**Leaders, Power and the Paradoxical Position: Fantasies for Leaders’ Liberation**

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**Abstract**

In this paper, I explore how by furthering our understanding of the concept of power, a critical perspective of the leaders and power debate could emerge, where leaders are no longer only sources of power and almighty heroes, but by contrast, become accepted for the impotence that concurrently characterizes them too. The paradoxical position, of how leaders are demanded to control things they cannot, is an example of power over leaders. In order to cope, with power over them, such as their paradoxical position, leaders fantasize, and through their own fantasies leaders could liberate themselves. By taking the case of England’s higher education sector and its leaders, where primary qualitative research was done during a recent period of turmoil, the paper explores how leaders’ through their fantasizing could liberate themselves from their paradoxical position. Particularly, I explore the role of magical realist fantasies, which disguise the fantasy as a matter-of-fact.

**Keywords**

leadership, power and politics, cognitive perspectives

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*“Imagination governs the world”*

-Napoléon Bonaparte

Poor humble puny humans, awake in a world where they are subjected to far too many forces they cannot master. Where the illusion of liberation is forever yearned, while perhaps forever vanished and unfulfilled too. But of lack of effort we must not blame humans, as in their search for freedom they have constructed the romance of leaders (Bligh, Kohles, & Pillai, 2011; Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985): the fantasy of heroic leaders that can control and master everything we followers cannot. Leaders, furthermore, who with their wisdom, strength and vision are supposed to provide hope and liberation to followers. Yet, little do followers reckon that beyond the way they romanticize leaders, leaders are simply limited humans too. Thus, while followers construct the romance of leaders, among other types of fantasies of leaders (Gabriel, 1997, 2011), how do leaders fantasize? In short, leaders -as human beings- are subjects of power (Gabriel, 1998; Lindblom, 1959; MacKay & Chia, 2013). However, in the case of leaders, they are put in a paradoxical position, because while being subjects they are supposed to embody, at the same time, followers’ dreams of liberation: the dream of someone being in control of the world. Thus, if leaders are to do anything for their followers, leaders might need first to find mechanisms that liberate them, even if illusorily, from their own subjection.

This paper is, thus, about the fascinating and popular connection between two highly controversial concepts in management theory. The first one is the concept of leadership. The second one is the concept of power. What is interesting regarding the use of power in leadership studies, is that most research has been done through the conventional idea that being a leader means being in a position of power. Make no mistake, leaders indeed could hold positions of power, and asymmetric and hierarchical relations between leaders and followers could easily loom. Yet, it is important to understand that when it comes to leaders and power, talking about how leaders have power, is just one half of the equation. The other one, using Fleming and Spicer’s terminology (2014), is about everything in the world that has *power over* leaders. In other words, it is important to acknowledge that not everything is so romantic when it comes to being a leader. So that as powerful as leaders might be, they are also impotent in many ways. This is important to note because unless we acknowledge and research the consequences of the powerlessness of leaders, our conceptualization of the connection between leadership and power will be necessarily incomplete. And like this, leadership studies might, then, end up being nothing more than the realization of Alvesson and Kärreman’s concerning epiphany: “We argue that contemporary leadership ideas offer two contributions of a broadly speaking ideological and, for managers and (other) leader-wannabes, identity-boosting nature: the fuelling of hero and saint fantasies” (2016, p. 142). Thus, following Alvesson and Kärreman’s call for a more critical perspective of leadership and power, I would like to explore a different dimension of the power-leadership connection, so that as Collinson and Tourish argue we finally “go beyond the romanticized assumptions of mainstream perspectives to highlight the importance of power in leadership practices” (2015, p. 590).

Now, the latter will only be possible as our conceptualization of power evolves as well. Power tends to be defined “as the ability to influence others” (Blickle et al., 2013, p. 602). However, what influences us goes far beyond other people. Taking this argument forward, hence, I will develop an alternative conceptualization of power, which will show us that before anything else we are first subjects of *physika* (the natural order). It will be such reconceptualization of power that will allow me to identify the paradoxical position in which many leaders have to operate. Eventually, this paradoxical position will show us that leaders are not necessarily or exclusively vehicles and nodes of power, but also subjects of it.

In sum, the question is, how could leaders escape from this paradoxical position? In other words, how do leaders cope with power over them? This paper will suggest that from this paradoxical position, leaders escape through cognitive vehicles called magical realist fantasies. In order to illustrate this point, I will use primary rigorous qualitative research done in the context of England’s higher education sector. After working with 47 very senior leaders in English universities, including 24 university Presidents, I will show how through a period of significant turbulence, leaders found themselves in a paradoxical position of being demanded to control that which they actually could not control or master. Yet, it was the use of sophisticated magical realist fantasies, which allowed these leaders to cope with power over them.

**Theoretical Background**

**To be is to be enslaved: An interdisciplinary perspective of power.**

If there is an illusion, it would be the illusion of freedom. Despite its hubris, ambition, and arrogance, our species is, whether we like it or not, only one form of life out of myriad others. Humans dwell in a vast universe (Kauffman, 2008), and for ages we have tried to master our destinies in it. There is no question that with the advent of science, we have taken significant steps towards this aim. However, we still remain largely incapable of fully achieving it so far. Let us illustrate the latter. Economics might represent a good first example, because in spite of the plethora of research, academic and practical developments in the field, we just recently evidenced one of the most tragic and catastrophic crises of all times, which no one was able to prevent. An economic downturn so profound that it only evidenced how much we still cannot control about the global economy. Like this, many other examples could be found about how little do we actually control. Perhaps taking a different instance, from the other extreme of the spectrum of human experience, could be helpful. So the let us look at the self. The revolutionary work of people like Freud (2005), shed light into our inner selves. As Gabriel describes (1998), Freudian psychoanalysis, through its cornerstone concept of the unconscious (i.e. that which is repressed, yet having constant covert impact on who we are) shows us that sometimes we are not even in control of ourselves. Now, if you do not profess the religion of Freudian psychoanalysis, do not worry, as the same conclusion emerges from Darwinian approaches to human behavior, where evolutionary Darwinian processes of natural selection have selected genes that program behaviors in humans that best fit our environments (Wilson, 2014). Thus, leaving us empty-handed in terms of our beloved desire for agency, and making us instead largely slaves of our genes (Harari, 2014).

