Serving the need of people: the case for servant leadership against populism

Milton Sousa & Dirk van Dierendonck

To cite this article: Milton Sousa & Dirk van Dierendonck (2021) Serving the need of people: the case for servant leadership against populism, Journal of Change Management, 21:2, 222-241, DOI: 10.1080/14697017.2021.1917494

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14697017.2021.1917494

Published online: 28 Apr 2021.
Serving the need of people: the case for servant leadership against populism

Milton Sousa a and Dirk van Dierendonck b

aNova School for Business and Economics, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Milton de Sousa; bRotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University

ABSTRACT
This article provides a contrasting perspective between populist and servant leadership. We propose four key differences based on distinct views on people centricity, the role of the people in the leadership process, the problem solving approach and the preferred leader role. Given the key function that meaning plays in leadership discourse, in particular during times of uncertainty and change, we further propose that populist leaders make use of simplistic meaning-making systems that emphasize monistic and over-simplified views around polarized options, while servant leaders in contrast use complex meaning-making systems that emphasize pluralist and reconciled views towards shared problem solving. Considering that populist leadership often makes references to serving, humility and self-sacrifice in defence of the people, we find it important to distinguish it from servant leadership. We advance, in fact, that servant leaders can function as an antidote to populism, being a genuine people centred approach with a reconciliatory and pluralist view and an adequate (but surely not perfect) response to many of our societal problems.

MAD statement
Populism is on the rise, even in well-established democracies. Driven by galloping inequality, technological disruption, growing migration, and a resurge of nationalistic sentiments, populist leaders seem to strive on an overall feeling of insecurity and resentment. The recent COVID19 crisis has contributed to this trend. Populist speeches are often infused with an apparent motivation to serve the people and leader self-sacrifice. In this article we want to dispel this apparent similarity with servant leadership and expose the contrast between the two. By doing that we aim to contribute to a better understanding of servant and populist leadership processes and to enable people to distinguish more easily between the two in real life contexts.

KEYWORDS
Servant leadership; populist leadership; people centricity; meaning; pluralism; paradox

Introduction
Leadership and our understanding of it is being challenged as our world becomes increasingly complex and interconnected. One such change is the rapid expansion of
populism, even in well-established democracies. The democracy-index of The Economist (https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index) reports that in less than ten years, from 2012 onwards, the percentage of the world population living in a full democracy has declined from 12.3 to 4.5% in 2018. In 2019, only 22 countries counted as a full democracy, 15 of which in Western Europe. In fact, we might be assisting to Plato’s nightmare unfolding before our eyes as populism gains terrain and democracy is misused by people who, after gaining power through the democratic process, emerge as autocrats on the shoulders of oligarchies. We see throughout the world leaders with aspirational nationalist agendas hijacking institutions that were put into place to provide checks and balances. In fact, one may even wonder if modern democracy will be able to withstand this widespread attack.

To this end, our guess is that only those democracies with strong institutions and cultural ethos of personal freedom will be able resist (Dahrendorf, 1997). The Economist democracy index does show that this is possible given that, as an example, in 2019, France, Portugal and Chile progressed from flawed democracy to full democracy (https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index). It is against this background that we want to give attention to leadership with a moral compass for freedom and care for people. We would like to add to the current discourse on the trend towards populism by discussing how a positive and constructive leadership could look like in contrast. A model of leadership that builds on the real people needs that populist leadership addresses, but does so in a way that strengthens (instead of weakening) democracy and institutions in society at large. This model is servant leadership. We will describe how servant leadership can help reverse this downward trend, and counterbalance the movement towards populist leadership by addressing similar societal needs that have given rise to populism but in a more ethical way.

Our article follows Rost’s (1993) appeal to explore more the processes involved in leadership rather than just peripheral (e.g. traits, or behavioural styles) or content themes (e.g. knowledge or expertise of a certain domain). As such, in this article we take a more dynamic approach towards leadership as an ‘influence relationship between leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes’ (Rost, 1993, p. 102). This in our view helps us understand better both populist and servant leadership, and ultimately to contrast the two.

At first glance, one might be tempted to consider populist leadership somehow as being servant. After all, isn’t the populist leader mainly concerned about the people? We often see populist leaders often making references to serving, humility and self-sacrifice in defence of the people. However, a closer look shows that servant leadership clearly is of a different kind. In fact, we propose that servant leaders can function as an antidote to populism, being a genuine people centred approach with a reconciliatory and pluralist view and an adequate (but surely not perfect) response to many of our societal problems. As such, understanding the difference between the populist and the servant is ‘terribly important to know’, as Robert Greenleaf, put it: ‘How does one tell a truly giving, enriching servant from the neutral person or the one whose net influence is to take away from or diminish other people?’ (2002, p. 57). Before exploring their differences in detail, we notice that servant leadership seems closer to the notions defended by Rost (1993), who stated that leadership is and should be a noncoercive relationship characterized by seeking mutual beneficial outcomes, where others are encouraged to
become leaders in their own right. Populist leadership, on the other hand, most often seems to involve the use of authority where the leader controls via rewards and punishment to achieve short-term gains without a real regard for empowering and developing others. We will explore such issues.

