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'All Right, I Will Do as You Say': Leadership and Followership in Ibsen's *Pillars of Society*

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Abstract:

The inverted relationship between leaders and followers is the product of the false consciousness that Henrik Ibsen presents in Pillars of Society. To the playwright, this relationship has been a disruptive phenomenon as it excludes, rather than includes those whose perceptions are different from the leader's personal view. The result is unprecedented levels of failure in security, economy and welfare policies. This failure, as I argue in this article is also blamed on the followers who seem not to know the role, they are to play towards the success of the political system they support. The few who understand the concept of followership see their efforts thwarted and frustrated by the leaders in place. Ibsen therefore questions the political environment, and presents the authorities in place and their followers as responsible for the poverty, injustice and exploitation in their society.

By paying attention to what constitute the landmarks, stages or watersheds of nineteenth century Norwegian and European politics, and by focusing on the question: 'Who leads the work of government?' this article analyses Ibsen's characters (leaders) who use their power of appointment and election to maintain a broadened support, not by working under the advice of experts who have a better grasp of national agenda, but by turning to close friends and associates who sympathize with their own hopes and plans. The article therefore aims at carrying out a literary analysis of Pillars of Society as a strategic technique to de-centre the dominant rhetoric that 'to lead, one must induce followers to permit him or her act for goals that represent his motives and motivations'.

Keywords: Ibsen, leadership, followership, autocratic, governance

1. Introduction

It is easy to forget how uneasy the father of modern drama, Henrik Ibsen felt towards his attraction to an art deemed low by his contemporaries. When he abandoned the verse after Peer Gynt and Emperor and Galilean for prose plays about contemporary problems, his drama was considered uninspiring and common place. His contemporaries: Dumas Fils, August Eugene Scribe and Alexander Victorine Sardou were all writers of immense theatrical skills, and their plays were a sentimental drama of strong emotions and equivocal moral sentiment. John Gasner and Edward Quin write that they (Ibsen's contemporaries) used attractive dramatic conventions such as soliloquys, asides, songs, verse, disguise, chorus and the appearance of the ghost on stage in their drama (qtd in Shepherd-Barr 63). Ibsen abandoned the soliloquys, epilogues and prologues and projected the actions of a social being with the ultimate hope of progressing towards a more moral and meaningful existence. His dramatic realism in a language close to the vernacular denied him the lexicon of the great dramatic poets who had preceded him. From a traditional poetic diction, Ibsen sought to formulate a new vocabulary rooted in the modern dramatic realism, what, Tore Rem calls 'a poetry of things or objects, let us say, more than words' (46). Ibsen managed to bring every element of the theater to exposure in order to create this new theatrical poetry: the set, stage directions, props, costumes, and lighting as well as the actual spoken lines of the text and the sub textual or unspoken dialogue that would often lie beneath it. He understood that he could not address the failing socio-political situation of his society by entertaining the public with music, and so took them straight into the realities of their lives.

Ibsen's life falls between 1827 (when the first constitution of Norway was drafted) and 1913 (when the women in Norway were granted the right to vote). He lived the autocratic reigns of King Charles, Oscar I and Oscar II, and saw how they exercised absolute powers over those they ruled as they single-handedly appointed ministers, governor generals and councils of state without consideration from parliament, and these were accountable only to them. Søren Turseth asserts this when he says 'the king (Charles) exploited his powers to the limit, appointing ministers and governor generals from his henchmen' (qtd in Nygaard, 50). Their autocratic rule extended to trade and industries, which were restricted by regulations drafted by them alone. Turseth further states that the king – without the consent of parliament – placed a ban and high custom duties on some goods which he thought were not good for his subjects (qtd in Nygaard, 51). Their reign therefore disregarded equal rights, religious freedom and freedom of expression, free trade, and broadening political participation. The government, administrative bench and the king had all for themselves and lived in the Royal Castle in the Swedish capital, Stockholm (Bastienson, 52).

