

## The Human Need for a Master

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**When the world ruled by aristocracies fell apart, there emerged a felt need for leaders. In an authoritative new book, Yves Cohen studies the historical and theoretical aspects of this emergence, which was related to modern management ideas and was developed both nationally and internationally. He focuses on four countries that were to play major roles in the first half of the twentieth century.**

**Reviewed:** Yves Cohen, *Le Siècle des chefs. Une histoire transnationale du commandement et de l'autorité (1890-1940)* [The Century of Leaders: A Transnational History of Leadership and Authority (1890-1940)], Paris, Éditions Amsterdam, 2013, 872 pp., 25 €.

This book, a culmination of twenty years of research, is essential reading for understanding the history of the twentieth century and the phenomenon of authority more generally. It examines what its author Yves Cohen calls the “preoccupation” with leaders and leadership that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, in the four countries that he studies: France, Germany, the United States and the Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup> In this period of democratization and the rise of capitalism, the obsession with leadership reflected worrying transformations that increased the anxieties felt by elites about the arrival of the masses. In 1895 Gustave Le Bon’s *Psychologie des foules* [The Psychology of Crowds] called for authority and hierarchy, asserting that “men in crowds can’t do without a master”. The call for leaders, both big-time and small-time, gave rise to an extensive literature, both popular and specialist, describing what leaders should do, and how they should go about it, given that the challenges and timescales differ from one country to another. In the first part of his book, Cohen looks at that profusion of writings and identifies those challenges and timescales; in the second part, he examines how leaders actually acted, looking at archives this time, and focusing particularly on the French and Soviet cases. The great originality of his investigation stems from it not being limited as to the field of activity (political, industrial, or military) nor as to the kind of regime (liberal or authoritarian). The book rests on an impressive number and variety of sources, and a no less impressively large multilingual bibliography.

### A phenomenon that was global as well as local

Cohen looks at the general, historically identifiable phenomenon of reflecting on authority and leadership, which unfolded in individual ways in France, Germany, the USA and Russia, and which also appeared in exchanges between these countries. One of the strengths of his work is that he pays attention to these international movements of ideas that

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<sup>1</sup> The recent publication of several books directly or indirectly concerned with the authority of leaders shows the renewed interest in these issues today. See Emmanuel Saint-Fuscien, *A vos ordres? La relation d'autorité dans l'armée française de la Grande Guerre*, Paris, Éditions de l'EHESS, 2011 (<http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Obeir-en-1914-1918.html>); Jean-Claude Monod, *Qu'est-ce qu'un chef en démocratie? Politiques du charisme*, Paris, Seuil, 2012 (<http://www.booksandideas.net/Choosing-Our-Leaders.html>); and also Bruno Karsenti, *Moïse et l'idée de peuple: La vérité historique selon Freud*, Paris, Cerf, 2012 (<http://www.laviedesidees.fr/L-autre-Moise.html>).

took place during the development of leadership theories. To do this he used a comparative semantics that involved putting together words in different languages (for example, leadership, “*commandement*”, “*Führung*” and “*roukovodstvo*”) even if their meanings were not identical so that translating them raised questions about their equivalence. Inter-country exchanges became apparent in the first American study of leadership, published in the field of psychology in 1904. The author, Lewis Terman, developing a theory on the selection of leaders, drew from Gabriel Tarde’s article on “*inter-psychologie*” [interpsychology], published in an American journal; Alfred Espinas’ book on *Sociétés animales* [Animal Societies]; and Alfred Binet’s research on *Suggestibilité* [Suggestibility] – all works in which the English term “leader” already appeared, borrowed from American psychology. In fact, in Binet’s case, the traffic was two-way. Although translation is not a *sine qua non*, it can be decisive for the diffusion of ideas when the knowledge of the language is less common, e.g. in the case of Russian. The psychiatrist and neurologist Vladimir Bekhterev’s book on suggestion in social life, first published in 1903, very quickly appeared in German (1905) and French (1907). This accessibility meant that it could be used by the sociologists Robert Park and Ernest Burgess in the same decade. So thinking about leadership was very clearly a result of multiple interactions that spilled over national boundaries.

