

Thinking differently about leadership:  
a critical history of the form and formation of leadership

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In the current era, regardless of the problem, leadership is the answer. This way of thinking about leadership appears to be self evident, natural and normal. However this creates and sustains the concerning expectation that leaders can be all-knowing and all-powerful, whilst also rendering followers passive and deficient. This is despite the fact that modern leadership is generally thought to be superior to that of the past, based on science and enlightened thinking. The modern understanding of leadership is seen as the highest state of development in a long and noble history shaped by great thinkers and great leaders. My study seeks to challenge conventional accounts of leadership and its history by means of a Foucauldian critical history.

The study will explore how leadership has been understood in different times, including our own, with a particular focus on identifying both change and continuity in thinking about leadership. It will analyse underlying assumptions, the subjectivities and relationships invoked by different ideas about leadership, and the links between leadership ideas and their social context. It seeks to explain how we have come to understand leadership in the way that we do, and how it has been understood in other times. The overall aim is provoke greater creativity in our thinking about leadership today. This study will challenge conventional accounts of developments in leadership ideas and develop an alternative, historically and critically informed, basis for rethinking leadership.