When Johan Sverdrup was appointed Prime Minister in 1884, and a parliamentary system put in place, it turned out that he was not the competent strategist that most Norwegians had either learned to fear or admire. His five years as

Prime Minister were disappointing as there was constant '...class struggle between the peasant and the public servant and tradesmen classes' (Bastiansen, 54). Sverdrup lacked the nobility needed to handle such issues, and lost the influential group.

Ibsen was therefore a witness to the political squabbles embodied in the struggle between the king and parliament. He was confronted by the political conflict created by the opposition to king rule and was also very disappointed by the new reign of Johan Sverdrup. Both systems, the autocratic and the democratic failed largely because their followers were left out in decision making. The kings' one-man rule sparked opposition from the civil society and from the press. Sverdrup's democratic system failed because he could not manage the conflict that arose between his followers as 'there was a class struggle between the peasant and the public servant and tradesmen classes, which in Norway, with no nobility, was the most influential' (Bastiansen, 47). Ibsen came to understand that the success of a leader is not defined by the political system, but by the relationship between leadership and followership, and in a rally where he was honoured by the students of Oslo with a torchlight procession through the streets that included songs, a poem composed for the occasion, and speeches, Ibsen said the task of the poet was 'not to reflect, but to see' (Rem, 45). He had seen the problem and therefore needed not to reflect over it.

'In literary terms, Ibsen's first sign of a renewal was *Pillars of Society*' (Fulsas and Tore, 460) where the playwright blames leadership failure on the leaders' inability to relate their followers in effective management, and on the show of ignorance on the part of the followers on the role they are to play in the management of country's resources. As shall be presented below, the relation between leadership and followership represents the miniature of democracy (governance) and determines the failure or success of the government in place.

To develop the power relation between leaders and followers, new historicists' concepts of 'subjectivity' and 'power' will be helpful. Laurence Lerner's view in 'History and Fiction' illustrates the relationship between historical context and literary imagination. Lerner criticises the anti-positivist school of thought of history not being able to 'give objective facts, since the ideology and the verbal strategies of the historian will determine what he chooses to notice, and how he describes it to say nothing of the connections that he then establishes' (qtd in Muller 47), and contends that 'if perception is not wholly objective, it does not follow that it must not be wholly subjective' (438). By this, new historicists think that though events have causes, these causes are usually difficult and complex to analyze because each narrator and historian 'is not merely the product of the culture from which they live but is also a product of their individual will and desire' (Muller, 280). In this light, Greenblatt and Gallagher argue that, new historicists' claim that historical analysis is based on bias 'make history as forth-right as possible about their own ideological positions relative to the material they analyze' (24) so that their readers can have some idea of the human lens through which they are viewing the historical issue at hand.

S. Wiedenmann perceives the aim of new historicism as revealing power relations that are reflected but hidden in a text. She also argues that all texts are considered as products of certain historical conditions and therefore imbued with cultural, political and social elements. (3) Power, to new historicists, does not emanate only from the top and socio-economic structures but is everywhere. To show how power works, Michel Foucault, one whose ideas have strongly influenced the development of new historicism, said that 'power circulates in all directions, to and from, all social levels at all time' (281). As a result, there is power exchange in buying and selling, in leading and in being led, in teaching and learning, in gambling, taxation, marriage, adoption and in all other forms of life.

2. Absent Followers and the Power of Influence

Pillars of Society transformed the Western stage and moved bourgeois drama onto a new level and into an entirely new frame of reference. Although the actions in the play are too specific, and are extremely particularized, the characters are fully-drawn psychologically, making the scope of the play huge in implications and resonances. Remember, Ibsen had said that the poet must 'not reflect, but see.' His purpose in this play was not to create yet another version of bourgeois mimesis, but to use the stage as a metaphor for the entangled relationship between followership and leadership. Ibsen thought that the process used in following leadership is important in effective governance, and therefore set out to address it.

