

Puzzles, paradoxes, and paradigms: the intellectual legacy of James MacGregor Burns

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As much as we might laud the intellectual contribution of James MacGregor Burns to the field of leadership studies, he would be very disappointed if his work did not spur conflict and challenges. Consequently, this article points out puzzles and paradoxes in Burns's work and suggest elements of a new paradigm. Those elements include leaving behind the leader-centrism that haunts Burns's work and clarifying the leadership role, in contrast to followership, of all members of a group.

Keywords: *leader-centric paradigms, leading, empowerment, leadership systems, Montgomery Bus Boycott*

1 BURNS'S LEGACY – PARADIGMS, PUZZLES, AND PARADOXES

The Jepson School and the Burns Academy of Leadership organized a conference in 1998 to mark the 20th anniversary of the publication of *Leadership*. I served as the go-between and, with a committee, lined up a number of notable leadership scholars to discuss the impact of that book on their and others' scholarship (Couto 2007). Coincidentally, Jim was on the University of Maryland campus and decided to drop by and keynote the conference with a pre-emptive critique of his own book (Burns 2007, pp. v–viii). Before launching into his remarks, Jim looked around the large crowd and asked, 'Where's Dick Couto? Where's that iconoclast?' I am delighted to recount that moment because Burns was an iconoclast as well.

He did not make frontal attacks on icons; he simply took away their venerability. His book, *Leadership* (1978), subtly challenged the leader-centric theories in the field of leadership studies. Surreptitiously, his work brought followers and values – moral values – to the forefront of leadership studies. Twenty-five years later in another work, *Transforming Leadership* (2003), Burns continued to move the needle on icons; in particular, with a theme of empowerment. Transforming leadership, Burns explains, liberates and empowers followers to envision, energize, and enable the pursuit and practice of the values of transforming leadership. Power *with* others replaces power *over* them (ibid., pp. 26–27).¹ Although we find partially developed new paradigmatic

1. Others had more critical perspectives on leadership and dissatisfaction with the old but still dominant leader-centric paradigm than Burns's later work and applied them to formal organizational settings (see Couto 2007; Follett 1924; Gardner and Laskin 1995; Heifetz 1994; Rost 1991; Scharmer 2009; Tucker 1995; Uhl-Bien and Marion 2008; Volckmann 2010; Walters 2007; Wheatley 1992).

features of leadership in his work, his intellectual legacy includes puzzles and paradoxes for us to address. This article deals with two of them in order to continue and challenge that legacy:

- The central tenet of a new paradigm of leadership is leading, not leader; an action, not positional, authority. Hundreds if not thousands of definitions of leadership exist. We add to this roll call another one that captures the action nature of leadership: taking initiative on behalf of shared values and the common good. Of course, someone in a position of authority can take such an initiative but merely occupying such a position is neither necessary nor sufficient to lead, to exercise leadership, or to be a leader.
- This emphasis on leadership as action, especially in collective action, involves other group members but not as subordinate followers. Subordination implies hierarchy, formal or informal. Followers, in this new paradigm, regardless of rank or position also exercise leadership, in the sense of taking initiative.

I will use the Montgomery bus boycott as grounds for the discussion of these points. Jim suggested, during the time he nurtured discussion and thought about a general theory of leadership (Goethals and Sorenson 2006), that our group take an event such as that and ground our theory-making within it.

2 LEADERSHIP AS LEADING, NOT LEADER

My first conversation with Burns led us to disagree about the state of leadership in the United States about the amount and quality of leadership in the country. He surveyed political leadership, state and national, and found paucity. I had worked with local, community leadership from a university base and I found abundant and exemplary leadership. Many years later, I found myself challenging the president of a small liberal arts college on the first day of my consulting on campus. Again, it was a matter of definition of leadership. We were discussing the scope of the program, exclusive or inclusive; enrolling student organization leaders and others like them or being deliberate and intentional about the leadership development of all students. He jokingly castigated his colleague, who was in charge of developing a leadership program. 'She thinks everyone can be a leader. But leadership is not for everyone.' I replied, 'Then you have a problem.' He asked me why and I pointed out to him that his college's mission statement, like just about every other mission statement, talked about imparting a passion for ethical leadership and civic responsibility. 'It doesn't say ethical leadership and civic responsibility for some students and subordination and irresponsibility for the rest.' He called my bluff and asked the logical question: 'What is leadership?' I generally freeze at that question. This time, however, my mind somehow rifled through more than a decade of thought and teaching about leadership and I heard myself say, 'Leadership takes initiative for shared values and the common good.'