But the question is, to what should we attribute this incapacity we have to control our fates? Reasons abound, yet one that is central, is the complexity and chaotic essence of many events and processes in which we are embedded (Kauffman, 2008). For instance, the impossibility to control the economy might emerge from the large number of interacting and interdependent variables that make of the global economy a complex system. Now, as it is well known, complex systems tend to be chaotic at some point. Chaos means that small variances in a certain part of a system, might derive in disproportionate changes in other parts of the system, cascading sometimes into events and outcomes that no one could have foreseen (Stacey, 1992). The tragedy of complexity and chaos, derives in our Heideggerian being in the world turning into an everlasting slavery to countless forces that we cannot always fully control. The ideal of the human being as an individual, the heroic traveler in control of his fate, is therefore to be forsaken, and instead we must settle with the traumatic realization of the subject: he or she that far from free is the slave of countless variables, forces, events, and circumstances.

**Coping with our subjection: Fantasy.**

To conceive our existence as that of a living organism that is subjected to forces galore, is not an epiphany that warms hearts. By contrast, humans have done every possible effort to pretend like they could fully conquer their destinies. To be free -in control- is eternally longed by Homo sapiens, the Great Ape who romantically found in its fantasies the possibility to forget the nonsensical essence of its existence. Fantasies, as Lacan would argue, are distinguished because they presumably emerge from the frustration of confronting a world that fits in no absolute way with our wishes (2005; Zizek, 2006). Thus, fantasy as “an attempt at wish-fulfillment” (Ornstein & Ornstein, 2008, p. 212), becomes an unconscious or conscious thrust for man and woman to imagine an ontological space where their frustrations are alleviated, because as Freud claims “The mind does not wish to continue the tension of the waking life” (2005, p. 117). In this fictional ontological space, all that is disappointing regarding our existence becomes magically transformed into everything we ever wished.

By and large order is the ultimate human fantasy: the dream to live in a universe that far from being the result of the accidents of history, emerges by contrast, from purposeful plans that bestow inherent rational connections between everything that exists. Order is the primordial fantasy, because it dilutes the insupportable cognitive realization of everything we cannot control, and it transforms it into the ideal that everything that happens, happens for a reason (Varki & Brower, 2013). In other words, one must not wonder so much about the nonsensical essence of being, when one has been assigned the role of the CEO, the father, the mother, the son, the President, or the student. Because when I am Mr. CEO, I am focused, and my being in the world becomes targeted towards something, even if that something is just a delusion. However, it does not matter how fantastical the roles built for us are, the only thing that matters is that they give us place within the chaos that surrounds us. In other words, in our efforts to “resolve the cognitive disorder created” by a world that was simply not designed to make sense (Balogun & Johnson, 2004, p. 523), human beings, through our ideas, have come to construct symbolic orders (Freud, 1929). Symbolic orders that far from representing whatever chaotic and complex processes that govern nature (Gleick, 1988), merely edifice a fiction in order to allow humans to behave, like Zizek argues (1989), as if objects and events sustained inherent relations (i.e. order). Language, therefore, turns primordial to symbolize the world (Lacan, 2008), and hence, it is through “a communicative set of interactions” that “social and cultural beliefs and understandings are shaped and circulated” (Freeden, 2003, p. 103). Symbolizing the world, and imagining fictitious relationships among its entities, has historically allowed humans to order themselves at a social level, as within a symbolic order the existence of a human being is no longer undetermined, but by contrast, an imaginary hailing is given to every person (Althusser, 2006), as to bestow on them a place in the world. In short, the symbolic order is the greatest fantasy that humans have built in their desperate attempts to pretend that everything in the world makes sense for itself. However, the tragedy of the fantasy of the symbolic order, is that far from setting us free from our misery, it makes us slaves anew. Because in the fantasy of the symbolic, as Clegg argues, implicit violence emerges through “social actors acquiescing in their own domination” (2010, p. 6).

In sum, within the symbolic, our subjection expands, because now the subject is that who is not only subjected to nature, but “at the same time… subjected to the meanings and sentence structures that language”, through the fantasy of the symbolic order, allows (Belsey, 2002, p. 37).Deriving, therefore, in human beings who could certainly be conceived as subjugated to power of various dimensions (Lukes, 2005). Thus, if power is to be envisaged as “the ability (potential or capacity)… to exert influence” (Sutherland, Gosling, & Jelinek, 2015, p. 609), then not only the influence of some humans over others must be acknowledged, but more importantly, the influence of the natural, physical, biological and symbolic forces must be recognized too. So that the conception of the subject of power can be revealed for what it is: a subjection that constrains us all to forces galore.