J. Rost defines followership as collaborative leadership. In his words, it is 'an influence relationship among leaders and collaborators who intend significant changes that reflect their mutual interests' (57). To Cox et al. followership is a 'priori choice (self-conscious) of the individual in the context of his or her relationship to the nominal leader. Issues of authority and rank play little or no role in such a choice. Followership is interactive' (48). According to J. Maroosis, followership is a 'discipline of competences and response-abilities' (18). From the above definitions, there is no doubt that the crux of followership is appropriate skills and behaviors for optimized performance, which contributes to upholding organizational development. In this sense, 'good followership can be learned' (Bardy, 23) and should go beyond the simple function of followers providing feedback or chanting songs of praise. Ibsen knew that the dynamic social construction of followership was key to the success of the political system in place. The different failures registered by leaders in his political plays can therefore be attributed to the absence of inter-correlation between leaders and followers.

The opening setting and exposition of *Pillars of Society* stresses the helplessness of humanity in the hands of leadership that does not promote collective responsibility. The setting is the garden-room in the home of Bernick, the shipbuilder. There are large glass doors and windows upstage through which a spacious garden is visible. Beyond the garden is a fence and 'a street lined . . . with small, colourfully painted wooden houses' where we can get a glimpse of 'sunstruck humanity, sweating and haggling over its petty affairs,' as the schoolmaster Rørlund describes the scene. The

room is only partially lit by the bright early afternoon sunshine coming from outside. On stage, a group of the town's civic-minded women are sewing clothes for distribution to the poor.

Three elements in this description symbolize freedom: the large glass doors and windows upstage, the spacious garden and the sunshine outside. The reader is surprised to see that even though it is warm and sunny outside, everyone is seated inside in a small room that is only partially lit by light from outside. During the scene, the curtains are even drawn such that the room is lit solely by artificial light. The women's position suggests the position of passive followers who though suffocating, cannot better their situation because of the gap that exists between them and the pillars of the society. The non-participation of these women in law-making automatically makes them victims of Bernick's tyranny since their opinions are not considered.

The treatment Bernick gives them is dehumanizing. The relationship can be described as a completely alienated one. The single instance in the play wherein he comes in contact with them reveals his explicit desire to remain utterly removed from them. He constantly insists on the fact that they are wives and daughters and should be concerned with the emotional. They should '...go on undisturbed in [their] charitable activities ...being an aid and comfort to [their] nearest and dearest' (Act 1, 33). He is so conscious of the stratification which should exist in the community that he does not, not even once, consult them in making the decisions that will affect them. The only plan he has is to silence them forever by employing a school master to build in them a 'solid moral foundation'. The women, like the workers hold a sub-human position in Bernick's 'kingdom'. They are children who do not know anything of the world they live in. Implicit in this insult is the understanding that the followers with whom he is supposed to rule denote inferiority and degradation, and should be left out.

Bernick surrounds himself with those he shares a similar vision, and as such is free from any opposition. He fails to understand that good leadership requires that you surround yourself with people of diverse perspectives who can disagree with you without fear of retaliation. Bernick's clerk, Krap, defends his master's interest at all time. In the opening lines of the play, he does not only refuse Aune from getting access into his master's office but attacks him for making Saturday speeches to the workers:

Krap: You've got to stop these Saturday speeches of yours to the workmen.

Aune: Oh? I'd thought I could use my own free time ----

Krap: You can't use your free time to make other people useless on the job. Last Saturday you talked about the dangers to the men of our new machines and the new working methods in the yard. Why did you do that?

Aune: I did it for the betterment of the society. (Act 1, 98)

The clerk tailors his daily activities towards the propagation and defense of Bernick's ideology whether good or bad. This makes him a less individual because Bernick and his group of 'advisers' work as a mob. Bernick is left on his own though he thinks he is surrounded with followers. The thinking might be plural, but the vision is uncommon and is bound to fail. Such a method of governance is motivated by personal gain. Interesting to note is the fact that the only time Bernick and his associates raise voices in the play is when they are discussing money gained:

Mrs. Bernick (having turned towards the door of Bernick's room): They are talking so loud in there.