After almost ten years, I still use this definition. It preserves Burns's emphasis on values, including the common good, without extolling a set of transcendent values. It is context-free so that it may apply to individuals within families, organizations, social change efforts, and the spectrum of human interactions. Leadership by this definition may be lofty but it also brings leadership into the realm of everyday actions on behalf of values and the common good while preserving for some the realm of transforming leadership. Additionally, like the paradigmatic work of Ronald Heifetz (1994), this definition separates leadership from authority but incorporates the latter. It also permits

an integral approach to leadership that delineates and relates the action of leading, the role of leader, and the process of leadership (Volckmann 2010).

It may be useful to point out that this definition leaves out many considerations. It includes any initiative for any value; it offers no guidance whether the values and the version of the common good, upon which initiative is taken, are good or bad. Both the bus driver who enforces segregation and the passenger who disobeys it are leading. This inclusiveness of bad (Kellerman 2004) and even toxic leadership (Lipman-Blumen 2005) contrasts sharply with the bright line that Burns painted consistently between leadership and power wielding.

Likewise, the definition offers no guidance on another quality of leadership and the consuming concern of leadership studies: what makes leadership effective? An initiative, whether effective or ineffective, is leadership as long as it is taken on behalf of shared values and the common good. Take, for example, the case of the African-American woman who, in 1955, refused to move further back on a segregated bus to free up a seat in the 'colored' section for a white passenger who had just boarded. We laud Rosa Parks for this action in December 1955 that has become an icon of leadership for social change in the role it played in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the subsequent movement for desegregation and civil rights. However, 15-year-old Claudette Colvin had taken the same action nine months earlier, and, like Parks, refused to give up her seat. She vehemently insisted, correctly, that Montgomery's law did not require her to do so and join the standing passengers because no vacant seats were available. When summoned, the police forcibly removed her from her seat and the bus and arrested her. The circuit court overturned her lower court conviction for violating segregation laws but upheld her conviction for assault and battery and resisting arrest – curiously, for a crime that it found did not occur. Informal protests and even boycotts followed. The local NAACP initially supported Colvin, but when the court's decision removed the constitutional issue of segregated bussing the NAACP reluctantly withdrew support (Burns 1997, pp. 5–6, 73–77). Likewise, Thomas Edward Brooks paid with his life in 1950 for continuing from the front entrance of the bus to the 'colored' section, instead of getting off and entering from the rear door. The police officer, summoned by the bus driver, approached Brooks, a United States Army private first class and in his uniform, and hit him in the head with his Billy club. A witness described the blow as being like 'a hickory-nut being snapped by a pair of pliers.' Brooks escaped the grasp of the police officer and bus driver and ran out the front door of the bus before the officer shot him, fatally, in the back (Williams and Greenhaw 2007, pp. 14–15). Despite different outcomes, by this definition all three acts are leadership.

Although more inclusive of initiatives as leadership, our definition permits us to exclude as leadership earlier actions of people who would later become central actors of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. In 1943, for example, Rosa Parks entered a bus by its front door and bus-driver James F. Blake told her to get off and re-enter by the rear door. She complied. Her violation of the Jim Crow law was inadvertent, unlike her action a dozen years later. Similarly, Jo Ann Robinson, who played a major role in starting the 1955 boycott, initially sat in the section reserved for whites in a nearly deserted Montgomery bus in 1949. Harangued by the bus driver to move, she got off the bus out of fear (*ibid.*, p. 55). In both cases, there is no intended initiative on behalf of shared values and the common good and hence there is no leadership. Disappointingly perhaps, for those who see morality in leadership, all the bus drivers involved in these four incidents took initiative to enforce the values shared by some about racial subordination and laws regarding seats on a bus.