**From ancient types of fantasies to modern ones.**

The conventional human effort to fantasize a symbolic order, is usually characterized by an essential feature: that powerful fantasies emerge through a rift (i.e. an ontological rupture). Take for example the case of God and other human-made deities, who usually remain at the core of many powerful symbolic orders that have for eons organized people. For long, humans have built these magical anthropomorphic conceptualizations of almighty Lords that somehow control whatever we cannot. Yet, the fantasy of God emerges through the rift -the rupture- between the natural and the supernatural, as Gods are usually (although not necessarily) conceived as belonging to the ontological reality of a different order than ours: the supernatural order (Wilson, 2014). Thus, God-centered symbolic orders have tended to be liminal in the sense that they actually give order by connecting two different realms: one is the natural realm (where things seem incontrollable), the second one is the supernatural realm, which once it enters the picture it gives sense to everything else in the natural realm. In short, the conventional type of symbolic orders that humans have constructed, is one that emerges through rifts, such as the rift between the natural and the supernatural.

Nonetheless, humans have found other ways to fantasize without requiring a rift. These other ways involve what I call magical realism fantasizing. Magical realism is a term first coined by art critique Franz Roh (1995), who used it to describe in art the juxtaposition of realism -aiming at depicting the world as closely as it is- and magic -aiming at depicting the world not necessarily as it is but as we imagine and/or wish it to be. Here, as Bowers argues, magic relates to “any extraordinary occurrence and particularly to anything spiritual or unaccountable by rational science” (2004, p. 19). Magical realism eventually evolved into a widely spread and successful literary genre, where, as Flores argues, “the novelty… consisted in the amalgamation of reality and fantasy” (1955, p. 189). Considered originally the voice of the Latin American novel (see, for example, García Márquez’ masterpiece *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (2014)), magical realism has become a global phenomenon, which encompasses any effort to disguise the magic of fantasizing as a matter-of-fact that is somehow blindly accepted as part of our reality (Anderson Imbert, 1975), and therefore, requires no rift between the fantasy of the symbolic and reality.

Make no mistake, all fantasizing is generally related to reality in some way or another (Ornstein & Ornstein, 2008), either because reality incites the fantasy, or because the fantasy speaks back to reality, or because the fantasy is set in mundane scenarios. And, therefore, most fantasizing is magically real at least in the trivial sense, as it aims to combine reality and fantasy, as when, for example, someone has a sexual fantasy about someone they know. However, not all fantasizing is able to merge reality and fantasy fully. Thus, rifts between the fantasy of a symbolic order and reality could persist in different degrees. Yet, the outstanding power of fully magical realist symbolic orders, is that in them fantasy and reality become deeply intertwined and merged, as if fantasy was not fantasy but another element of the natural order of the world.

**Leaders as cornerstones of magical realist symbolic orders.**

With magical realism, novel symbolic orders have developed, which tend to be centered no longer around supernatural entities but around feel-like-natural ones, such as the law, ethics, or morality, among others. One type of feel-like-natural entity that tends to act as a cornerstone of magical realist symbolic orders are human leaders, who have sometimes substituted deities. There have been times when some humans looked up to the sky, raised their arms, and claimed that almighty entities, such as Gods or Angels, could be our beacons of hope, because one day they would liberate us from everything that subjects us. Yet, the problem we face in our times, is that nowadays in the age of science, it could be considerably harder for people to believe in such idolizations. Thus, sometimes modern humans must settle with their human leaders. However, in order for these leaders to be beacons of liberation, humans come to romanticize them (Bligh et al., 2011; Meindl et al., 1985). So that followers might fantasize their leaders as a path to an idealized non-subjugated existence, or the object to blame for the failure of such realization. Yet, as aforementioned the romance of leaders does not turn leaders literally into magical entities. On the contrary, we are now in a magical realist symbolic order, so leaders must remain a natural entity, they must remain human, and hence, a part of the realism of the natural order, while paradoxically having implicitly some capacities, never to be explicitly spoken about, to control and master everything that we cannot.

**Leaders, power, and the paradoxical position.**

The magical realism of the fantasy of leaders, generates symbolic orders that may now not necessarily be centered around mystical supernatural deities, but simply around human natural leaders that somehow others see as special, powerful, and sometimes almighty in spite of their humaneness. Even academia has been so subjected to the influence of magical realist symbolic orders, that large amounts of work in leadership studies have conceived leaders as centers and nodes of power, or as Yukl himself claims: “Much of the research coming under the power-influence approach attempts to explain leadership effectiveness in terms of the amount of power possessed by a leader” (1989, p. 254). Thus, in some ways, as Alvesson and Kärreman describe (2016), research on leaders has been mainly an ideological expression that complies with a modern magical realist symbolic order centered on the apotheosis of leaders. Examples of this type of work abound. For instance, De Hoogh, Greer and Den Hartog, explore the phenomenon of autocratic leadership precisely as if being a leader was equivalent to being powerful, and thus, they define autocratic leadership as related to “power-centralizing tendencies” (2015, p. 688). Another example would be Bendahan, Zehnder, Pralong and Antonakis, who even suggest that as power accumulation increases in leaders, the temptation to abuse it increases too (2015). Similarly, Chou, Sibley, Liu, Lin and Cheng’s discussion of the concept of paternalistic leadership, embraces as well the ideal of leaders as those with power, because as they claim, paternalistic leadership “is based on the assumption of power inequality rather than equality in the social relations” (2015, p. 687). Like this, then, it becomes clear that when it comes to power, a lot tends to be said about how leaders have it.

However, critical voices have always existed against this marriage between leaders and power. A pioneer among the latter was Zaleznik, who said: “Power in the hands of an individual entails human risks: first, the risk of equating power with the ability to get immediate results” (2004, p. 2). The risk is fairly evident: if power, as Lukes claims (2005), entails the capacity to influence someone to do something that that someone would not have done otherwise, and if leaders are supposed to be masters of power, then leading should be straightforward. Yet, far from being in control of everything, leaders are simply human, with human limitations. Something we witness every time a leader falls (e.g. the fall of former British Prime Ministers Blair or Cameron). Thus, this need to have leaders at the center of magical realist symbolic orders, generates for leaders qua a tragedy, because leaders, as their followers, are subjects of countless forces too. This puts leaders, hence, in a *paradoxical position*. Paradoxical (Lewis, Andriopoulos, & Smith, 2014; Poole, 1989), because of the two contradictory forces that converge in order to influence and shape leaders. On the one hand, followers pressure leaders to become beacons of liberation that will control all that they cannot. On the other hand, the human dimension of the leader that as a human is a subject too.

