje Nassau.

Kets de Vries works as a consultant on organizational design/transformation and strategic human resource management for companies worldwide. As an educator and consultant, he has worked in more than 40 countries. In his role as a consultant, he is also the founder-chairman of the Kets de Vries Institute (KDVI), a boutique strategic leadership development consulting firm.

Kets de Vries was the first fly fisherman in Outer Mongolia (at the time, becoming the world record holder of the Siberian *Hucho taimen*). He is a member of New York’s Explorers Club. In his spare time, he can be found in the rainforests or savannas of Central and Southern Africa, the Siberian taiga, the Ussuri Krai, Kamchatka, the Pamir and Altai Mountains, Arnhemland, or within the Arctic Circle.

# Introduction

*Not everyone is capable of madness; and of those lucky enough  
to be capable, not many have the courage for it.*

—August Strindberg

*When the world goes mad, one must accept madness as sanity;  
since sanity is, in the last analysis, nothing but the madness  
on which the whole world happens to agree.*

—George Bernard Shaw

## The Dadaesque World We Live In

Looking at the world we live in, we cannot help but acknowledge the growing proliferation of populist, often demagogue-like, leaders, whose behavior is imbued with an almost surrealistic, Dadaesque quality. Many of these leaders seem to be engaged in a theater of the absurd, appealing to humankind's most basic instincts. However, such a theater of the absurd has the potential to become dangerous and can easily lead to disaster. And given what history has taught us, we cannot avoid or dismiss the warning signs. It is with all of this in mind and against the background of what I have learned about the darker side of these leaders' behavior that I undertook writing a number of essays, each of which grows out of the profound disquietness I have begun to feel about the world that's being created by them. This book offers a collection of these essays.

In this collection, not only do I discuss the psychological dynamics that facilitate the rise of populist, demagogue-like leaders, I also present a number

of these essays in the form of fairy tales. Having written quite a few fairy tales over the years, I have learned that the use of this format can be quite illuminating.<sup>1</sup> Fairy tales have the capacity to stimulate the readers' creativity and imagination, and, in so doing, prove educational. But in particular, fairy tales provide the reader with moral guidelines. In that respect, fairy tales continue to play a significant role in our society, as they have in various societies for thousands of years. With the help of their kings and queens, heroes and villains, dragons and elves, fairy tales allow us to portray the various human dilemmas of leadership in a very stark tone. Often, these stories illustrate how leaders can be a force for the ugly, for the bad, and for the weird—as the title of this book suggests. In addition, I may at times resort to irony and metaphor as a way of making my point in the hope of prompting a better understanding of the darker side of leadership.

I strongly believe that leadership pertains to the ability to coalesce the efforts of many different individuals toward the achievement of common goals. Effective leaders are able to bring people together, make them better, and make them stronger. But to be able to do so implies that leaders need to set a moral tone. In fact, divorced from morality, leadership quickly becomes meaningless. And I would like to add that if leaders want to make a real impact, the values by which they govern should be transcendent—that is, those in a leadership position should grab the opportunity before them to make a real difference in society, to be a force for the good.

Furthermore, I also suggest that to be an effective leader necessitates that he or she is willing to undertake an inward-bound journey—an intense journey into the self. It's about acquiring a greater sense of self-awareness. It is all about self-improvement, about self-knowledge. After all, without self-knowledge leaders can easily be led astray. They may be tempted to act out their neuroses without consciously being aware of it. They may also become victims of hubris. It is for this reason that I will attempt to look not only at phenomena that appear on the surface, but also at what is happening under the surface. And to arrive at a greater understanding, I will resort to theories derived from psychoanalytic psychology (after all, in my other life, apart from being a professor of management, I am also a psychoanalyst), developmental psychology, neuroscience, and evolutionary psychology.

Unfortunately, with respect to the leadership equation, all too often, the Latin proverb “It is absurd that a man should rule others, who cannot rule himself” applies to too many of our contemporary leaders. Paradoxically,

---

<sup>1</sup> Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries (2016). *Telling Fairy Tales to the Boardroom; How to Make Sure Your Organization Lives Happily Ever After*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

given their personality makeup, it often seems that people with the wrong kinds of motivations are drawn to search out a leadership role—people who aren't even capable of leading themselves.