We are very much aware that the adoption of servant leadership poses various challenges. For organizations, political movements and public institutions wanting to change their leadership culture into this direction, several questions arise. For example, given the central place of humility for servant leaders, how can they rise to the top and navigate throughout the meanders of political life dominated by populists, demagogues and opportunists without losing their moral compass? How can we distinguish servant leaders from populists, who often use infused discourses on serving their people? Such questions cannot be fully answered in one single article. We choose here to focus on providing the core differences between populist and servant leaders. In particular, we are interested in exposing how their focus and behaviours differ in dealing with the tensions and dichotomies every leader faces so that we can more easily identify one and the other.

By giving the reader a framework that helps distinguishing the populist from the servant leader, we want to encourage current and future leaders to choose the latter road when addressing the needs of their people. Our ultimate intent is understanding how true servant leaders could rise in the ranks to positions of power, hereby limiting populists from potentially hijacking our democratic institutions. By deconstructing the language of populists, we aim to create room for what we call strong ‘democratic servocracies’ in which diversity and equality are equally celebrated and integrated.

Our article is structured as follows. Despite its vagueness and elusiveness as a construct, we present some traits that from our analysis seem central to the idea of populism. After a brief introduction into the concept and historical development of servant leadership, we then establish the main distinctive aspects between populist and servant leadership based on the characteristics outlined before. Finally, we further explore this differentiation through a meaning perspective. We find this important because people look for references and a sense of direction that provides meaning through coherence and purpose (Martela & Steger, 2016), especially in a context of societal and organizational change (van Dierendonck & Sousa, 2016). As such, leaders play an important role in providing meaning as they create stories of identity or narratives ‘that help individuals think about and feel who they are, where they come from, and where they are headed’ (Gardner, 1995, p. 43). This can be instrumental in further understanding the differences between populist and servant leaders, and resonates with Rost (1993) emphasis on process rather than peripheral or content concerns.

The Traits of Populism

The term populism has been increasingly used to refer to various political phenomena, of which little consensus can be formed (Brett, 2013; Canovan, 1982; Laclau, 2005). Originally thought of as emerging from the agrarian People’s Party in the USA in the late nineteenth century, in recent times it has been associated with such disparate movements as Podemos in Spain; Syriza in Greece; the far-right movement of Le Pen in France and various others in Europe; Chavez and Maduro’s revolutionary socialism in Venezuela; or
the Tea-Party of Sarah Palin in the US. Populism therefore, does not seem to neatly fall into any category of the political spectrum but to be integral to today’s emphasis on identity politics (Fukuyama, 2018). One should note that, while populism seems to carry a negative connotation in the current day political arena (even populists refuse to identify themselves as such), some scholars defend a more neutral, even positive view of the term. Ernesto Laclau (2005) offers an idea of populism as an ‘empty signifier’ that functions as a vehicle of emancipation of excluded segments of the population. Such view, shared mainly by left-wing populist movements such as Podemos and Syriza (McKean, 2016), can be seen as a form of ‘civic agency’ to empower the people (Boyte, 2012).

Canovan (1982) attempted to develop a more systematic perspective of the field including two large categories: agrarian populism (farmers’ radicalism, peasant movements, intellectual agrarian socialism) and political populism (populist dictatorship, populist democracy, reactionary populism, and politician’s populism). As noted by Canovan (1982, 2004) herself and some critics (e.g. Laclau, 2005), such distinctions inevitably overlap and can hardly be considered as a typology. Our goal however is not to converge on a single definition of populism but instead, while recognizing the concrete and real effect of a broad populist trend, understand how it can be conceptually distinct from servant leadership. As such, our analysis of extant literature reveals some traits that seem common to the various expressions of populism, regardless if one considers it a thin-ideological construct (Mudde, 2004; Stanley, 2008), an empty signifier of emancipation of the people (Laclau, 2005) or a political strategy instrument (Hawkins et al., 2018).

The Central Role of the People

Common to the various approaches to populism, is the centrality of the people. The main thought behind the term is in fact that the people hold the necessary wisdom and common sense to rule and guide political action. The people are in themselves virtuous (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). While such ideas seem close to the idea of democracy at large, under populism the people do not surrender their power to the veto of political domination, as suggested by Popper (1988), but instead take an active and direct sovereign role in governing a shared destiny (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). The general will of the people is to be respected and foundational to any political process (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). As such, populists often defend direct democracy over representative democracy as a better instrument of popular power (Akkerman, 2003; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Stanley, 2008). We observe that whether populist leaders actually intend to distribute their power or instead purely see this as an instrument of self-affirmation and gaining power is not always obvious.

Populist movements integrate the idea of the people in different ways. Some affirm a more exclusionary view, emphasizing the separation between the authentic and genuine in-group from the alien and strange out-group. Others seem to advocate a more inclusive view in which minorities are pulled from the fringes into the core of the in-group, to involve them in the deliberative governance process (Hawkins et al., 2018; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). These distinctions can be instrumental in explaining the differences in the idea of ‘the people’ between right and left wing populism. The latter in the past portrayed itself as the voice of the proletariat and today seems to emphasize the respect for the identity of minorities (migrants, refugees, homosexuals, etc.),
hence inclusionary. The former defines the people as a form of pure and authentic expression of often nationalistic and even racial ideals, hence exclusionary (Mudde, 2004). In either case, the division into these two forms of populism may be elusive since any form of populism implicitly excludes others because, as we will see ahead, this is at the core of the concept (Hawkins et al., 2018; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013).