Rørund: Is it anything special?

Mrs. Bernick: I don't know. I hear someone in there with my husband.

Rørund: Seems to me the others aren't exactly soft spoken.

Hilmar: Lord no! Not when they are defending their bankbooks. (Act 1, 19-22)

Hilmar later comments that 'everything around here revolves around petty gain' (Act 1, 22). Commenting on how characters in the drama of Ibsen and on British and Irish playwrights who wrote in his wake are driven for the accumulation of capital figures neither as a natural instinct nor as a social necessity, Reggina Gokaj points out that the invisible hand of the market made its material grasp felt on stage through the sudden arrival of a wealthy capitalist who decided the faith of the rest of the characters and concludes that they are 'radiant disk of morality and personality with their vicissitudes, these are left unmentioned at the beginning of the drama' (677).

In the nineteenth century, the discourse of economic efficiency was so permeating, penetrating and affecting everything, including leadership, so that Charles Darwin reverted to economic metaphors in his *On the Origin of Species* (1859) to explain how the beehive produces wax. In his narrative, nature figures as an efficient manager making sure animals engage only in the most economical and productive of labours. It is therefore not surprising that Ibsen presents economically minded leaders who despise the wellbeing of their followers for personal gains. The aim of new historicism is to redefine the relationship between a text and the cultural system in which they were produced. This is to say history is conceived not to be a fix objective fact, but like literature with which it interacts, a text that needs to be interpreted.

Usually, where leaders like Bernick meet serious opposition from their followers, they maintain control through fraud, intimidation, severe sanctions and deprivation. Tom Eide identifies steps to corruption of the mind. He writes that the leader may threaten followers who hold opposing ideologies with the loss of respect and of reputation, appeal to their sense of community and loyalty, focus on their weak spots, turn their colleagues against them and persecute if necessary. Consult Bernick understands how these strategies work and applies them to perfection.

In order to keep his power in society Bernick becomes part of that power, an instrument and a puppet. For example, when Aune makes an objection to the use of machines, afraid that they will take away the work from numerous craftsmen, Bernick uses his position as employer and makes a threat of dismissal to force the obedience of Aune. This implementation of power not only strengthens the leader but also distances the leader/follower relationship.

Another abuse of power by Bernick is of an even more severe nature. When Johan announces his decision to reveal the truth to the public so that he may marry Dina, Bernick is determined to murder him with his secret by letting the Indian Girl go down. He takes advantage of the fact that his yard is repairing an American ship, the Indian Girl, which is deeply unseaworthy. Bernick orders his yard foreman to finish the work by the next day, even if it means sending the ship and its crew to certain death, because he wants Johan to die on board. That way Bernick will be free of any danger of exposure in the future. But matters do not work out quite in the way he wants. Johan runs off with Dina on board another ship leaving Bernick's young son stows away on the Indian Girl, thereby seemingly heading for certain death.

Bernick is furious at Aune because he insists in playing his role of followership by actively participating in decision making. Aune is unwilling to repair the Indian Girl, a ship whose hull and substructure have rotted away entirely but which is made to look seaworthy by superficial patching or 'bandaging.' Bernick has just received a mail from his American business counterparts requesting that he should 'do least possible repairs, [on the ship] for the cargo will float her in emergency' (Act 2, 34), and does not care about the risk involved. Aune's moral crisis over the fate of the Indian Girl and its crew triggers a further moral crisis in Bernick, pushing him to make the decision that human life must be sacrificed for the greater good of society. This reveals Bernick's automatic, almost unconscious desire to manipulate individuals and events to his advantage. On the other hand, Aune's individual attributes make him a true follower in a context where followers perform effective followership. We already said that the key in leadership is rooted in shared values and indispensable conditions of leaders and followers who work together to create an effective institution. In a sense, this collective responsibility requires both parties to play a reciprocal role as they set out to achieving the same goal.