Now, the question remains, however, on how leaders liberate themselves from the paradoxical position in which their followers put them? In short, such a paradoxical position might leave leaders desiring: wishing to fulfill their followers’ fantasies of control and power, while at the same time leaders being frustrated that they are subjects of forces galore too.To develop and particularly to emerge from a paradox, Lewis suggests that “actors can avoid becoming stuck in these paralyzing and often vicious cycles via greater cognitive and behavorial complexity” (2000, p. 761). As fantasies represent precisely attempts at greater cognitive complexity, they could be once more a vehicle for liberation. In other words, the fantasy of the almighty leader that is in control, emerges from followers’ desire to order the world. Yet, these efforts end up encapsulating leaders in magical realist symbolic orders, where the role that is bestowed on them is particularly tragic and impossible to fulfill. Hence, now, I would like to argue that equivalently fantasies could be cognitive vehicles to liberate leaders too, specifically in this case, liberate them from their paradoxical position. Thus, a way to cope with their paradoxical position might be for leaders to construct their own magical realist fantasies, “to bridge this gap between what is desired… and what is available” or demanded from followers (Kligyte & Barrie, 2014, p. 163). However, the question remains on which magical realist fantasies might liberate leaders from their paradoxical position and how?

**Research Design**

Most likely, answers to the latter question are context dependent. Thus, the selection of an instrumental context was necessary, in order to research this question. England’s higher education sector was selected as context, because it was considered enabling for the research question. In short, English higher education as a sector works, because there is a symbolic order that defines connections among its actors. However, such a symbolic order depends on things happening in the macro-environment where higher education is situated. In 2009 that macro-environment was changing because of the global financial crisis, and thus, the government launched the Browne Review, an independent higher education review which through the response it evoked from the government, radically changed the way universities are funded (BIS, 2011), by following and implementing pro-market policies. In other words, such public policy changes came to disturb the English higher education symbolic order, creating or transforming the relationships among its actors and the primordial fantasies that dictate how these interact. For instance, in the previous English higher education system, because the primordial fantasy was that of free (or quasi-free) higher education, students only paid small loan-backed tuition fees in the range of £3,000, while in addition the government provided generous block teaching and research grants to universities -among other types of funding. Additionally, the number of students a university could recruit was controlled by the government through quotas. In the post-Browne Review system students, by contrast, still aided by public loans, pay up to £9,000 in tuition fees. Now, hence, the primordial fantasy is that of a quasi-free market of higher education. Therefore, the block grants from the government have, especially on the teaching side, reduced drastically (BIS, 2011). Furthermore, from the Browne Review onwards, a process of deregulating student numbers began, initially liberating the numbers of high achieving students -called AAB students in England-, but eventually freeing everyone. In this context, universities, faculty, and sometimes even students, reinforced the magical realist fantasy of leaders, as many of them certainly hoped their leaders (e.g. university Presidents) would liberate them from such unamicable realities; when actually university leaders were far from being able to fight against these policies, and by contrast, were subjected by them too, as the alternative, for example, to the hike in tuition fees, would have been even more damaging funding cuts to universities’ budgets. Thus, the paradoxical position exists in the used context, which makes it a relevant context where to research this question.

Finally, another important reason of why this context was selected, was that it provided generous access to its leaders, so that their subjective experiences could be explored. Semi-structured interviews were carried, precisely, because of the capacity of interviews to give us access -even if only partially- to the subjectivity, and thus, fantasizing of interviewees. The semi-structured mode of interviewing was selected because, although the purpose of the interviews was the same for all of them (i.e. to isolate cognitive vehicles that were behaving as fantasies), each person thinks and fantasizes in different ways.

**Data.**

47 semi-structured interviews were done, including 24 university Presidents (known in England as Vice-Chancellors), 16 Vice-Presidents (or equivalent), plus 7 background interviews with the most senior political leaders involved in designing and/or implementing the recent policy reforms. Interviews were done under very strict conditions of anonymity and confidentiality. In total, approximately 65 hrs. of interviews were collected. Additionally, a documentary review was done before each interview, to collect other sources (e.g. newspaper articles) where interviewees had recently shared their experiences dealing with all the recent post-Browne Review undergraduate funding reforms. ~1000 pgs. of these types of documents were reviewed. Documents allowed me to triangulate some information emerging from the interviews, and also to prepare customized interviews.

As interviews were semi-structured, a general interview protocol was developed beforehand (Kvale, 1996), while having significant flexibility to steer the interview depending on specific circumstances. Interviews began with icebreaker questions, where rapport was built. After the icebreaker questions, the interviews continued through a brief oral history part, where the interviewee reconstructed his/her account on how these turbulent policy changes unraveled. Next, I explored several higher education topics with them, where I collected their views on what all these changes meant for higher education. As part of this exploration, we delved then, on the challenges that this turbulence generated for them. These questions were important because they allowed me to explore several things, including those things that caused greater frustration for leaders, things leaders did not agree with politicians, decisions leaders took and later on regretted, among other issues that could illustrate how leaders were experiencing their paradoxical position. Following the latter discussion, I would then explore how leaders justified all the frustrating elements. Their justifications allowed me to go in-depth into how these leaders were making sense of the events, and how when events in reality were simply unbearable, they found a way to make them bearable through fantasies. Other topics were explored later on during the interviews, as these interviews were part of a broader project.