**The People Ideology**

While some defend that not all populism is exclusionary, and in its essence it may not need to be; the fact is that its expression in our society carries a natural confrontational tension as it always opposes itself to the elites. Populism is therefore in essence at its core an expression of conflict between (at least) two factions in society, as abstract and diffused as they might be. This anti-elite aspect of populism was originally captured by Edward Shils (1954). According to some scholars from the ideational camp (Abi-Hassan, 2017; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017) populism is in essence about a shared ideal of the people fighting the oppression of the elites, be they economic, political, academic, political or in the media (whichever better serves the interest and ideology of the populist on a given time and context). As such, populism can be seen as a thin-ideology, as opposed to full ideologies such as communism, socialism, fascism or liberalism, that can be equally applicable in multiple political contexts and by leaders in a wide range of the political spectrum (Mudde, 2004; Stanley, 2008; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Hawkins et al., 2018; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). There is therefore a natural antagonizing tension between the people and the oppressive elites (de la Torre, 2017). Even in the less critical view of Laclau (2005), populism is seen as a naturally antagonistic process that allows the emancipation of oppressed groups articulated around shared demands.

Nevertheless, populism seems to strive more often than not on the victimization of the people, appealing to moral foundations like loyalty, respect and sanctity, which, as introduced by Graham and colleagues (2013), often go unconscious and define our identities, principles and values. This victimization is an important mechanism through which populism gains its energy. Populism may give rise to resentment and anger, which often decline into revolt and antagonism, and might explain why it grows under times of crises (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). As referred by Mudde (2004), there is an implicit process of vindication against an elite that somehow oppresses the people’s natural rights to expression and/or socio-economic affirmation, typical of identity politics (Fukuyama, 2018). Such vindication can be seen from a conservative perspective (to preserve or even impose traditional values and norms threatened by foreign influence), often used by right-wing populists, or from a progressive perspective (to defend the inclusion of unheard voices and minorities against entrenched elites), often used by left-wing populists. In either case the populist victimizes the people (or a specific segment of it) as an instrument of power against an oppressive force. When populists gain significant power (and become de facto an integral part the elite), the victimization continues, but this time by blaming others often to hide their own shortcomings in instilling the promised vindication (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). For example, Nigel Farage and other Brexiteers blame the boycotting of an external power like the European Commission; Nicolas Maduro blames economic interests and American colonialism. In doing so,
populists insulate themselves from criticism from those they try to defend, symbolically ‘pretending’ to still belong to the people while in fact being part of the (new) elite. Such paradox might be particularly difficult for left populists as shown by the cases of Alexis Tsipras, who was criticized for putting his children in an expensive private school (‘Tsipras exploits’, 2015), and Pablo Iglesias who acquired an expensive villa in the outskirts of Madrid (Torres, 2018), attesting the difficulties of holding the idea of populist politics as an anti-elite fight when the populist gains power, becoming this way part of the elite.

Simplification and Polarization of Tensions in Political Discourse

Laclau (2005) defended that simplification, often associated with populist political discourse, was in fact an integral part of any political process, as he expressed: ‘populism, it is argued, ‘simplifies the political space, replacing a complex set of differences and determinations by a stark dichotomy whose two poles are necessarily imprecise ... however, the trademark of populism would be just the special emphasis of a political logic which, as such, is a necessary ingredient of politics tout court’ (p. 18). Such is also the view of more ideational scholars that do recognize the appeal to the people and the corresponding simplification of reality in all forms of political discourse, especially in times of elections (Mudde, 2004; Stanley, 2008). So it seems indeed obvious that any form of political discourse that tries to reach wide sections of the population needs some form of simplification. However, we argue that the unique simplification inherent to populism is one that feeds on and amplifies the tensions it lives from. As defended by Mudde (2004) there is a moral stand of populism that is built on the dichotomy between the oppressed and the evil elites that leaves little room for compromise and reconciliation. The populist discourse is therefore simplistic, not so much because of its use of basic language and oversimplification of reality to create a sense of proximity with the people (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), but because it tends to prevent any form of reconciliation, simplifying the decision space into a binary set of options. It is us or them. Contrary to the original ideas of Marxist socialism, the end game of populism seems not to be the elevation of the people as equals but instead the elimination of the immoral elites. Populism is a monistic view that sets itself apart from elitism, and uses that contrast to feed its revolutionary power. It is therefore simplistic as it polarizes the decision space. Populism and elitism (Stanley, 2008) are similar in as far as they take a monistic view that one camp is better equipped than the other to care of governing collective interests (Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). The alternative to any of these simplistic and polarized views, be it populism or elitism, would be pluralism (Mudde, 2004; Stanley, 2008) which in contrast recognizes the complexity of social life and tries to integrate that same complexity in the governance and deliberative instruments of society by means of compromise and reconciliation (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). In here we would like to highlight the possibility of populism being instrumentally used by elitists to gain power, using it as an opportunistic instrumental mechanism. This could be particularly the case in more extreme ideologies. In other words, a fascist or communist could use populism to conquer power in a democracy and then dissimulate it such as to install an elitist government. On the other hand, more moderate politicians that do believe in some form of pluralism, might see populism as a way of breaking the
system, oversimplifying choices and instilling a more revolutionary process in the hope of reaching that end idealized state. The latter is probably the view defended by Laclau (2005) and his followers.