### **Leaders as a human type and as guarantors of social order**

Arising out of the non-acceptance of the doomed world of the aristocrats, the obsession with leadership produced an abundant literature not only in the human and social sciences but also in politics, industry, and the military. The publications and speeches that blossomed at the turn of the century are analysed in the first part of Cohen’s book, in chapters focusing on a country and a theme. It becomes clear that the idea of the need for leaders became popular at the end of the First World War – leaders as a “human type” and as a guarantor of social order. This fashion for reflecting about leadership was very closely connected with (among other things) the scientific study of management and the movement to rationalize industry, and thus with new ways of organizing individuals and work. It was thought that the inherent complexity of modern societies required persons who were proficient in certain skills, which social psychology was trying to identify, but never quite did. In fact the relationship between leaders and their followers seemed like an abiding mystery. Thus, the idea of “charisma” was developed by the sociologist Max Weber to describe the properties that make certain men followed “because we have faith in them”. Insofar as it sanctifies the individual character of authority and hierarchy, the idea of leadership throws doubt on the leader’s relationship with egalitarianism, or at least with democracy. However, that relationship appeared to be demanded by particular historical factors in each of the four countries. In Germany, the relationship of leaders to democracy was difficult from the start, and the Weimar Republic’s failure to bring forth a governing class gave birth to Hitlerism. In Russia the Revolution seemed to be a matter for leaders, since the Bolsheviks defined themselves as such; the October Revolution, which saw itself as a protest against existing forms of authority, paradoxically ended up putting into power a very strong hierarchy. In the USA and France, the leader was a figure in democracies in which leadership powers were distributed according to the characteristics of the individual leaders. In the case of Franklin Roosevelt, the leader even appeared as the incarnation of democracy, because at the end of the 1930s he was perceived as the only person able to save it from the perils of dictatorships.

### **Leaders in action**

In the second part, Cohen’s book moves from discourses to “operations”. Leaders’ actions are closely examined in four chapters dedicated to different aspects of leadership: planning, being present, speaking, and writing. The part played by planning is clarified by

Cohen's observations on Ernest Mattern, an [Arts-et-Métiers](#)-trained engineer who worked at Peugeot for many years in the early part of twentieth century, and whom Cohen has spent a lot of time studying.<sup>2</sup> A plan tries both to target objectives and to anticipate hazards. As an instrument for governing collective action that tries to avoid the unexpected, it has social and physical implications: the imposition of a hierarchy and the organization of space. Its effectiveness as a leadership technique depends on its ability to organize complexity. That is the basis for the authority of a leader. However, that authority is tested whenever something unforeseen happens and requires that the working methods be adjusted. Moreover, according to Mattern, production cannot be directed remotely; one has to be present in order to monitor things and to solve any problems. Cohen calls this "spatial action": being physically present means not only that you can give an order and monitor its application, but also that you can engage in a collective search for the best solutions to problems. However, others, following in the footsteps of the Belgian industrialist Edmond Landauer, developed techniques of leading from a distance: using a "model" meant that decisions could be geographically remote. During the first five-year plan in the Soviet Union, in the Poutilov factory in Leningrad there were several competing ideas about leadership and leaders. Out of the confrontation between the Party and the functional bodies came a set of "leadership skills" having to do with urgency, concealment, disobedience, negotiation, and expediency. During the same period was constructed a managerial apparatus that was flexible enough to keep up with changes in economic policies. In what was set up, the interest of the workers was never taken into account, and they began to harbour a deep hostility towards their superiors. For Stalin the proletariat must clearly be led by the leaders, with him as their leader in chief: he was to be the guide who sets up a mode of direct action for governing the society, the leading example being his tour of Siberia in 1928 to requisition wheat. Cohen's analysis of the genesis of the law of 7 August 1932 on the theft of socialist property shows the process of constructing a dictatorship, and the way that Stalin "performed" as a leader by means of his writings.<sup>3</sup> In other words, leaders are not simply those who act as such, but are those whose behaviour shapes their personality as leaders.

### **Beyond "governmentality"?**

In studying the leader as an image of modernity, and very clearly describing its problematic appearance in the twentieth century, Cohen comes up against the crucial problem of human conduct. This is an issue that sociologists and historians have always worked on in terms of authority and dominance, whereas Cohen approaches it in terms of the concept of "governmentality", a concept that Michel Foucault developed to refer to the political rationality that is involved in governing a society.<sup>4</sup> We have already seen how this idea shapes Cohen's investigation, both in its refusal to see discourses and practices as opposites, and in its attention to governing apparatuses and to knowledge systems. To these two principles, Cohen adds a third: attention to action and its materiality. This enables him to see afresh the modalities of the exercise of authority and to discover meanings in disparate and heterogeneous facts. From this point of view, the trail he has blazed has proved to be very rich. The huge task of re-describing and explaining the past, made possible by his enrichment of Foucault's analytical tools, could have been used reflexively, to examine the concept of

