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LIGHTS - Leadership

From authority to algorithm: what should leaders be responsible for in post-symbolic corporations?

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Abstract

This paper examines how contemporary regimes of decision-making, increasingly structured by technical systems and data infrastructures, redefine the nature of leadership in organizations. Drawing on Simondon's theory of individuation and Stiegler's concept of proletarianization, it argues that leadership is not merely constrained by technological mediation but actively reconfigured through it. Decision-making is increasingly produced within socio-technical systems that displace the locus of judgment from identifiable actors to technical processes. Leaders are not only deprived of control over decisions; they are progressively dispossessed of their capacity to judge. Leadership thus becomes both intensified and hollowed out: more visible, more accountable, yet less grounded in substantive agency. This transformation extends across organizational fields, including corporations and business schools, which continue to promote responsible leadership while operating within systems that structure and limit decision-making. The paper concludes that contemporary organizations do not suffer from a crisis of leadership in moral terms, but from its reconfiguration as a function detached from judgment.

Keywords : leadership, proletarianization, decision-making

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Introduction: from leadership to decision systems

Let's imagine a situation in which an HR director in a given company must decide, which employees will be promoted to senior leadership positions. Before the promotion committee convenes, candidates have already been evaluated by a talent analytics platform that aggregates performance indicators, engagement scores, mobility histories, peer evaluations, and leadership assessments. The system generates rankings and identifies those employees deemed most likely to succeed in future leadership roles. Formally, the director remains responsible for the final decision. If the promoted executives subsequently fail, accountability will rest with the director and the organization. Yet the decision itself has already been substantially shaped by a technical system that determines what counts as performance, potential, and leadership.

This situation illustrates a growing paradox of contemporary organizations. Leaders remain responsible for decisions, but increasingly operate within environments structured by algorithmic systems, data infrastructures, and technical architectures that define what can be seen, evaluated, and justified.

In contemporary organizations, leadership is increasingly framed in terms of responsibility, judgment, and the capacity to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty. Leaders are expected to interpret complex environments, assume responsibility for outcomes, and embody the capacity to decide. Business schools play a central role in promoting these ideals, presenting leadership as a key competence grounded in ethical awareness and strategic reasoning. At the same time, however, organizational decision-making is increasingly structured by technical systems. Data infrastructures, predictive models, and algorithmic tools define the parameters within which decisions are made. Strategic choices are no longer simply the result of individual judgment, but the outcome of processes that integrate data, models, and computational procedures. For example, a CEO considering entry into a new market may rely on predictive demand models, competitive intelligence systems, and scenario-planning software. Although the final decision formally belongs to the executive team, the range of plausible options has often been largely structured by technical systems before deliberation begins.

This simultaneity of a strong discourse on leadership and an increasing reliance on technical systems raises a fundamental question. Does leadership still reside in the capacity of individuals to judge and decide, or has it been displaced by the systems that organize decision-making? This paper argues that leadership is not disappearing, but being fundamentally reconfigured.

The central claim developed here is that contemporary leadership is characterized by a shift from individual judgment to distributed decision systems. Drawing on Simondon's theory of individuation and Stiegler's concept of proletarianization, the paper shows that decision-making is increasingly produced within socio-technical assemblages, while leaders are progressively dispossessed of their capacity to judge. Leadership thus becomes a function that persists institutionally but loses its substance as a site of decision.

Individuation and the displacement of the decision-maker

Simondon's theory of individuation provides a crucial framework for understanding this transformation. Rather than conceiving individuals as pre-existing entities, Simondon (1958) defines individuation as a process through which entities emerge within a milieu composed of relations, tensions, and technical elements. Individuals are not the origin of action; they are the outcome of processes that include both human and non-human components. Action is not produced by a subject acting upon the world, but by a system within which both subject and world are co-constituted. This perspective has significant implications for decision-making. If individuation is a process, then decisions cannot be fully attributed to a bounded subject. They must be understood as emerging from interactions between actors, tools, and environments. The individual is no longer the sole locus of decision but one component of a broader system in which agency is distributed across heterogeneous elements.