**The Personification of the People in the Figure of the Leader**

Populist movements are frequently, if not always, originated by a strong charismatic leader (Nai & Martinez i Coma, 2019; Tormey, 2018), most often a man (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). They portray themselves as humble representatives of the people and their sufferings, sacrificing themselves for the mission of vindicating the oppressed (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). Quite frequently, populist leaders present themselves as the only possible vehicle to purge the people from the oppressive power of the elites, demanding absolute loyalty (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). For an independent observer this forms in itself a contradiction, as populist leaders claim power to the people while at the same time concentrate all power on themselves. Populist leaders might see this instead as a legitimate part of the political process (in good Machiavellian fashion) or perhaps, they honestly believe, eventually through some form of divine destiny, to be the sole representation of the people. This could help explain how their narratives can be so passionate and full of determination, which can have a magnetizing effect in leadership narratives, often associated with charismatic leadership (Conger, 1989). The need to affirm oneself as the representative of the people can involve even some form of denial of belonging to the elites (Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

The personification of populist leaders can be understood from the lenses of giving and taking attitudes. Adam Grant (2013) suggests that takers tend to speak highly of their own achievements, at the expense of the role of others, in a striking contrast to givers that tend to give more credit to their teams and even mere luck. Populist leaders seem to behave like takers that emphasize the people, but at the same time like to take personal credit for their results in liberating them. A good example of this is how some populist leaders associate their movement to their own names, like Peronism by Juan Perón. In summary, in populist discourse, the centrality of the other seems quite often to be not the end but instead more of an instrument to affirm the self. Yet, it is also clear that some populist leaders do truly mean it when they claim power to the people and that they are prepared to let go of their power if needed. Regretfully, the movement itself might have a hubris effect (Picone et al., 2014) and what started as well-intended mission to liberate the people becomes a political and personalized project of power that sustains itself and inhibits the populist leader from letting go of the power gained. Power can have an inebriating effect, tolling judgement and inflating the self at the expense of being able to take the perspective of others (Galinsky et al., 2006) and may lead to undervaluing and objectifying others (Gruenfeld et al., 2008).

This brings us to servant leadership that offers a different view on leadership and on serving the needs of people.

**How Servant Leadership Serves the Needs of the People**

Since the publication of Robert Greenleaf’s original work in the 1970s, the last 40 years observed an exponential growth in scholarly articles on the concept of servant leadership.
As of today (July 12, 2020), a simple Google search on the term ‘servant leadership’ retrieves 48,500,000 references. A recent review study (Eva et al., 2019) found 270 articles published in 122 academic journals from 1998 to 2018. The field has become vast with a panoply of models, instruments, case studies, and empirical data with apparent evidence of the effect of servant leaders on motivation, performance and organizational behavior (Eva et al., 2019; van Dierendonck, 2011).

At the basis of most publications in the last 40 years, lies a concept of serving laid down by Robert Greenleaf, expressed in a sentence that makes headway in almost every single publication about servant leadership. This one, in that respect, is no different. Greenleaf (2002, p. 7) introduces the concept of serving this way: ‘The servant-leader is servant first … It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions … The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature’. Greenleaf (2002, p. 7) continues by providing the ultimate test of the servant leader: ‘The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant – first to make sure that other people’s needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer is: Do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wise, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And what effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or at least not be further deprived?’.

It may be clear that, according to Greenleaf, what differentiates servant leadership from other perspectives on leadership is its foundational concern for the betterment and growth of others. Leadership is not an end on its own but instead the vehicle through which people on power positions try to improve the life of those they work with and for. In that sense, the order of the term servant leadership is not indifferent. For Greenleaf, the archetypical servant-leader is at his or her core a servant first and only then a leader. Implicit in Greenleaf’s proposal is an ultimate concern for the individual. A closeness and empathy that plays out essentially in the one to one relationship between leader and follower. In essence, the selflessness that characterizes the servant leader in their relations with people is one of empathy and healing (Spears, 1995), servanthood (Liden et al., 2008), and compassionate love (van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). This individualized concern for others has been advanced as a distinctive feature of servant leadership when compared for example with transformational leadership, where the leader’s focus is put more on the vision for the organization rather than the wellbeing and personal growth of the individual employees (Stone et al., 2004; van Dierendonck et al., 2014). Concurrently, Eva et al. (2019, p. 114) suggested, based on their extensive review, the following definition: ‘Servant leadership is an (1) other-oriented approach to leadership (2) manifested through one-on-one prioritizing of follower individual needs and interests, (3) and outward reorienting of their concern for self towards concern for others within the organization and the larger community.’

The original ideas of Robert Greenleaf colored further elaborations by later scholars and helped us gain a better and deeper understanding of servant leadership. Larry Spears (1998) pioneered that process and proposed 10 essential traits of the servant leader, namely: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, philosophy,
conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. These traits contain a mix of attitudes, values and skills necessary to lead from an initial motivation to serve. Some are broadly defined skills (e.g. listening, persuasion, conceptualization or foresight) while the others emphasize again a focus on helping the individual. Spears (1998) advances that empathy involves accepting and understanding others, which is supported on a commitment to their personal, professional and spiritual growth. Healing is based on the idea of wholeness and a belief in the human potential of every individual. Even those aspects that might involve some form of identification with a social group, are in fact constructed around the idea of committing to helping the individual (stewardship) and building communities among individuals working within their institutions, which can give the healing love essential for health (Spears, 1998). The community exists as a network that supports the individual and not as having value on its own through a form of social identification.