Many critics have described the world of the play as a microcosm of Norwegian society. In this light, as Edward Beyer points out, in the nineteenth century it was not uncommon that 'Norwegian as well as British ship owners were speculating and sending unseaworthy ships to sea' (qtd in Gokaj, 676). Bernick succeeds to speculate in this direction because he refuses to listen to Aune, and at this point, we do know for sure he is willing and capable of sacrificing the lives of an entire people under 'necessary' conditions.

Ibsen presents this scene of extreme wickedness and abuse of power as a proof of the severity of leadership's abusive management of the shipping business in his days. In the 1870s, the ever-increasing losses of ships and crews due to overloading reached such a point that the English Parliament was forced to pass Plimsoll's Merchant Shipping Act of 1876 (Gokaj, 676). In this light *Pillars of Society* becomes a form of discourse similar to many other discourses of the period, from preliminary debates to scientific theses. In this regard, literary texts are cultural artifacts that can tell us something about the interplay of discourses and the web of social meanings operating in the time and place in which the text was produced.

Bernick has a slavish and egoistic addiction for power and honour and must protect his position. To achieve this, he shapes and conditions the minds of the people to suit this egotism. His attachment to convention and his strong desire to make his followers remain at the receiving end explain his decision to hire a clergy, Rørlund who continuously corrupts the minds of the people by ceaselessly praising the small community for its moral fiber, its faith in the old traditional values, and its resistance to the new and immoral ideas running rampant in the world outside, which has 'no moral foundation under its feet.' (Act 1, 17). In one of his praise speeches, he hails Bernick for standing as an example of what leaders should be:

Well found ships go out from your yard and fly our flags in the farthest seas, a large and happy body of workmen look up to you as a father. By calling into being new industrial development, you have laid the foundation of prosperity for hundreds of families. In other words, you are in a special sense the chief pillar of the community (Act 2, 128).

It is the pillar of the society who should be seen as the saviour, and not anyone else; he should be the one to take total responsibility and should be at the top of everything. In the following except, the clergyman leaves followers with the impression that they are not needed in the governing procedure. Rorland 'rails against the hollowness and decay of society and the scum humanity, and celebrates Bernick's will to front a team of self-appointed guardians of morality in their small coastal town' (Sandberg, 111). Bernick exploits the people and the same time positions himself as a representative of pure values and family life. Leadership and the discharge of duties under such system is therefore centralized.

3. Towards Effective Governance: Repositioning Leadership and Followership

We have attempted to show that toxic leadership seems to thrive on two essential ingredients: destructive leaders and susceptible followers. The only way out of this, and this is Ibsen's belief, is that leaders should believe in the power of groups and in the ability of collections of individuals to get together, participate, engage, identify new concerns and propose alternative courses of action. In this light, Van Vugt who uses the metaphor of a flower to explain why followers must stand up for their leaders and direct them concludes that many significant failures, disasters and mishaps could have been avoided, prevented or mitigated if those lower in the hierarchy were successful at communicating to their leaders the risks they were seeing in the system, an opinion shared by Ibsen.

In *Pillars of Society* Ibsen presents a character, Aune, whose courage to assume responsibility, to speak and challenge hierarchy, take moral action and participate in transformation define the essence of his followership. Aune however fails to develop a more dynamic relationship with his leader. At each moment he is in disagreement with leadership, he stands on his point, refusing to give any form of consideration to the other's view. For example, the conflict that usually arises between Bernick and Aune is on the transition from traditional manual ways of production to industrialized impersonal forms of production. At the very beginning of the play Aune makes it clear, 'My society isn't

Consul Bernick's society' thereby betraying the fact that they are working for the betterment of two different people and societies. Aune is working for the working class, 'the narrow faction' in Bernick's terms, and pursues better economic and social conditions for this class. On the other hand, Bernick pursues a progress more connected to his class. Though he constantly tells the people that he is working for the progress of the whole society, his ventures benefit his class. These two differently-oriented goals are at the center of the disagreement between Aune and Consul Bernick.

