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‘Together we rise’: Collaboration and contestation as narrative drivers of the Women’s March

Abstract

The Women’s March is arguably the most important counter-narrative to Trump’s post-truth regime, but does it also present a leadership alternative to his populist and authoritarian style? And is this alternative necessarily better than currently dominant social formations? In this paper, we argue that the Women’s March is partially configured by similar forces of affective circulation as those governing pro-Trump narratives, but that it is different and better in one important respect. Its narratives are driven by both collaboration and contestation, meaning its circulation is both centripetal and centrifugal. We substantiate this claim through a close reading of the narration of the Women’s March – from its inception until its first anniversary. Here, we focus particularly on the development from a moment of resistance to a political movement, arguing that this process offers a prototype for conceptualizing a new form of ‘rebel’ or social movement leadership. Hence, the Women’s March not only offers a different and better alternative to the leadership of Trump, but also offers an opportunity for promoting and refining leadership theory in the post-heroic vein.

Keywords: Collective leadership, intersectional feminism, post-heroic leadership, social movements, the Women’s March

Introduction

‘Trump is a great man who can make America great’. The Women’s March might be said to have come into existence as a counter-narrative to this, the basic story of the Trump-presidency. In positing its critique of and resistance to Trump, however, what sort of an alternative does the Women’s March offer? As Tourish (2017) emphasises there is an urgent need for scholars to address current events and propose alternatives to them. In the present paper, we seek to heed this call by exploring the potential of the Women’s March for inspiring social change and stimulating theoretical re-conceptualization.

In so doing, we begin from an analysis of the narration of the Women’s March as a collaborative and contested process of co-constructing the organization and its leadership. We situate the analysis within current conceptual developments of post-heroic leadership as rebel or social movement leadership (Edwards, 2017; Eslen-Ziya and Erhart, 2015), and we discuss how the case of the Women’s March may further these developments.

Methodologically, we develop tools for studying the collaboration and contestation of narration and, hence, detailing the how as well as the what of the narrative leadership of the Women’s March. This entails an empirical focus on the stories told of and in the movement, on the ways in which the organization and its leadership emerge in and through their telling. More specifically, we will follow the collaboration in and contestation of the Women’s March in the process of developing, embodying and narrating intersectional feminism as the main leadership principle of the organization. The term intersectionality dates back to radical black feminism in the 1970s and

80s and refers to acknowledgement of the fact that black and coloured women experience discrimination and oppression differently from white women since race intersects with gender in patterned and often problematic ways (e.g. Crenshaw, 1989). Studies on how gender intersects with other categories such as class, ability, sexuality, age and religion have cemented how feminism is perceived differently by women who do not enjoy the privilege of being cis, white, straight, abled-bodied etc. 'Woman' is not a universal category and not even within one particular intersection of categories do women face the same levels of discrimination. Intersectional feminism demands attention to not only the specificity of the categories, but also the nuances of discrimination and oppression that different women experience (Villeseche et al., 2018). Finally, invoking intersectionality implies a move from categories of difference to processes of differentiation and systems of domination (Liu, 2018).

Studying collaboration and contestation as two distinct modes of narration of intersectional feminism within the Women's March leads us to conclude that the interrelations of these modes constitute a strong value-led leadership narrative for the organization. Based on this analytical finding, we discuss whether and how the Women's March provides alternatives to Trump's populist leadership narrative. Here, we define populism along the lines of Laclau's suggestion that all politics draws on populist reasoning to the extent that it puts "...into question the institutional order by constructing an underdog as a historical agent – i.e. an agent which is an *other* in relation to the way things stand" (Laclau, 2005: 47, emphasis in original). Trump, we suggest, offers to speak for 'the underdog', offering authoritative and authoritarian accounts to guide his followers through the uncertainties of the post-truth era. Ironically, then, Trump uses the social condition of post-truth to assert his own falsehoods as the Truth (Davies, 2016). Might there, we wonder, be more productive ways of engaging with the blurred boundaries of truth and lies, honesty and dishonesty, fact and fiction that characterize contemporary life (Keyes, 2004)?

Thus, our main contributions are to, first, analyse the narration of the Women's March through collaboration and, second, discuss the potential of these two narrative modes conceptually. That is, does the Women's March provide better alternatives to currently dominant social narratives and organizational practices? Here, we will argue that the Women's March is, indeed, the most convincing counter-Trump narrative around, but that it also applies some of the same narrative mechanisms and is involved in similar processes as those that propelled Trump to power. Thus, we discuss how the Women's March fights populism with populism (cf. De Cock, Just and Husted, 2018), using populist reason to promote progressive goals, as well as whether and how its post-heroic leadership narratives may offer a positive response to the communicative conditions of the post-truth era. To this final end, we point out and detail the potential of the particular dynamics of collaboration and contestation that figure the Women's March.