Soon after Larry Spears’ work, Laub (1999) proposed the very first psychometric instrument to estimate a leader’s servant leadership behavior through the eyes and experiences of the people in the organization. Not surprising, the focus in this instrument on the individual is most prominent, most notably on valuing and developing people, as well as in sharing leadership with them. For Laub, the community aspect, like for Larry Spears, is based on developing collaborative and personal relationships rather than committing to some form of abstract group identity.

As the study of servant leadership continued, its key dimensions remained somehow unclear (van Dierendonck, 2011). After Laub (1999), various other instruments were developed to capture the characteristics of servant leaders including Wong and Davey (2007), Barbuto and Wheeler (2006), Dennis and Bocarnea (2005), Liden et al. (2008), Sendjaya et al. (2008) and van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011). Eva et al. (2019) reported no less than 16 measures. In an effort to consolidate the field and inform his own psychometric instrument development, van Dierendonck (2011) conducted an overview of existing measures and condensed the underlying concepts into six broadly defined dimensions that directly tie into Eva’s (2019) definition: (a) empowering and developing people, (b) humility, (c) authenticity, (d) interpersonal acceptance, (e) providing direction and (f) stewardship. This review of archetypal dimensions confirms the individual focus of servant leaders across various measures, whether they translate into direct one-to-one individual guidance and support of people or the building of communities and setting direction with the goal of further supporting the individuals within the organizations and those affected by it.

**Contrasting Populist and Servant Leadership**

Having provided an overview of the servant leadership concept and its historical development, we will now present a few observations comparing it to the populist traits described before.

**People Centricity as a Celebration of Unique Individual Potential**

For the servant leader ‘the people’ is a composition of individuals all equally entitled to growth and self-development, not an abstract collective. It is in fact an affirmation of
the diversity that characterizes our modern organizations and society. It recognizes the unique potential in everyone, whereas within populist leadership, the identity of people is treated in an abstract way, more as a group consciousness. Servant leaders are still mindful of how groups of collective interest have shared demands, as in populism (Laclau, 2005), and they do fight to defend those. However, the servant leader works in a way such that ‘people of colour and the disadvantaged and the alienated have found their way and can freely choose that which they find useful from what the non-privileged have stored away’ (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 48). In doing that, the servant leader will ‘wait and listen until the less favoured find their own enlightenment, then define their needs in their own way, and finally, state clearly how they want to be served’ (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 49). As such, the servant leadership concept of Robert Greenleaf resonates with the ideas of Paulo Freire (2018) who proposes a pedagogy that liberates and humanizes the oppressed to reach their potential, not to condition and manipulate them to follow a set of abstract ideals around identity, race or religion.

This individualized attention to people, in contrast to the more generalized and abstract treatment of the populist leadership, entails that servant leadership promotes the personal growth of people as a pathway toward their living and expressing their full potential, to flourish and become who they were meant to be. Compared to most other leadership theories, servant leadership uniquely prioritizes followers’ needs above those of an organization, a country and especially above those of the leaders themselves (Eva et al., 2019; Giolito et al., 2020). It is a personalized approach to leadership (Whetstone, 2002) that takes as starting point the person, understands that human nature combines the subjective experience of oneself with a need for autonomy and human dignity. At the same time it places persons within communities and emphasizes solidarity, all elements also described by Rost (1993) as belonging to post-industrial leadership. van Dierendonck and Patterson (2015) describe this as a pathway that starts with compassionate love, which is about doing good with a clear motivation of concern for people under one’s care through acts of kindness. This love gives rise to working with virtuous traits such as humility, gratitude, forgiveness and altruism and servant leadership behaviour. Together, it will encourage people’s flourishing, a sense of community and camaraderie, leading to a sense of meaningfulness.

**People as Accountable Individuals, not as Innocent Victims**

Because the ultimate goal of the servant leader is to empower those he or she serves to find their own path and inspire them to become themselves servant, there is no victimization but instead a strong focus on accountability for one’s own growth and development (van Dierendonck, 2011). This clearly contrasts with the way modern-day populist leaders seem to approach the needs of their followers, oftentimes emphasizing their victimization by the institutions.

When asking himself about ‘Who is the enemy?’ Robert Greenleaf (2002) affirms: ‘Not evil people. Not stupid people. Not apathetic people. Not the “system”. Not the protesters, the disrupters, the revolutionaries, the reactionaries’ as these will always exist, but instead the ‘fuzzy thinking on the part of good, intelligent, vital people, and their failure to lead, and follow servants as leaders’ (p. 58). In other words, Greenleaf proposes that it is in ourselves that we need to search for answers and to take responsibility for our own actions and
our own liberation. The ‘problem is residing in here and not out there’ (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 59). One should be aware of the oppressors but at the same time accept them and take ownership for own responses, as leaders and followers. To this end, genuine humility, as an awareness of our own shortcomings and flaws, is essential (Greenleaf, 2002; van Dierendonck, 2011).

A related way to gain a deeper understanding of how servant leadership works is to link it to wisdom, which is generally conceived as instilling a way of life that has a positive influence on oneself, others and the society at large (van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). The wisdom contained in servant leadership brings the ability to deal with the uncertainties that organisations, communities and the country at large face. It helps with addressing questions on meaningfulness. This, again, in contrast with the populist leader, who has a tendency to oversimplify complex issues. A research program by Baltes and colleagues (2002) confirmed that wisdom encourages leading a flourishing life for oneself and for the ones in one’s care, with an explicit understanding of the complexity of viewing and working for the good of the whole.

