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Book Review - The Dark Side of Transformational Leadership

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The Dark Side of Transformational Leadership: A Critical Perspective

By Dennis Tourish

Reviewed by Alexandra Stein

New York, NY: Routledge. 2013. ISBN-13: 978-0415564281; ISBN-10: 041556428X (paperback), \$35.03 (Amazon.com). 264 pages.

I have followed Dennis Tourish's work over many years, since the 1998 publication of his article, "Ideological Intransigence, Democratic Centralism and Cultism: A Case Study From the Political Left," in the *Cultic Studies Journal*. That article offered an insightful analysis of the Communist Workers International, highlighting the cultic characteristics of the group. Tourish has been one of a small handful of scholars to study and describe political cults, along with Tim Wohlforth (coauthor with Tourish of the book *Political Cults Right and Left*), Janja Lalich, Masoud Banisadr, and myself. Later work by Tourish includes an important article on transformational leadership, which looked at what he termed corporate cultism in the workplace. This article discussed the perils of charismatic, transformational leadership, showing how this type of leadership promotes cultic group dynamics. Tourish usefully described a model of transactional leadership that acknowledges the independent interests and power differences of corporate leadership and workers, opposite to that which requires unquestioning obedience and buy-in to the transformative "vision" of the charismatic leader, a requirement familiar to any with experience of cults.

This latest book pulls together in one volume these articles (revised and updated) and others, bringing Tourish's many years of research on transformational leadership in both cults and the workplace under one heading, and shedding much-needed light on this form of manipulative and coercive leadership. In *The Dark Side of Transformational Leadership*, Tourish applies a variety of social psychological theories to analyze how and why the coercive leadership style takes hold. He uses a range of case studies along with his own research to illustrate the very real and current problems of transformational leadership.

Tourish embeds his wide-ranging knowledge of social psychology in each chapter, together with a comprehensive range of sources that will lead interested students to a wealth of both classic and contemporary literature. The book is structured as a textbook, with useful discussion questions listed at the end of each chapter.

This book will be a tremendous resource, particularly for advanced students of social psychology, for delving into the perils of charismatic and authoritarian leadership. For cultic studies scholars, the chapters on corporate cultism, spirituality in the workplace, and the analyses of leadership in the Communist Workers International, and of Jonestown and Heaven's Gate, will be of particular interest.

Tourish proposes that future research on leadership refocus on the crucial question of follower agency and "the productive potential of dissent" (p. 215). As he says,

Following the wrong kind of leader can get you killed. A spirit of independence, self-awareness and willingness to dissent are among the traits that leaders such as Jim Jones and Marshall Applewhite attempt to eradicate, as one would attack an outbreak of pestilence in a city. But it is precisely these qualities that we need if we are to ensure a healthy relationship between leaders and followers. The alternative is a subordination to the will of others that may well end in catastrophe. (p. 176)

I recommend *The Dark Side of Transformational Leadership* as a very useful educational resource to teach students how to conceptualize, identify, and resist unhealthy, exploitative, and dangerous forms of leadership.

International Journal of Cultic Studies ■ Vol. x, 2012

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