Ibsen understood that the machines are important in an ever-growing economy, and also knew that leaving out the workers in the production process could cause a serious social problem. Seeking for the midway was the solution. Harold Clurman mentions in his discussion of the play that similar incidents [the disagreement between Bernick and Aune on the introduction of the machines in the production process had happened in England, where 'the same difficulty and dispute had provoked the insurgence of the machine wreckers' (qtd in Rem, 70). Ibsen thought that a more dynamic leadership with an open-minded nature should listen to his followers, especially those who do not share same opinion with him, because they represent the thoughts of a people, they are not very familiar with, and should be ready to give up some of their strongly held values. Towards the end of the play, Ibsen will gradually merge these two different 'social divisions' by allowing their respective adherents to consider the other's view, though not completely.

Therefore, I find it rather meaningful that at the very end of the play Aune concedes to Bernick's view and willingly undertakes the task of implementing the new machines. Bernick on his part admits that he has always gone after profit, and is aware that his hunger and craving after power, and how status and influence has been the driving forces behind most of his actions. Eventually, his reaction is appropriate and much awaited. The detailed breakdown of his guilt in front of everyone and in front of the eyes of his accomplices seems a strange and incredible behaviour to his followers. He says

It seems like I came around after a severe poisoning. But I feel ... that I can still rejuvenate and recuperate myself. Oh, come, gather around me! Approach Betty! Come here! But we ... a long day of hard work is waiting for us, especially me. But, no problem, let it come, you just get tightly to me, you good and faithful women! I have learned something else in these difficult days, that you, women, are the pillars of society! (Act 2, 112).

The women (the followers) he thought had to remain estranged are now going to be his daily companions. The glimpses of elements of human tragedy are overshadowed in this final phase of the play by Bernick's comprehensive move to resolve the conflicts and to lay a new start for an inartificial world. Bernick, after building his honour through abuse of power, fraud and intimidation, comes to self-realization. After having presented himself as a sinner, he subjects himself to the judgment of the people. Bernick's declarations and confessions make him sit securely more than ever before at the center of the community, especially when he promises to take into consideration the opinions of the people he rules.

The confession liberates him and he can now be described as a man noble in character, mind, and will, ready to implicate his followers in decision making as they move society forward. In his final words, he says: 'People should never think primarily of themselves, least of all women. We all have some sort of community, large or small to support and work for' (Act 2, 134). By turning Bernick's perception around for a prosperous community, Ibsen can be seen as 'Norway's 'soft power' for a cultural internationalization in which individuals play their roles (Huq, 89). The play becomes a clarion call for united and visible effects. Bernick understands and is ready to take up leadership that promotes an open debate, and not a situation where a few people condition the thoughts of others who are supposed to be allowed to think freely.

4. Conclusion

Leaders and followers are resources who work towards improving and developing leadership. Surrounding themselves with those who share opposing views will make leaders more dynamic. In this way, there is no reference point; rather, seeking compromise and finding midway of each form can be an effective and efficient approach to leadership.

Followers who resist following, can breakdown the function of leadership. Because of the interrelation of leaders and followers the followers must be willing and able to inspire their leaders. In this regard, followership becomes a form of leadership since followers need to adopt some characteristics of leadership. We analysed Aune, Bernick's foreman at the shipyard who communicates courageously, and towards the end identifies with the leader, as he ends up adopting part of Bernick's vision. He is therefore supposed to serve as a model to the likes of Rørlund, the clerk, the group of women and Bernick's partners.

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