**Pluralism and Reconciliation Involving Stakeholders, not Simplification and Polarization**

Common to various notions of servant leadership is the idea of community building, healing, conceptualization, humility and listening, such as to construct solutions that accommodate for different views and perspectives (Liden et al., 2014; Spears, 2010 van Dierendonck, 2011). As such, where populist leadership has the tendency to take a monistic view in which the oppressed need to take over government by throwing away the elites, servant leadership follows a pluralist path towards creative and shared problem solving, gradually integrating tensions and dichotomies. This is similar to the idea of the paradoxical dynamic equilibrium proposed by Smith and Lewis (2011). Forgiveness is described in this respect as a central and unique servant leadership virtue when it comes to reconciliation and overcoming tensions (Verdoold & Van Dierendonck, 2010). Forgiveness places an essential role in repairing damaged relationships and can turn a downward spiral into an upward spiral. It takes courage to refrain from allowing injured feelings to influence one’s behaviour, not going after an offender, even when a person believes it is morally justifiable. Servant leaders play a key role here by building an open, non-invasive culture focused on constant dialogue. Forgiveness and humility are intertwined given that both ask a retreating into the background of the leader, making one’s own needs and feelings secondary to that what the overall situation calls for.

In addition, the emphasis seems to be more on an individual approach rather than mass movement or revolts, more typical of populist initiatives. While holding people accountable, the servant leader is respectful often ‘persuading people one by one with gentle non-judgemental argument that a wrong should be righted by individual voluntary action’ (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 43). To sustain this idea, Robert Greenleaf makes use of the example of John Woolman that travelled throughout North America in the eighteenth century reasoning with fellow Quakers one by one to stop slavery: ‘He didn’t raise a big storm about it or start a protest movement. His method was one of gentle but clear and persistent persuasion’ (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 43). Eventually Woolman was successful and
the Quakers stopped slavery one hundred years before the American Civil War. It seems therefore that, in contrast to the populist leadership ideas presented before, the fight of the servant leader is done in a strikingly different way. Respect, non-judgment, diplomacy, creativity and gentle persuasion seem to be the main influencing tools of the servant leader, and not appeals to violent protest or mass revolt. It may be clear from this description, that servant leadership is most in accordance to Rost’s (1993) description of the 21st century leader.

**Authentic Humility and Empowerment, not the Leader as Personification of the People**

Perhaps the most distinguishing dimensions of servant leadership when compared to other models, are the ones of humility and standing-back such as to recognize one’s shortcomings, trust the potential of others and to give credit to followers (Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2017; van Dierendonck, 2011). Based on this attitude, a servant leader genuinely empowers others to take initiative (van Dierendonck, 2011). As mentioned before, leaders with a giving orientation (Grant, 2013) rarely claim credit for success and gladly give stage and the spotlight to their followers. This humble self-effacing attitude cannot be confused with low self-esteem (Owens & Hekman, 2012; Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2017; Rego et al., 2017). Often, quite the opposite. In contrast to populists, it is unlikely that servant leaders would portray themselves as unique and leading representatives of the people. In fact, just like saying that one is humble might be a sign of arrogance, claiming to be a servant leader might paradoxically be indicating its opposite (i.e. a self-centred populist). This self-effacing approach is again highlighted by Robert Greenleaf (2002, p. 47) through the example of Nikolai Grundtvig, who inspired the movement of the Folk High School in early nineteenth century Denmark: ‘Grundtvig himself did not found or operate a Folk High School … What he gave was his love for the peasants, his clear vision of what they must do for themselves … and his passionately communicated faith in the worth of these people and their strength to raise themselves’.

What is noteworthy in this respect is the power of listening that is an integral part of servant leadership. Real listening to what another person has to say, what their needs are and what insights they can bring to a situation. Schein (2013, p. 2) calls this humble inquiry: ‘the fine art of drawing someone out, of asking questions to which you do not already know the answer, of building a relationship based on curiosity, and interest in the other person.’ A conversation based on humble inquiry signifies a real respect for the other person, and openness to wanting to understand them. It takes an organization away from the do-and-tell culture. It ties in with enhancing the self-determination needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness (Van Quaquebeke & Felps, 2018). A basic assumption here is that good relationships are key for long-term success. Open communication facilitates finding the best solutions and way forward within the current VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) world.

In the following table, we provide a summary of the preceding analysis that contrasts how populist and servant leaders seem to differ when it comes to the four themes we explored, namely: (i) the way they make people central, (ii) the role they envision for the people, (iii) the approach they use to solve problems and (iv) their preferred role in the process.
Weaving it all Together: how Populist and Servant Leaders Attribute Meaning to Their Leadership

Leaders play an essential role in sense-making and sense-giving (Weick, 1995), creating meaningful stories or narratives (Gardner, 1995) that instil mutual influence between them and followers. Providing meaning through sense-making and sense-giving is likely even more important in times of change (van Dierendonck & Sousa, 2016), in which populists often strive. As such, to weave together the distinctions provided in Table 1 and provide a deeper understanding of the different mechanisms through which populist leadership and servant leadership integrate people towards a common cause and form their own role as leaders, we use the lens of meaning. As previously noted, this emphasizes the process perspective on leadership as suggested by Rost (1993).