3 LEADERSHIP WITHOUT 'FOLLOWERS'

After *Leadership*, Burns devoted more attention to followers because he came to see power as 'something between and among followers and leaders' (Burns 2007, p. vi) that included the motivation of followers and not merely the resources of the leader. He even became enthralled, 'motivation among those we are trying to influence is the fascinating thing' (ibid., p. vi).

Once again, however, Burns only partially leaves leader-centrism behind. Initially (1978), he gives up a view of a much less hierarchical and more fluid relationship between leaders and followers. Later, he explains leadership as empowering engagement with followers (2003, p. 183), that remains leader-centric. His emphasis on leadership as power *with* rather than power *over* falls short of a paradigmatic break because it seems a choice of a person in authority with power *over* people who decides to do something *with* others; enabling, empowering, etc.

To move beyond the understanding of followership that Burns left as his legacy, we need to move beyond the remnant of leader-centrism of power *with* and move to a systemic perspective in which everyone participates, regardless of position (Chaleff et al. 2008; Rost 1991; Uhl-Bien and Marion 2008; Uhl-Bein et al. 2014; Volckmann 2010; Wheatley 1992). Burns starts us off with the suggestion that

... instead of identifying actors simply as leaders or simply as followers, we [should] see the whole process [of leadership] as a *system* in which the function of leadership is palpable and central but the actors move in and out of leader and followers roles. At this crucial point we are no longer seeing individual leaders; rather we see *leadership* as the basic process of social change, of causation in a community, an organization, a nation –perhaps even the globe. (Burns 2003, p. 185, author's emphasis)

Burns's more radical critique of leader-centric models requires forms of power other than *over* and *with*. It requires recognitions of forms of power common to all members of a group: the power *to* and the power *within*. Power *within* is the self-awareness of the personal capacity for action, and the power *to* is the exercise of that sense of agency (VeneKlasen and Miller 2002). Done in conjunction with other people, power *with*, these latter two forms of power create a transforming synergy of vitality at the personal, group, social, organizational, national, and even international level.

Ronald Heifetz makes explicit the agency and purpose among people in collective action, ordinarily described as followers, which make them leaders:

The black and white people mobilized by the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s felt mobilized to exercise leadership themselves; and most became engaged citizens. Few, if any, had an experience of 'followership.' In short, the term inaccurately describes a leadership that mobilizes responsibility-taking and generates more leadership. (Heifetz 2007, pp. 41–42)

We find in studies of social movements these intrapersonal dimensions of power *within* and power *to* occurring regularly before the interpersonal dimension of power *with*. Edwards (2012, p. xxii), for example, finds in black fiction and culture an 'archive of contestation' that risks 'defying the authority of tradition and forsaking the supposed safety of singular political authority for the hope of a more radical collectivity and the urgency of the creative complaint.' Betsy Leondar-Wright and William Gamson (2010) suggest that the distinctive leadership of social movements provides a collective action frame of political consciousness that defines a group as

we and a set of adversaries as *they*; a ‘hot cognition,’ laden with emotion, that ‘they’ have responsibility for an injustice; and, particularly significant, an agency component:

The *agency component* (also known as empowerment or collective efficacy) refers to the belief that it is possible to change conditions or policies through collective action. Collective action frames deny the immutability of some undesirable situation and empower people by defining them as potential agents of their own history. They suggest not merely that something can be done but that *we* can do something. (Ibid., p. 350)