Presently, the leaders that we need more than ever are people who also know how to unlock their followers' potential, who know how to help the people they lead to improve themselves. In fact, I would even go so far as to say that the ability to help their people grow and develop should be seen as one of the highest callings of leadership. After all, we rise by lifting others.

My hope is that these various essays will help the reader to better understand not only what's needed to be an effective leader but also to learn about the pitfalls of leadership—to recognize the warning signs when leaders transform into populist-like demagogues. I want the reader to become more aware of the psychological forces at work when groups of people resort to regressive practices. In addition, these essays will also speak to the importance of living a full life—and what gives our lives meaning. In this context, I will also make a few observations about the intricacies of male–female relationships given their importance, discussing in particular the feminine mystique. Consequently, I will address the question of what makes these relationships work.

I would like to conclude the introduction to this book by saying that effective leadership is not about making speeches or being liked. In many ways, leadership is about inspiring hope and defining reality. It is about the ability to unite people through the creation of meaning. And in my judgment, there is no more noble cause than to return people to the dignity of work and self-sufficiency, not to fall under the grip of arrogant ideologues and spineless detractors.

We want our leaders to do what's right, not what's easy. In fact, effective leadership is mostly defined by results—something that I view as being direly missing among many of the leaders that I am describing in these essays. Therefore, after everything has been said and done, what becomes apparent is that what we do has a far greater impact than what we say.



# 1

## The Dark Cloud of Crowds

*Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities.*

—Voltaire

*If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it.*

—Joseph Goebbels

Recently, once again, I saw *Triumph of the Will*, the infamous Nazi propaganda movie directed by Leni Riefenstahl, the famous German film director and Nazi sympathizer. The film remains well known for its striking visuals, showing some of the most enduring images of the leaders of the Nazi regime. It chronicles the 1934 Nazi Party Congress in the medieval city of Nuremberg, a town specifically chosen for this particular event to symbolize the link between Germany's Gothic past and its rising Nazi future. In the film, it is for all to see how Riefenstahl presents Hitler as the ultimate savior whose arrival on the scene would be the beginning of a supposedly "German Rebirth," bringing glory to the nation by creating an imagined Thousand-Year Reich.

In the early scenes of the film, we see how the Führer, like a contemporary god, descends from the sky in a plane. Subsequently, we find him surrounded by throngs of admirers, the camera capturing him through rows and rows of arms raised in the dreaded Nazi salute. And while Hitler is delivering his histrionic speeches, he is portrayed as a master conductor of a world of impeccably regimented subjects, who are lined up to create

awe-inspiring human tableaux. Due to the intoxicating atmosphere created by these imposing crowds, every word spoken by Hitler is depicted as an inspired edict coming down from the heavens. And the filmmaker, in portraying these stark images—consciously or unconsciously—is showing how well she understood crowd psychology. She is demonstrating the kind of psychological dynamics that populist leaders know how to practice often in the most chilling of ways.<sup>1</sup>

## The Siren Song of Populists

Sadly enough, given the way societies are developing, it has become increasingly clear that, in today's world, there are too many leaders who in their behavioral patterns display an alarming number of similarities to a terrifying individual like Hitler. They know how to take advantage of whatever a country's *Zeitgeist* may be as reflected in the mindset, attitudes, and values that have become mainstreamed. They know how to confront unequivocally the major anxieties of the populace in their time.

These populist-like leaders also know how to round up and excite people by demonizing other groups of people. To these individuals, xenophobia is par for the course. Unfortunately, while they are acting the way they do, too many of the people caught in their spell seem to be suffering from massive amnesia, forgetting the often-violent history that accompanies such leaders' stay in power. Given what these people are capable of doing, very disturbing behavior is to be expected. Writer and philosopher George Santayana pointed directly to the issue before us when he said: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

In encouraging their followers to do unimaginable things, some of these leaders have known no limits. In addition, what makes these people especially frightening is that many of them, in their desire to obtain power, are terribly seductive. Quite effectively, they turn into high priests of manipulation. They know how to cater to people's desire for magical thinking. All too often, however, by acting the way they do, these populist, demagogue-like leaders are comparable to "snake oil salesmen," merrily peddling their miracle cures, providing oversimplistic answers to difficult problems, while their solutions rarely are the correct ones.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gustav Le Bon (2009). *Psychology of Crowds*. London: Sparkling Books.