Theories of leadership – from hero to rebel

The practice (and theory) of leadership has a long history of being associated with the actions of great (male) individuals and promoting the narrative of such great leadership heroes, but leadership scholars are increasingly abandoning this myth to, instead, favour and advance post-heroic alternatives.

At the centre – or rather, marking the beginning – of the vast amount of heroic leadership literature stands Carlyle's (1841) book *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*. Carlyle's discussion of what makes great leaders, popularly known as the 'Great Man Theory', still stands as a (corroding) symbol for heroic leadership theories. It laid the basis for more than a century of leadership theories, which centred on one person (often a man) and this person's skills and almost supernatural abilities to lead others to success. This obsession with – and celebration of – leaders as singular, larger-than-life people, created a heroic and romanticised commitment to leadership (e.g. Meindl et al., 1985), which bears similarities to religious worshipping (Sliwa et al., 2013; Spoelstra, 2017) or seduction (Sinclair, 2009), and leaves little or no room for recognizing collective contributions. The blind belief in the power and influence of one individual leader, thus, seems more based on emotional or sexual persuasion than on rationality and strategic commitment (Gabriel, 2005; Sinclair, 2005; Spector, 2016). When followers are seduced by great leader narratives, facts and reasons becomes secondary to emotions and personal beliefs.

Stories of the leaders' greatness are central to the worship of great leaders; they are told and retold in ways that reinforce their power and eradicates – or at least depreciates – any potential critique of them and their abilities. As Mouton scathingly remarks: "The few Great Men are talked into Greatness by their many little followers" (2017: 3). Tourish and Pinnington (2002) have shown how such 'little followers' of the great leader are effectively brain washed by the cult-like character of great leadership. In a similar vein, Spector (2016) concludes that dependency on one great leader does not lead to progress, but rather marks the reduction of intellectual engagement. As such, he compares effective leadership to what Janis (1972) early on described as groupthink and called out as the modern threat to good decision-making.

In sum, heroic leadership theories and the very idea that one person should be responsible for all the important decisions of a collective – be it an organization, a political party or social movement – have come to be viewed as amoral or undemocratic and antithetical to good governance (Brown, 2015; Spector, 2016). Pye (2005) argues that the continuous search for what she calls 'the Holy Grail' of leadership implies that the search itself was ill-guided, trying to solve the wrong problem. The move towards what has been labelled post-heroic leadership seeks to open new paths by rejecting the idea of the hero as religious archetype (Spoelstra, 2017). Instead, it seeks more collective understandings of leadership, based on the suggestion that "leadership, as distinct from power, is most evident when (...) all members of the group are 'on an equal footing'" (Brown, 2015: 382).

Post-heroic narratives of emergent and collaborative leadership

Post-heroic leadership theories emphasise the active role that followers play in the construction of leadership (Ford and Harding, 2018; Shamir et al., 2007), thus seeing leadership as distributed (Gronn, 2002; Mailhot et al., 2016; Spillane, 2006), shared (Avolio et al., 1996; Pearce and Conger, 2003), collective (Bolden et al., 2008; Raelin, 2016), empowering (Vecchio et al., 2010), relational (Uhl-Bien, 2006), and/or emerging (Robinson and Kerr, 2017; Virtaharju and Liiri, 2017).

As the importance of one heroic leader is refuted, leadership is, instead, grounded in social interaction (Fletcher and Käufer, 2003; Fletcher, 2004); it comes to be understood as a relational process in and through which leader- and followership are simultaneously claimed and granted as

part of individual and collective identity formation (DeRue and Ashford, 2010). Ultimately, leadership, as conceptualized and practiced in the post-heroic vein, is a collective process rather than the feat of a single person. Thus, agency shifts from the individual to the collective involved in co-constructing leadership (Raelin, 2016; Ospina and Foldy, 2010). In her theory of leadership moments, Ladkin (e.g. 2017) goes so far as to argue that:

Leadership occurs when context, purpose, followers and individuals willing to take the leader role align in a particular way. More importantly, it is not just how these factors align which is important, but *how they are perceived by followers*, which really determines who is accepted in the leader role (Ladkin, 2017: 394, emphasis in original).

While offering critiques of the centralization of power in the Great Man theories, post-heroic theories of leadership have, themselves, been criticised for their idealization of collectiveness and the blindness to power that follows from such ideals. Post-heroic leadership practices, it is argued, are not deprived of power; rather, power is more systemic and difficult to detect in collective leadership styles, meaning they are powerful tools for manipulation and influence (Lukes, 1974). Thus, some post-heroic leadership theories, ironically, support their own hero figures. The post-heroic hero displays fewer of the megalomaniac and narcissistic characteristics associated with heroic leadership and leads much more quietly (Badaracco, 2002; Sellers, 2002), but continues to enjoy the same powers, privileges, and godlike popularity as the heroic leader (Fletcher, 2004).