In contemporary organizations, this system is structured by technical infrastructures that organize both perception and action. Data is not simply available; it is selected, formatted, and filtered through systems that define what counts as relevant information. Interfaces, dashboards, and analytical tools do not merely present information; they shape how it can be interpreted. The promotion decision described above offers a useful illustration. Before candidates are discussed, their applications have been translated into performance ratings, engagement scores, mobility histories, and leadership indicators. The manager does not encounter employees directly but through representations generated by the talent management system. Technical infrastructures therefore do not merely provide information; they actively shape the reality upon which judgment is exercised. Decision-making is thus embedded in a technical milieu that conditions both what can be seen and what can be done. This conditioning has a decisive consequence. The space of decision is no longer open but prestructured. What appears as a possible decision is already shaped by the organization of information, the architecture of systems, and the parameters embedded in technical devices. In this sense, the decision does not originate in the subject; it emerges from the configuration of the milieu. This transformation leads to a displacement of the decision-maker. Leaders no longer stand at the origin of decisions; they operate within systems that predefine the field of possible actions. Decisions are not simply made by individuals but produced by the interplay between human actors and technical systems. The leader becomes a node within a process rather than its source. This does not eliminate leadership, but it alters its foundation. Leadership is no longer grounded in the capacity to make decisions, but in the ability to navigate, interpret, and validate processes that are beyond individual control. The figure of the decision-maker persists, but its ontological status is transformed. Leadership remains visible as a role, while its grounding in a subject capable of decision is progressively weakened.

Technics and the proletarianization of judgment

While Simondon allows us to understand the displacement of decision-making, Stiegler's work provides a framework for analyzing its consequences for judgment. For Stiegler (2010, 2015), modern technological systems produce a process of proletarianization, understood as the loss of knowledge through its transfer to technical devices. In industrial contexts, this process deprived workers of know-how; in contemporary contexts, it extends to cognitive and decision-making capacities. In organizational settings, this transformation is particularly visible in the growing reliance on algorithmic systems. These

systems do not simply assist decision-making; they actively structure it. By processing large volumes of data, they define what counts as relevant information, establish evaluation criteria, and generate outputs that guide action. Decision-making is thus increasingly mediated by systems that preconfigure both the inputs and the outcomes of the process.

This reconfiguration has a direct impact on judgment. Judgment, in its classical sense, involves interpretation, hesitation, and engagement with uncertainty. It presupposes a space in which multiple possibilities can be considered, compared, and evaluated. It cannot be reduced to calculation, but depends on the capacity to situate action within a broader context. Algorithmic systems, by contrast, tend to reduce decision-making to optimization problems. They translate situations into variables, establish correlations, and produce ranked outputs that appear as rational solutions. In doing so, they transform the conditions under which judgment can be exercised. The space of deliberation is not eliminated, but it is narrowed and prestructured. Similar dynamics can be observed in talent analytics systems used to identify future leaders. Managers continue to discuss candidates and formally approve promotion decisions, yet deliberation increasingly revolves around rankings generated by technical systems. Judgment is not eliminated, but exercised within boundaries already established by algorithmic procedures.

As a result, judgment is not abolished but captured. Leaders are no longer required to interpret situations in their full complexity; they are required to operate within frameworks that have already structured the decision process. Their role shifts from that of a judge to that of an operator of decisions produced elsewhere. The act of deciding is replaced by the act of selecting among predefined options. This transformation leads to what can be described as the proletarianization of leadership. Leaders are progressively dispossessed of their capacity to judge, as the knowledge required for decision-making is embedded in technical systems. They remain formally responsible for decisions, yet their ability to engage with these decisions as acts of judgment is diminished. The consequence is a profound redefinition of leadership. Leadership does not disappear, but it is detached from the cognitive and interpretive capacities that once grounded it. It becomes a function exercised within systems that define both the terms and the limits of decision-making. In this sense, leadership persists as a role, but loses its substance as a site of judgment.

Decision-making as distributed process

Contemporary organizations increasingly distribute decision-making while preserving individualized accountability. Promotion systems, performance evaluations, and legal frameworks continue to assume the existence of identifiable decision-makers who can be held responsible for outcomes. Yet the production of decisions increasingly depends on socio-technical arrangements involving data infrastructures, algorithms, organizational routines, and multiple actors. Leaders therefore remain accountable for decisions produced outside their direct control. The combined effects of distributed individuation and proletarianization produce a transformation of decision-making itself. Decisions are no longer the outcomes of individual judgment, but the products of distributed processes involving multiple actors and technical systems. This distribution takes the form of layered agency. Data is collected, filtered, and structured by infrastructures that define what can be known. It is processed by algorithms that establish correlations and generate outputs. These outputs are interpreted by analysts, integrated into organizational routines, and validated by managers. Each layer contributes to the production of the decision, yet none can fully account for it. The decision emerges from the articulation of these layers rather than from a single point of origin. At the same time, this distribution happens alongside a

strong structuring of action. Algorithmic systems do not merely process information; they organize it by selecting variables, establishing thresholds, and ranking options. They define what counts as relevant, what is excluded, and what appears as optimal. The space of possible decisions is thus preconfigured before any individual intervention takes place.