**Data analysis.**

After each of the 47 interviews, I wrote a memo of the interview of approximately 1-3 pages, in order to summarize the main findings and initial thoughts. With this information, and while following the conventional practice that Suddaby describes as continuously comparing findings against the literature (2006), I improved the next interviews, especially as to explore any missing gaps. The importance of this process of refining interviews lies once more on the fact that people are unique and complex, and therefore, it is difficult to have a perfect interview protocol that would fit all sizes. Thus, if for instance, I had interviewed a university leader and noticed that it was difficult to discuss with him his views on the government, after the interview I would try to analyze on the memo of the interview what was the possible problem, and how I could fix it in future interviews.

Interviewing stopped at a point where a reasonable level of theoretical saturation was achieved, which is a standard qualitative practice, as followed for example, by Walsh & Bartunek (2011). Once all the interviews had been done, then, I personally transcribed them all, using the software called NVIVO. The transcription was exhaustive, where every single hour of interviewing was transcribed mostly word by word, generating approximately 500+ pages of transcripts. To analyze the data a two-step process was followed, very much in line with what has been called the Gioia method (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). The first-order analysis consisted in constructing “*in vivo* codes through ‘open coding’ of data extracts using the words of participants, and then group these into ‘first order’ (participant-based) concepts through ‘constant comparison’” (Langley & Abdallah, 2016, p. 148). Through the first-order analysis I was able “to discover themes and patterns in events and informants' accounts” (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 437). The second step was a second-order analysis. The second-order analysis looked for emerging theory that could explain the data (Balogun & Johnson, 2004), of which the particular focus was on identifying leaders’ fantasies. Finally, second-order themes were clustered into an aggregate dimension, in order to understand how these fantasies might be working. **Table 1** shows the data structure of the first and second-order findings.

*[Please insert Table 1 near here]*

**Analysis: A Problem of Perspective.**

It is important to note that in order to distill the magical realist fantasies of leaders, the analysis was done from an externalist perspective. In short, I did not aim for the standard ethnographic approach to put myself in the shoes of the interviewees. By contrast, I analyzed leaders as an externalist (Dennett, 2006; Putnam, 1981), who does not share the deeper cultural understandings of their symbolic order. This is fundamental as it is possibly the only way to identify magical realist fantasies, which are -by definition- disguised as part of reality, and hence, they could easily turn into what Zizek calls people’s “objectively subjective” (2000, p. 83). This is why the analysis was carried through an outsider (externalist) perspective. Now, since fantasies are supposed to be wish-fulfilling efforts to cope with insupportable issues of human experience, this criterion was the core one used in order to identify and isolate fantasies.

**Findings**

For an important number of leaders, their paradoxical position, although in different ways, was acknowledged. Leaders argued that these policy reforms took the higher education sector from a previous era of stability and certainty, where their incomes and funding were largely protected and regulated by the government, to a new epoch where uncertainty was considerably higher. More importantly, for these leaders the main problem emerged from the vast and continuous series of policy changes that just kept changing things. So that the post-Browne Review era, was not about one change, but a series of constant policy changes which happened while simultaneously other areas of interest were also changing. Now, these changes were perceived as fissures in the symbolic order, which evidenced for interviewees that they were not as powerful as they thought or as people wanted them to be. By contrast, the complex, chaotic, incontrollable and constant changes generated various roadblocks for these leaders, who saw themselves as partly impotent against them. For example, the President of UniX expressed the impossibility of, for instance, knowing cause-effect relationships precisely in this complex/changing environment:

because nobody changed one thing at the same time, there were always more than one variable being changed which was frustrating: so we had the fees, we had AAB then we had ABB…, then we had change in demographics, 18 year olds, increasing numbers of 18 year olds. We have changes in visas… So the difficulty is to what do I attribute all of this?

In short, leaders discussed an experienced symbolic order that appeared confusing and subjecting. Nonetheless, their paradoxical position emerges when these various factors of impotency for leaders are juxtaposed with the expectations that the symbolic order had of them. The most important expectation being that different groups inside these universities, assumed that their leaders would be powerful enough as to defend them fully against all the reforms. The latter was evidenced, for instance, in the countless protests and sit-ins by students in universities, where students demanded their university Presidents to protect them from the risk of having to pay higher fees. One university President even described a letter written to her by students demanding her not to back the reforms. Thus, leaders’ appeared, perhaps, entrapped in a magical realist symbolic order, where the role they were supposed to play was that of the almighty savior, in spite of being limited human beings. This, therefore, put leaders precisely in the paradoxical position I was looking for, but gives us now further insight as to how that position is experienced. More importantly, the latter evidences that leaders themselves can acknowledge their own paradoxical position.

The data analysis explored how these leaders attempted, through their own magical realist fantasies, to escape their paradoxical position. I will explore now the three main magical realist fantasies of leaders that emerged in this research. The first one is the prestige. Some in government were expecting that the introduction of higher fees would lead to price differentiation (i.e. some universities would charge the cap of £9,000, while others lower or much lower fees). However, the latter -in the end- did not happen. This caused frustration among politicians. The standard argument from universities and their leaders to justify setting their tuition fees at the cap or near it, was that setting a lower fee would have signaled that they were a cheaper second class university. Thus, setting a lower fee was seen as detrimental due to what a former CEO of a Sector Body called the Heathrow Express dynamics:

because when the Heathrow Express [(the express train from Heathrow to Central London)] was first introduced… it was quite a low price, and people particularly American tourists, wouldn’t use it because of the low price, they assumed that therefore it wasn’t any good. And when they increased the prices the customer base increased very significantly.