## Populism

Generally speaking, the term populism applies to political movements that are situated outside the mainstream. It refers to a range of political stances that emphasize the idea that society is separated into two groups that are at odds with one another: the “pure” people versus the “evil, corrupt elite.” This supposed elite consists of the political, economic, cultural, academic, and media establishments, which are portrayed as a homogeneous entity, accused of placing their own interests, and often the interests of other groups—such as large corporations, foreign countries, or immigrants—above what’s important to the “pure” people. Naturally, it leads to the conclusion that these pure people have been seriously disadvantaged.

The popularity of these movements is very much due to general feelings of discomfort about the inability of liberal democracies to fulfill the promise of creating a better life for everybody. When that promise remains unfulfilled, the losers in this equation are tempted to search for some kind of “messiah” to defend themselves and their interests. They will be looking for someone able to stand up against the evil elite who, in their minds, have been unwilling to share their perceived advantages with others. It is a political approach that can have great appeal to the so-called ordinary people.

In addition, populist leaders, in seducing the masses, know how to take advantage of a primitive defense mechanism called “splitting,” thereby creating an oversimplified world of “us” versus “them,” of “good” against “evil,” a way of looking at things that has no middle ground. Of course, while engaging in their demagogue-like activities, these leaders view themselves as being the representatives of the “good.” At all times, they will reassure their audience that they have the interests of “the people” at heart, trying to defend them against this “evil elite” who are always portrayed as a corrupt and self-serving entity that has been taking advantage of the virtuous, hardworking population these populist leaders pretend to represent.

It is in this way that populist leaders manage to get their followers emotionally engaged by creating a binary *Weltanschauung* comprised of friends versus enemies. In fact, throughout history, the ability of *Homo sapiens* to create enemies—imaginary or otherwise—has always been a great way “to rally the troops,” to create unity among a leader’s followers. And this binary world consisting of “us” versus “them” becomes easier to latch on to when income stops growing or even starts to decline, when unemployment (especially among a country’s youth) increases, and when poverty expands, bringing with it a growing income inequality.

Unfortunately, too often, in our day and age these societal developments have become a reality. No wonder that many people who have felt left behind are often plagued by anxiety and are angry. After all, income inequality is a perfect prescription for social unrest. It explains the attractiveness of these populist-like political or social movements that are challenging the entrenched values, rules, and institutions of democratic orthodoxy. But as I suggested before, these developments may be another instance of history once more repeating itself.

When reflecting back on various historical movements, the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset began studying the social upheavals in early twentieth-century Europe, which he saw as presenting a vision of Western culture that was sinking to its lowest common denominator while drifting toward chaos. In fact, many of the populist upsurges we are now witnessing worldwide can be interpreted—to use Ortega y Gasset’s terminology—as a new “revolt of the masses.”<sup>2</sup> And these rebellions are directed not so much toward the very essence of democratic forms of government, but rather as an uprising against an elite that appears to have failed to share their advantages with the common people. Of course, what’s disturbing is that far too much of the world’s economic gains have gone to the top 1% of the population.<sup>3</sup>

What needs to be added is that populist leaders—Donald Trump being a more recent, but very disturbing example—don’t feel bound by institutional rules and regulations. Constitutional arrangements mean little to them. They strongly believe that the people whom they represent should be given the right to unbounded rule. No wonder, given their particular *Weltanschauung*, that they only pay lip service to frameworks for both enabling and restraining the exercise of public power. In reality, however, they aren’t really interested in freedom of speech, assembly, an unallied judiciary, and an independent media. In fact, they’re only interested in *their media*. These leaders are convinced that everything that they’re doing is permitted, always pretending that they are speaking with the voice of what’s conveniently described as “the silent majority.” And to “rally the troops,” they resort—as I have suggested earlier—to these primitive defense mechanisms such as splitting, often using minority groups as scapegoats to further their ends.

Unfortunately, all too often, much of their irresponsible behavior has been expedited by the social media. In their hands, rumors and lies easily become transformed into believable facts. And their rumors, by far, travel at a speed too fast to fall victim to fact checking. Thus, what has become increasingly

---

<sup>2</sup> José Ortega y Gasset (1994). *The Revolt of the Masses*. New York: Norton.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Piketty (2014). *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.