The way we attribute meaning to our live has been subject to much theoretical and empirical research (Baumeister, 1991). Meaning helps to integrate past, present and future (Baumeister et al., 2013) forming this way an important factor in guiding human behavior (Baumeister, 1991; Frankl, 1985). As such, meaning can be seen as process of ensuring that our life story makes sense (Giddens, 1991; McAdams, 1985; Sarbin, 1986; Singer, 2004) through a life narrative: ‘people make sense of their lives by creating life stories. People use narratives to try to derive some measure of unity and purpose out of what may otherwise seem to be an incomprehensible array of life events and experiences’ (Bauer et al., 2008, p. 84).

Based on Howard Gardner’s (1995) assertions that stories play a central role in how leaders make sense of themselves and in others, McAdams (2014) further explores, for example, the narrative of redemption in explaining the leadership of Barack Obama and George W. Bush and their ascension to power. Narratives can therefore contribute towards safeguarding coherence and defining purpose, which form two important attributes of a meaningful life (Martela & Steger, 2016) and leadership behaviour.

Underlying the importance of narratives is this need for coherence which can be interpreted as an act of sense-making (Weick, 1995), in which people continuously make sense of their context, enact upon that context and build mental maps to help them make sense of the world. To ensure coherence people can either rationalize reality to confirm their

Table 1. A summary of the populist and servant leader in contrast.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contrasting themes</th>
<th>Populist leader</th>
<th>Servant leader</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People centricity</td>
<td>The people are an abstract collective blob representing a shared demand, often built around aspects of fairness and/or identity</td>
<td>The people is formed by concrete individuals with their own unique needs despite the shared demands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People role</td>
<td>People are victims to be protected from the oppressing elites. As such they should revolt and eliminate the elites.</td>
<td>People are capable of their own liberation and should be themselves accountable for that. The elites are an equal part of the whole system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving approach</td>
<td>The world is over-simplified and solutions are polarized into opposing options. It is us (the people) or them (the elites).</td>
<td>The world is complex and solutions need to be reached through dialogue and paradoxical dynamic equilibrium between all stakeholders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferred leader role</td>
<td>Leaders takes full ownership to lead a collective revolt through their vision. The movement is personalized by the leader.</td>
<td>Leaders prefer to inspire ownership for change one by one through listening and gentle persuasion. The leader does not take credit for the change.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
maps, or adjust their maps to better reflect reality. In either case, human beings need to safeguard coherence. Martela and Steger (2016) advance that the need for coherence might work as a defense mechanism against uncertainty and therefore as a way to increase our chances of survival. In the case of purpose, meaning becomes an act of connecting past, present and future through some form of future oriented personal goal. As such, purpose is both a cognitive and an emotional process (Martela & Steger, 2016) in which one commits to something that is emotionally relevant. These two aspects of coherence and purpose are central to understand how leaders, be them populist or servant, attribute meaning to their narratives.

On a different but related note, Sosik (2000) further elaborated on the role of meaning in explaining charismatic leadership, which can be a useful perspective to understand populism. Conger (1989, p. 92) suggested charismatic leaders create meaning by interpreting reality such as to ‘offer us images of the future that are irresistible’. Based on Hermans (1998) valuation theory, Sosik (2000) further proposes that the two motives of self-glorification (S-motive) and self-transcendence (O-motive) could help distinguish between personalized charismatic leaders and socialized charismatic leaders. The former ensures meaning by ‘protecting, maintaining and aggrandizing one’s self-esteem … consistent with self-aggrandizing/narcissistic orientations of destructive charismatic leaders’ (Sosik, 2000, p. 63). In contrast, the socialized charismatic leader ‘provides meaning through the longing for contact and union with others’ based on ‘an egalitarian, self-transcendent, and empowering personality’ (Sosik, 2000, p. 63). This perspective is consistent with the model proposed by Rosso et al. (2010) in which meaning can be created through the intersection between agency vs communion action and self vs other motives. Sosik (2000) further highlights that many personalized charismatic leaders have skills that ‘allow them to manage the impressions they make on others’ (p.63), creating a false image of socialized charismatic leaders driven by an apparent concern for others. While one might debate whether servant leaders are charismatic or not (given their self-effacing and humble nature), one can establish interesting parallels here to further separate servant leadership from populist leadership. An important idea suggested by Sosik (2000), based on constructive-development theories (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987), is that personalized charismatic leaders might have simple (self-centred) meaning making systems, while socialized charismatic leaders might operate in complex (self-transcendent) meaning-making systems that promote higher levels of perspective-taking.

Following from these considerations, we propose that the meaning-making system of populist leadership is self-centred and promotes a more simplistic view of reality that tends to polarize and reduce the decision making space between opposing and irreconcilable choices. We prefer the word simplistic over simple. As Eisenhardt and Sull (2001) explain, simple solutions can be critical to address complex problems, but they do so by acknowledging complexity and taking advantage of leverage points to expand the field of possibilities and stimulating self-organization. Simplistic solutions on the other hand deny complexity and in doing that fail to address the systemic dimension of social problems. As such, in taking this simplistic approach, populist leaders try to guarantee coherence by over-simplifying reality around a protected core of values, victimizing the oppressed and creating an enemy in the elites that explains our problems while reducing the mission to entrusting in the leader the role to solve the problem. In this meaning-
making system, the people would be used as instruments to promote the populist’s own purpose. Purpose in this case is mainly achieved through self-directed agency, using the other as rhetorical instrument. In other words, the other is integrated into the leader’s narrative as a powerful instrument of influence, and not so much as the end itself. We admit that the concern for others might be genuine for some populists, and that a simplistic meaning-making system can be seen as an effective political instrument, but the strong personification of the mission on the self, might blind the leader’s ability to integrate others in the process as he or she alone possesses the answer to the other’s oppression (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). Together with the aforementioned hubris effect (Picone et al., 2014), well intended populist leaders might let their ascension to power affect their ability to stay connected and to empathize with the people they proclaim to protect, reinforcing their simplistic meaning-making system.