Hence, the fee level was seen by some as a proxy for reputation. And, therefore, in the reputation driven higher education sector, being seen as a second class university was inconceivable for some, allegedly pushing most of them to set their fees near the £9,000 cap (Taylor & McCaig, 2014, p. 18).

In sum, the prestige fantasy is about appearing as elite, as the top university, where usually -for better or worse- research intensive universities (Marginson, 2008), particularly Oxford and Cambridge, are considered the panacea of English higher education. Therefore, the prestige can be seen as a fantasy, because it could enable people to liberate themselves from a difficult reality and become part of a wish-fulfilling fiction that although will not be materialized, it could take leaders out of their paradoxical position. Let us analyze the latter. In order to explain the prestige idea, the President of UniM mentioned the following: “also the point about caps is if you set yourself anything other than the cap, it will define yourself as a second class institution”*.* Now, by counterfactual, the latter would imply that somehow setting your fees at the same level of Oxford and Cambridge would define you as them. As if just because you are charging £9,000 you have become Oxford. This would be an example of what Dews calls “deceptive identity forged by concepts” (2012, p. 41), as if the concept of your sticker price would fully define who you are as a university. The cherry on top of the cake of this fantasy is that somehow people forget that if every university actually became Oxford and Cambridge, then nobody would be Oxford and Cambridge, because no one would be top: by definition everyone would be average. Therefore, the dream of all being top, reputable, ultra-prestigious universities cannot by definition ever be reached. Thus, the idea of the prestige emerges from the wish of liberating oneself from a difficult position, while at the same time the wish remains impossible, making of this, then, a fantasy. More importantly, as this is a fantasy that did not require the invocation of the supernatural or any sort of fissure between the natural order and the fantasy, it is a magical realist fantasy to be more specific. Here, that which is fantasized -the magic of a sticker price fully defining the identity of a university- has been disguised as part of the essence of the mundane reality.

A second fantasy was that of the independent agenda. This, simply put, is about how post-Browne Review pro-market policies might not make sense and put university leaders in a paradoxical position, yet there is something beyond all these mundanities that is much more important: an independent agenda that the university will follow regardless of the hassles of the so-called real world. Hence, the independent agenda changes the interpretation of all these higher education reforms by saying: forget about things pointing to the market, things are actually pointing to something that is independent of it. For instance, a Vice-President from UniY, about the Browne Review, said:

Well it was on the radar, but I don’t think that we were doing anything specifically to anticipate what it was coming from the review, because it didn’t matter what the review said, we needed to implement changes. So really you know increasing the quality, extending the breath of what we were doing was going to be important irrespective of what would come out of the review.

So the independent agenda fantasy is about a mystical -almost metaphysical- kernel that cannot be touched by the mundanities of the so-called real world. The idea of the independent agenda lies in a popular metaphysical ethos that there might be in organizations (or other types of entities) a kernel that is not affected by the disturbances around them (Schoeneborn, 2016). However, organizations actually define their environment and the environment defines organizations, making it quaimpossible to define a clear-cut line between them (Stacey, 1992). Thus, there might be a kernel, but who knows what or where exactly it is. And, therefore, this probably remains a fantasy. Yet, it is in particular a magical realist fantasy, as that untouched kernel, even if perpetually fictitious, is still part of the mundane order of what a university allegedly is.

A final fantasy is that of inevitability, which refers to the idea that the post-Browne Review pro-market changes in public policy were unavoidable. This represents a fantasy, insofar as for the implemented policies, alternatives actually existed. Something acknowledged by the Browne Review itself, which addressed other alternative models. However, inevitability might be fulfilling the wish to escape the paradoxical position, by envisioning this as unavoidable, as if the leader could not do anything to prevent it. Almost as if the changes had to happen, as if they were meant to be. More importantly, the inevitability of the natural and mundane paradoxical position is natural and mundane too, and thus, this fantasy presents itself once more as a magical realist fantasy too. **Table 2** illustrates the three fantasies with quotes.

*[Please insert Table 2 near here]*

**Discussion**

Now, the question is, how do the three discussed leaders’ fantasies bestow on leaders some liberation from their paradoxical position? It is difficult to understand fully how liberation might be working. Yet, there are some indications of this if one looks closer at the three magical realist fantasies. In the prestige fantasy, liberation might not be as romantic as it sounds, as it might require simply to change one type of power for another. In short, leaders, by focusing on becoming the most prestigious university, might be enabled to overcome the frustration regarding the policy changes and the power that these policies had on them. Yet, the irony emerges as it appears like this fantasy is liberating them from their paradoxical position, by making them now enslaved to the delusion of aiming at all cost to look and feel as a so-called top university. Therefore, here we have simply an exchange or transformation of power. First, the leader might have been subjugated to a paradoxical position. However, once the leader turns to the prestige fantasy, the leader quickly becomes subjugated to another form of power in another sort of paradoxical position, which this time requires from the leader to obsess with turning her university into a sort of Oxford and Cambridge. Thus, one subjugation has been turned into another.

In the second fantasy -i.e. theindependent agenda- liberation might be working differently. Here, leaders downplayed the role of their paradoxical position, by arguing that there was a protected unchanged kernel in universities. This fantasy if it liberates, it does through resistance. In short, leaders’ acknowledged their paradoxical position; yet, they resisted the power that this position had over them, by arguing that universities have actually been protected given their unchanged kernel, which in spite of whatever power, remains always untouched. This echoes the Foucauldian realization that “where there is power there is also resistance” (Lukes, 2005, p. 100). The independent agenda, hence, is important, because it provides leaders with the experience or feeling that even if they cannot control the external environment that is changing their symbolic order, they could take care of the university by working on the independent agenda, which for some magical reason, is a kernel that is not affected by the reforms.