The accuracy of this stress on the intrapersonal dimensions of thought and action of participants in a social movement rings out generally (Polletta 2006) and particularly in the testimony of Montgomery residents who participated in the 1956 bus boycott. The NAACP sought to have the Montgomery public transportation segregation laws ruled unconstitutional in federal district court. The four plaintiffs testified in the case. In every instance, the city and state attorneys cross-examined the plaintiffs about the leadership of the boycott. In municipal court, they had previously found Martin Luther King Jr guilty of conspiracy and sought to portray him as a ringleader of the boycott that raised no constitutional issue. When asked if King had told blacks to boycott the buses, plaintiff Aurelia Browder told the city’s attorney that she and others decided not to ride the buses, not King. Walter Knabe, the city attorney, put the question sharply to plaintiff Susie McDonald, 77 years old: had she stopped riding the bus because of agitation among blacks in Montgomery? McDonald responded in terms of power within, to, and with: ‘I reached my own judgment. I stopped [riding] because I thought it was right and because we were mistreated.’ Knabe pursued a line of argument that the boycott had nothing to do with segregation and that those who stopped riding on December 5 had never given segregation a thought. He went further to suggest that the protest of segregation came from a few people. The third plaintiff, 19-year-old Mary Louise Smith, made clear that she was aware of and upset by segregation every time she rode the bus, just as the other plaintiffs testified. Trying to get to the ‘leader’ behind the boycott, Knabe asked her if King was her representative. She replied, ‘We appointed him our leader ... we represent ourselves.’ Claudette Colvin, 16 years old and the last plaintiff to testify, gave the same description of the role of King in the boycott. If Knabe wanted an explanation of the boycott, he did not find it in Rosa Parks, Edgar Nixon (head of the local NAACP), Rev. King, or any other person or set of persons. Colvin explained, in terms of ‘hot cognition,’ that she quit riding the bus ‘[b]ecause we were treated wrong, dirty, and nasty’ (Williams and Greenhaw 2007, pp. 212–216).

4 CONCLUSION

Burns’s intellectual legacy helps and hinders the emergence of a paradigmatic shift from leader-centrism in leadership studies. Burns offers a litmus test of leaders, especially transforming political leaders, as being ‘the achievement of purpose in the form of real and *intended* social change’ (Burns 1978, p. 251, emphasis added). A new paradigm of leadership, in contrast, recognizes that achievement is not the test of leadership; taking initiative is. While questions about effectiveness are primary, they cannot be exclusive if we are to include ordinary people in the leadership of collective action for social change. Similarly, a new paradigm of leadership suggests that we need to blur further the lines of the interdependence of leaders and followers. To move beyond

the remnant of Burns's leader-centric legacy requires an emphasis on leadership as a process that assumes the agency of all participants of a group: leadership without followers. Leadership becomes a co-construction (Uhl-Bien, Marion, McKelvey 2008, p. 187) of all group members who with their agency and the power *within* themselves find power *with* others, including those to whom they confer power *over* them, to get things done; sometimes far beyond their intentions.

Let's leave the last word on initiative, intention, and motivational power to Rosa Parks. She recalled, 'When I got on the bus that evening I wasn't thinking about causing a revolution or anything of the kind.' Her head was filled with thoughts of family, Christmas, and her aching back.

... When that white driver stepped back toward us, when he waved his hand and ordered us up and out of our seats, I felt a determination cover my body like a quilt on a winter night. I felt the meanness of every white driver I'd seen who'd been ugly to me and other black people through the years I'd known on the buses in Montgomery. I felt a light suddenly shine through the darkness. (Williams and Greenhaw 2007, p. 48)

She had been part of the strategy meetings about using Claudette Colvin's case. She knew of the local NAACP's search for a perfect case with which to challenge segregated buses in Montgomery.

But I wasn't thinking about all of that while I sat there and waited for the police to come. All I could think about, really and truly, was the Lord would help me through all of this. I told myself I wouldn't put up no fuss against them arresting me.² I'd go along with whatever they said. But I knew I wasn't gonna give up my seat just because a white driver told me to; I'd already done that too many times. As soon as they arrested me, I knew, I'd call Mr. Nixon and let him know what happened. Then we'd see. (Ibid., p. 48)

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2. This might reflect the influence of the Highlander Folk School workshops that she had attended three months before. They dealt with implementing the recent school desegregation ruling of the US Supreme Court (Williams and Greenhaw 2007, p. 45).

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