In contrast, we suggest that servant leaders have complex meaning-making systems that are genuinely and consistently other-centred. When you as a leader put an effort in integrating the other, you are forced to recognize tensions and creatively try to integrate them in a process of paradoxical dynamic equilibrium, as suggested by Smith and Lewis (2011). Coherence in this case is achieved by highlighting human potential, the intrinsic value of diversity and everyone’s responsibility to take ownership of their lives and the change they want to promote. The role of the leader becomes more of a promoter of dialogue and facilitator in which others can find ways of acting upon their needs, while accommodating for multiple demands. There is a self-transcending purpose that is built on the premise of empowerment, and not the need to promote oneself. Solutions are therefore encountered through reconciliation, active experimentation and continuous learning. This does not mean in our view that solutions need to be complex, in fact they can be quite simple (Eisenhardt & Sull, 2001). Complexity in this case is instead integrated and recognized as part of reality, while collectively trying to reduce it through a continuous learning process.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we reiterate the contrast between servant and populist leaders around four main themes:

- **People centricity:** Servant leaders see people as concrete individuals with their own unique needs not as a collective blob representing a shared demand.
- **People role:** Servant leaders see people as capable of their own liberation and should be themselves accountable for that and not as victims to be protected from the oppressing elite, which is an equal part of the whole system.
- **Problem solving approach:** For servant leaders the world is complex and solutions need to be reached through dialogue and paradoxical dynamic equilibrium between all stakeholders and not through over-simplified and polarized solutions as irreconcilable options.
- **Preferred leader role:** Servant leaders inspire ownership for change one by one through listening and gentle persuasion and they do not take credit for the change, as opposed to the leader centric and personalized revolt of populist leaders.
In addition, from a meaning perspective, servant leaders take a pluralist and complex meaning-making approach in contrast to the monistic and simplistic meaning-making processes of populist leaders. For the first, purpose is self-transcendent and coherence is achieved by emphasizing the intrinsic value of diversity. For the latter, purpose is an expression of self-centred leader agency and coherence is achieved by eliminating threatening ideas to established worldviews.

The differences depicted before are not exhaustive and they require further scrutiny by scholars and practitioners. For example, we can envision an empirical narrative study contrasting servant and populist leaders in how they communicate, further distilling their meaning creation and attribution processes in relationship to followers. To this end, our list of distinctions between servant and populist leadership (see Table 1) can serve as a starting point to map such processes. Equally important would be to study how leaders grew as populist or as servant, by analysing their life narratives and determining contexts and incidents that shaped their meaning-making systems in relationship to the people. Such studies could further extend our understanding of both servant and populist leaders from a process perspective, and not only from a peripheral or content one (Rost, 1993).

Final Word

In our view, servant leadership provides an adequate operationalization of Rost’s (1993) concept and appeal for a post-industrial leadership. We see this analysis as a starting point to further understand, detect and promote servant leaders in the midst of an enlarging populist stage, feeding on the increasing and unavoidable complexity of a globalized and interconnected world. More research is still needed. Hopefully, we have provided some pointers on the choices leaders can make to truly deliver to the needs of the people, while contributing to strengthening our political systems, institutions and organizations. As for democracy, the starting example of this article, its survival from a populist takeover can only be achieved through an informed and critical people that can distinguish the true servant from the populist leader. To this end, our article provides also a summarized and practical distinction of the two that can be further used in informational, educational and real life contexts.

Notes on contributors

**Milton Sousa**, PhD is Associate Professor at Nova School of Business and Economics, Portugal and Visiting Professor at KEIO Business School (Tokyo), SASIN (Bangkok) and the American University in Cairo. He co-founded the Leadership for Impact Knowledge Centre and held the positions of Associate Dean for Institutional Relations and International Development and Academic Director of CEMS MIM at Nova SBE. Previously, he was Director of the MBA Programs at the Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University in the Netherlands. He chaired 3 editions of the Estoril Conferences, a large international forum on globalization that gathers renowned world leaders from business, academia and public sector. His research interests include servant leadership and social innovation.

**Dirk van Dierendonck**, PhD is Professor of HRM, in particular leadership and management development at the Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University. His areas of expertise include human resource management, leadership and leadership development, positive organizational scholarship, well-being and measurement development. He recently finished a four-year term as
Dean of Faculty / Vice-Dean of RSM. He is co-founder of the Erasmus Centre for Leadership. His work has been published in books, and in over 70 scholarly articles, including the major academic journals.

**Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

**Funding**

This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 856688.

**ORCID**

Milton Sousa [http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7016-5906](http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7016-5906)  
Dirk van Dierendonck [http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3545-1798](http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3545-1798)

**References**