Liberation from the paradoxical position turns even more interesting in the final fantasy: inevitability. Here, leaders claimed that the effects of the macro-environment on their symbolic order, and thus their paradoxical position*,* were unavoidable. In other words, what is going to happen out there, is going to happen. And, therefore, they do not really see themselves anymore in a paradoxical position, because even if followers are expecting leaders to defend them against the hostile higher education changes, the policies are unavoidable. So as Pontius Pilate, university leaders could calmly wash their hands, and say that their magical realist expected role as grand saviors does not apply to things that are unavoidable. One possible way of looking at this is not as a fantasy of liberation but of power, because “The exercise of power can produce as much acceptance as may be wished for” (Foucault, 1982, p. 789). Nevertheless, a second interpretation exists. When the Buddha, Shakyamuni, strived to understand how to liberate humans from suffering, he did not arrive at resistance as the fantasy of liberation, but acceptance. Therefore, those that attain nirvana, becoming “fully liberated from all suffering”, liberate themselves not through resistance, but through the fantasy of the world as something that humans cannot change but simply have to accept (Harari, 2014, p. 196-98). Inevitability might be an instrumental fantasy for leaders’ development, if inevitability allows/enables leaders to get over -accept- whatever they cannot control/change, and focus instead on what they can. The latter would not be surprising, it is best expressed in the conventional wisdom (allegedly enunciated in the 19th century by Edward E. Hale) that says: I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something, and I will not let what I cannot do interfere with what I can do.

**Implications: Leaders and Power, A Critical View**

Let us look at the full implications of magical realist fantasies. It turns out that magical realist fantasies could be extremely valuable to leaders, if by partially liberating them from their paradoxical position (Ornstein & Ornstein, 2008), allow leaders to focus instead on that which leaders could probably control better. The latter generates, hence, a novel conceptualization of the relationship between leadership and power. As Yukl acknowledges, leadership and power have been constantly related as simply: leaders have power (1989; Bendahan et al., 2015; Chou et al., 2015; De Hoogh et al., 2015; Espedal, 2015; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). This is not a surprise, since that is how some of the ancient academic conceptualizations of leadership emerged, such as Carlyle and his Great Man Theory, where, as Grint recalls, leaders are seen as “independent agents, able to manipulate the world at will” (2005, p. 1471). Such conceptualization of the relationship between leadership and power tends to overestimate the power of leaders, up to the point that it makes of the “heroic leadership identity… preponderant as part of most leaders’ development” (Abreu Pederzini, 2016, p. 326). Now, we know, of course, leaders could have access to better or more abundant resources. Yet, it is actually difficult to go as far as to justify this ideal of the heroic leader that controls everything. Something that is clearly evident in the many cases of apparently powerful leaders that ended up falling, including people like Margaret Thatcher or infamous Drug Lord Pablo Escobar. Furthermore, the problem of academic literature overlooking leaders’ impotence, might be the consequence partly of a poor conceptualization of power, as the leadership and power literature has tended to overemphasize how one person has influence over others, but not much is said about other factors that have power over us. Having reflected, at the beginning of this paper, on how all these other factors build complex and chaotic realities in which any single individual will eventually prove to be at least partially impotent, I argued thus, that leaders as human beings would also be impotent in many ways. Others have already explored this idea in business and management studies too. For example, MacKay and Chia’s exploration of an automotive company going through the shocks of the financial downturn of 2008/2009 (2013), illustrates how the leaders of the company were far from being able to control the fate of their company.

Given the intricacies of the complex world in which we live, I argued that people have, thus, built fantasies about order. Because order is at the end of the day the ultimate fantasy. In such attempts, humans have ended up building symbolic orders that are pretty much a collection of fantasies about how everything in the world has place, meaning, purpose and direction (Zizek, 1989). And, hence, in an Althusserian sense, symbolic orders end up hailing people as to give them a role and place within the chaos of the world (2006). However, the problem of the fantasy of the symbolic and its delusion of order, is that through its hail, it becomes yet another source of non-human power over humans. The irony here is, therefore, that the fantasy of the symbolic is built by humans; however, as these constructions take on a life of their own, and through a process of inverted reflection, they come back to submit us to their wishes, “so that men and women submit to what are in fact products of their own activity” (Eagleton, 1991, p. 70).

Now, the problem for leaders emerges as in modern symbolic orders of the magical realism type, leaders have become a fantasy of followers. The fantasy of the romance of leadership that Meindl et al. many years ago first described (1985). Where, in an effort to put order on all that we cannot control, we romanticize some simple normal human beings -leaders-, as having an implicit surplus of meaning, because they are supposed to be capable to defend us agaisnt all that we cannot defend ourselves against. Having now extended our conception of power, we can see the paradoxical position that the latter generates for leaders, because leaders are nothing else but human subjects that are subjugated to the hailing of the symbolic. Thus, the first important contribution that this paper has generated is that the concept of a leader has been turned from the ideal of a person with power, to the ideal of a person that is a subject. Thus, where someone like Bendahan et al. would have argued that “Leaders wield power” (2015, p. 101), I have argued the opposite, which is that leaders are subjects.