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<sup>2</sup> Mattern was at the centre of another of Cohen's books, *Organiser à l'aube du taylorisme: la pratique d'Ernest Mattern chez Peugeot, 1906-1919*, Besançon, Presses universitaires franc-comtoises, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> The law on the theft of socialist property, also called the law of five ears of corn, was promulgated during a time of famine. Those found guilty were condemned to death. In attenuating circumstances the death penalty could be commuted to a sentence of a minimum of ten years in prison.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population: Cours au Collège de France (1977-78)*, Paris, Gallimard/Seuil, 2004.

governmentality itself. Cohen sticks to treating it as a historiographical exercise, as if the enormous erudition of that exercise did not involve any theoretical or epistemological shifts. Even with this more modest approach, history nevertheless does have the capacity to discuss the concepts of the philosophy that is in play. History obviously should not forego using those concepts and making them do some work; it is also appropriate for history to test them against the facts and new conceptualizations. In other words, in a mutual and fruitful exchange, while philosophy can treat the past as a place in which to find questions and reflections related to thinking about contemporary societies, history should be allowed to examine the way that philosophy problematizes the issues.

### **Which pragmatism?**

With the concept of governmentality, Cohen's subject becomes the practices related to leadership and authority. But he goes beyond that when he observes leaders acting. The shift from practices to action – i.e. from defined behaviour to an ongoing process governed by interactions – is justified by its heuristic utility: “In contrast to merely studying practices, pragmatic curiosity about the tiniest inflections of actions makes it possible for us to see a sources of authority connected neither with titles and structures on the one hand nor with personal characteristics on the other, the grand bipolar guidelines supplied by all the studies of the varieties of leadership” (p. 762). In fact, Cohen's book offers us some very lovely passages in which we see how history can capture an action as it comes to pass, and therefore how important it is to give more attention to pragmatic reflections in history. Cohen's efforts in this direction are completely successful. Nevertheless there are some problems. The first is a matter of vocabulary: except on rare occasions when “practice” and “action” are clearly distinguished, the two words are in general used interchangeably, as if the two things were equivalent. The second problem has to do with the relationship with the social sciences, in which pragmatic thinking, while more established there than in history, has also proved to be fragmented and plural.<sup>5</sup> So when Cohen refers to Bruno Latour's, Lucy Suchman's and Laurent Thévenot's work in his discussion of planning, and Béatrice Fraenkel's in his chapter on Stalin, while they do constitute a methodological configuration that offers various analytical perspectives, the coherence of this configuration is not at all clear. From this arises a third problem: what is the connection between pragmatic sensitivity, which puts action and experience at the centre of the investigation, and the evocation of Foucault, who thought in terms of practices and devices?

### **Practicality, action and normativity**

As was stated above, Cohen's book is organized around two related topics; it very efficiently leads us from an observation of the preoccupation with authority to a description of the acts of leaders. On the analytical level, this raises a question about the relationship between practicality and action. Two positions appear to be juxtaposed. In the first part of the book, Cohen suggests that the actions of leaders follow from principles – such as those promoted by scientific management and Taylorism – and that actions are basically nothing but the actualization of such principles. However, in the second part he shows – particularly with the example of Stalin – that principles of authority and leadership emerge and then take shape in and through the actual commitments of leaders, who can always justify these commitments retrospectively. So there seems to be a hiatus, which raises questions about the status given in this book to the very idea of practicality: is it descriptive (depicting a chain of actions), or is it explanatory (relating conduct to a norm)? Alongside this question about the connection between practicality and action, the problem of normativity is obviously also an

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<sup>5</sup> To get some idea of this, see *Tracés: Revue de Sciences humaines*, “Pragmatismes”, no. 15, 2008/2.

issue. This issue is left unresolved. Cohen does bring it up in the context of the world of the factory, when he examines how instructions are followed: in his position at the side of the norm setters, he tries to understand the effectiveness of their prescriptions. This technique showed their efficacy as well as their limits and therefore the adjustments constantly being made, whether through negotiation or through conflict. However, normativity does not make an appearance as a more general problem, treated as such, so the normative significance of discursive practicality is difficult to measure.

This book is important first of all because of the way in which it approaches authority: not as a substance but as a practice that is situated, material and changing. It is equally important because of the questions it addresses to historical writing, about the project that this writing should adopt insofar as it opens up some hitherto unexplored paths. There are certainly some things that need to be elaborated. Perhaps Cohen will do that in a later work; at any rate, his ability to conduct a discussion at the empirical, methodological and epistemological levels accounts for his great achievement in this book.

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