This dual movement — distribution and structuring — has significant consequences. On the one hand, decision-making becomes more collective, as it involves multiple actors and technical components. On the other hand, it becomes more constrained, as the parameters of action are increasingly predefined. The more decision-making is distributed, the less open it is. The more inputs are integrated, the narrower the space for interpretation becomes. This produces a paradoxical configuration. Decisions appear more rational, more data-driven, and more robust, yet they leave limited room for deviation, reinterpretation, or dissent. Leadership must operate within this tension, assuming responsibility for outcomes that are both collectively produced and structurally constrained.

Leadership as discursive overproduction and practical underproduction

Within this configuration, leadership takes on a paradoxical form. It is simultaneously overproduced as discourse and underproduced as practice.

Leadership is overproduced in the sense that it remains a central element of organizational narratives. Firms and business schools continuously promote leadership as a key competence, emphasizing responsibility, vision, and decision-making capacity. Leadership is formalized in competency frameworks, assessed through evaluation systems, and embedded in training programs. It becomes an object of continuous articulation and reinforcement. At the same time, leadership is underproduced in practice. The conditions under which leaders could exercise judgment are constrained by technical systems that structure decision-making. Leaders are expected to decide, but within frameworks that define the relevant variables, possible options, and acceptable outcomes. Their capacity to interpret, hesitate, or deviate is reduced. This leads to a structural imbalance. Leadership is highly visible, codified, and institutionalized, yet its practical capacity to shape decisions remains limited. The more organizations rely on technical systems to govern action, the more they need to maintain a discourse that affirms the importance of leadership. Leadership becomes more present as a category, but less operative as a practice. In this sense, leadership does not disappear; it is maintained through discourse while being constrained in action. The overproduction of leadership as discourse compensates for its underproduction as practice, allowing organizations to sustain the figure of the leader even as its functional basis is transformed.

Leadership in contemporary organizations (and business schools)

This dynamic becomes particularly visible in institutions such as business schools. These organizations do not merely promote leadership as a value; they play a central role in shaping how leadership is understood, taught, and reproduced. Through case-based pedagogy, leadership development programs, and competency frameworks, business schools formalize leadership as a set of attributes that can be taught and evaluated. Leadership is translated into skills, behaviors, and measurable outcomes, making it compatible with systems of assessment and accreditation.

At the same time, these institutions operate within environments structured by rankings, performance indicators, and competitive pressures. Their legitimacy depends on measurable outcomes such as graduate salaries, employability rates, and research output. These metrics shape institutional priorities and define what counts as success. Students are thus socialized into a specific configuration. They are taught to value leadership as a capacity grounded in judgment and responsibility, while being trained to operate within systems that structure decision-making through technical infrastructures. Leadership is both learned and pre-structured. From this perspective, business schools function as sites of reproduction. They do not simply reflect organizational transformations; they contribute to stabilizing them by aligning the discourse of leadership with the systems that constrain it. Leadership is produced as a visible and legitimate category, even as its practical conditions are transformed.

Conclusion: what becomes of leadership in a post-symbolic corporation?

Leadership has not disappeared; it has been reconfigured. It persists as a visible and institutionalized function, but loses its grounding in judgment. Decision-making is displaced into systems, and leaders become operators of processes they do not fully control. The crisis of leadership is therefore not moral but structural. It does not result from a failure of individuals to act responsibly, but from a transformation of the conditions under which responsibility can be exercised. As decision-making becomes distributed and structured by technical systems, the capacity to judge is progressively externalized.

The question is therefore no longer simply whether leaders decide. It is what they should be responsible for when decision-making increasingly emerges from technical systems. Their responsibility lies less in producing decisions alone than in maintaining the conditions under which judgment remains possible. Leadership becomes a role that must assume responsibility for decisions whose production is outside the scope of individual agency. In this sense, leadership persists as an institutional necessity while losing its ontological foundation. The central implication is that contemporary organizations do not suffer from a lack of leadership, but from its redefinition. Leadership has been reformatted. It is no longer grounded in the capacity to decide, but in the capacity to operate within systems that decide. The challenge, therefore, is not to restore a lost model of leadership, but to rethink what leaders should be responsible for when decisions increasingly emerge from socio-technical systems. Their responsibility lies less in producing decisions alone than in preserving the conditions under which meaningful judgment remains possible.

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