Furthermore, in this paper I specifically explored how leaders, by constructing their own magical realist fantasies, could speak back to the symbolic order and try to resist -or better said renegotiate- their hail. In short this is, therefore, what leaders were trying to do with the prestige, the independent, and inevitability fantasies. They produced other symbolic cognitive constructions, which by trying to impose them on their followers, they aimed to make them part of the ruling symbolic order. In short, in this case, fantasies would be related to leaders’ efforts to rebuild their identity: they “address the tension of who and how to be in leadership” (Carroll & Levy, 2010, p. 224). So that as De Rue and Ashford argue (2010), leadership becomes about identity granting and claiming, where fantasies could be the vehicle through which leaders aim to reconstruct part of their identity. For instance, in my higher education context, if a leader is fantasizing with the prestige, then the leader is in some ways claiming that perhaps he will not be able to do much about the public policy turbulence, but instead will focus on these other dynamics regarding turning the university into the most prestigious institution. On the other hand, in the case of inevitability, the leader could be similarly claiming that her leadership cannot do anything about the public policies because these are inevitable, but by accepting them as inevitable, they could now redirect their missions as leaders to other things they could control. Here, the magical realism essence of these fantasies is fundamental, because it could be allowing leaders’ fantasies to be seen by followers as matters-of-fact. So that very tangible and feel-as-natural fantasies, could be accepted by followers as potentially legitimate excuses from leaders in order to escape the paradoxical position in which followers put them in the first place. This is particularly important, precisely because as Lewis has discussed, paradoxes could end up paralyzing people (2000; Poole, 1989). Yet, through these leaders’ fantasies, leaders might be finding a way of escaping the impossible: the paradox.

It is here, then, that a contribution to the field of critical leadership studies emerges. As Collinson argues, “Constituting a comparatively new perspective on leadership, critical studies share a concern to critique the power relations and identity constructions through which leadership dynamics are frequently reproduced, rationalized, resisted and occasionally transformed” (2012, p. 89). It is precisely the latter what this paper has done: to critique power relations and identity constructions regarding leadership, and to find novel ways of conceptualizing the latter. To be more specific, the present exploration of leadership in the context of England’s higher education, has contributed to our understanding of alternative systemic power dynamics in leadership, taking forward De Rue and Ashford’s argument about the relevance of identity granting and claiming processes for this purpose (2010), yet shedding further light on how these dynamics might work, by showing the role and interaction of various types of fantasizing. Like this, then, a novel and critical face of the leadership and power relationship has been explored. I have left behind the conventional approach to this relationship. The approach, where for instance, Espedal would argue that: “Leadership research… suggests that there is a positive relationship between discretion (freedom, autonomy) and power (influence): Discretion is the freedom of choice and the power to act according to one’s own judgment” (2015, p. 153). The latter derives in claims, such as those by Rosenthal & Pittinsky, about how for leaders “their leadership is driven by their own personal egotistical needs for power and admiration” (2006, p. 618). Like I mentioned in the beginning of the paper, there is no question that this connection between leaders and power is certainly important. Yet, leadership and power is not as simple as the aforementioned research tradition would propose. By contrast, the discussion in this paper, has illustrated that the connection between leaders and power might not necessarily begin with how leaders have power, but how actually there is power over them. However, conceiving leaders and power this way becomes only possible once we can think about power differently, and far from equating it to the influence of one person over another, we take into consideration as well the influence of many other natural and social forces, including the symbolic. Symbolic orders that are constructed through language, and thus materialize Clegg’s claim that “this language is a language of power” (p. 62, 1987).

**Conclusions**

In conclusion, following Alvesson and Kärreman’s call for critical perspectives on the relationship between power and leadership (2016), I have focused here on one specific problem: the paradoxical position of leaders. If they want to lead, leaders would need to liberate themselves somehow from this paradoxical position. The mechanism that this paper explored for leaders to liberate themselves from their paradoxical position, was magical realist fantasies. But, which fantasies liberate leaders from their paradoxical position and how? Through the analysis of the English higher education sector, I explored an angle of this question. In this context, it seemed like leaders’ magical realist fantasies had the potential to become vehicles through which leaders could cope with their paradoxical position, by claiming a different identity for themselves than the one followers were forcing upon them. Through this renewed identity, leaders might try to redirect the attention to something different than their paradoxical position, something that this time they can better handle. Thus, in the systemic efforts of followers demanding leaders to be in certain ways, and leaders realizing they cannot, leaders’ fantasies could be instrumental if/when allowing for a reconstruction or renegotiation of the identity and role that a leader must play. More importantly, these leaders’ fantasies, by being of the magical realist type, could be particularly instrumental, as their disguising as unavoidable natural matters-of-fact could be more persuasive to convince followers to give up the dream of the heroic leader.

The insights developed by exploring the empirical context here discussed, might not necessarily apply to every context where leaders operate. By contrast and as aforementioned, context in leadership studies is of such an importance that contrary to what an structuralist view might demand, it could well be the case that the dynamics of leadership are greatly affected by contextual factors. However, that does not entail that everything will be fully context dependent. For instance, there is no question that the complex and chaotic change that English universities experienced, has been experienced too -although perhaps in different ways- by organizations and leaders in other contexts. The aforementioned study by MacKay and Chia is, for instance, an example of a company in a different context (i.e. the auto industry), where leaders experienced an equally constraining complex and chaotic macro-environment, which made their lives incredibly difficult, so that far from being agents of power, they were subjects of it (2013). In short, regardless of context, there could potentially be some value in reconceiving leaders as subjects of power that dwell in a paradoxical position. Or, as Foucault more generally reconceived the individual, we could redefine, therefore, the leader as that who is: “[an] enslaved sovereign” (1970, p. 340). The enslaved sovereign that in this context seemed to escape from her paradoxical position, through magical realist fantasies. Fantasies that are trying to convince followers to shift their ideal of leaders as agents of power to subjects of it. So that followers understand, as Lindblom did many years ago, that far from leaders controlling the world, they barely muddle through it (1959). A thought best summarized by the President of UniM, who as if poeticizing concluded: “You can only play the cards that you’ve been given, and as a head of an institution you either accept the cards… or you can ditch them. You are lucky or you are unlucky. Those are the ones you’ve got to play, and you play the ones you’ve got”.

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