Hence, as Fletcher (2004) argues, a change towards collective forms of leadership requires a radical change in our basic belief system about leadership:

It requires a fundamentally different way of conceptualizing the importance of relationship and relational interactions as well as a different way of conceptualizing growth, achievement, success, and effectiveness. When this alternative logic of effectiveness is ignored, the essence of postheroic leadership is in danger of being coopted and its transformational aspects castrated (Fletcher, 2004: 657).

The leadership potential of social movements

Responding to this critique of post-heroic leadership, while sustaining its impulse to provide alternatives to Great Man theories, a new wave of alternative theories is finding its way into leadership journals. These theories share the post-heroic goal of identifying leadership practices independent of a great leader, but take the search a step further as they look for such practices in places that have hitherto been considered unlikely sites of leadership studies, e.g. in social movements' resistance to established practices or regimes. This emerging perspective has been variously labelled as revolutionary or rebel leadership, and the practice of such leadership consists of, for example, ridicule and publicly calling out a leader's incompetence (Edwards, 2017). That is, the leadership of social movements offers conceptual and practical counter-narratives to stories of the Great Man.

Eslen-Ziya and Erhart use the case of the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul to identify a type of leadership in social movements that "is driven by the possibilities opened up by other democratic

and collaborative social movements and also social networking sites” (2015: 471). Combining the idea of leaderless social action with horizontalism, consensus-based decision-making, and the logic of connective action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012), Eslen-Ziya and Erhart argue that The Gezi protests reveal an alternative leadership model that is “interpersonally oriented, democratic, collaborative, all inclusive, and transformational” (2015: 483). Here, all voices are welcomed and heard, barring the emergence of one powerful leader and inviting enactment of the radically different leadership perspective that Fletcher (2004) called for.

Resistance towards narcissistic and dysfunctional Great Man leadership is not reducible to replacing one powerful leader with another (and presumed better) leader, but should instead attempt to replace leadership (whether heroic or post-heroic) with empowerment, with the formation of democratic, civil and inclusive social movements. As Eslen-Ziya and Erhart argue “in those instances when individuals are absent, the ideas or common goals may serve as the leader” (2015: 472). Similarly, Mailhot et al., in their study of the emergence of distributed leadership in a collaborative project, show how “different worlds were traversed, but never brought together permanently” (2016: 80). Here, leadership was ‘emergent, fluid and temporary’. And, importantly, leadership was both collective and multiple – shared and diverse, allowing “...the different actors involved to pursue the same course without having to share the same worldviews or interests” (Mailhot et al., 2016: 81).

In studying the Women’s March, we seek to contribute to the development of rebel or social movement leadership, not just in the empirical sense of studying the leadership of a social movement, but also in terms of how this study might contribute to our conceptualization of leadership as such. More specifically, we will explore how studying the Women’s March as a collective social movement can contribute to our understanding of the narrative drivers of emergent collective leadership and discuss whether this can function as a sustainable mode of opposition to heroic leadership narratives in a post-truth world.

Methodology: The rhetorical circulation of narrated leadership

In our study of the Women’s March, then, we are not concerned with questions of how the leaders of the march use narratives to establish the organization, but with the issue of how the organization and its leadership is narrated. Thus, we begin from the assumption that organizations, generally, and organizational leadership, more specifically, are communicatively constituted (Ashcraft and Muhr, 2018; Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren et al., 2011; Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014); that organizations and their leaders only exist in and through their narration (Brown, 2006; Fairhurst and Cooren, 2009; Kuhn, 2017). Common to studies that share this basic assumption is that they leave traditional scientific ideals of unveiling objective truth behind and instead attend to the ‘fabric’ and ‘fabrication’ of organizational narratives, to the ways in which stories do not represent, but rather create reality (Gabriel, 2004). In doing so, they point to the contested *and* collaborative nature of storytelling, to the ways in which different stories interrelate in the process of narration (Gulbrandsen and Just, 2013).

This duality is also central to our study. More specifically, we focus on the centrifugal and centripetal forces that drive the circulation of the Women’s March. Here, we adopt Catherine Chaput’s (2010) model of rhetorical circulation as the process of public sense-making, of mediated

narration (see also Just, 2016). In this model, meaning formation happens in and through the circulation of affective signs, understood as communicative symbols that carry the potential to accrue emotional value. Intensities of feeling, then, are the drivers as well as the results of circulation: “the more signs circulate, the more affective they become” (Ahmed, 2004: 45). In focusing on the ‘Women’s March’ as an affective sign, a narrative element that becomes valued and meaningful in and through its very circulation, we consider the direction as well as the intensity of this circulation. Thus, questions of affective force and affective valence guide the analysis: *how much are signs circulated and is the circulation positively or negatively loaded?*

As we seek to unfold how divergent stories and different voices merge so as to form the organizational narrative and, hence, the organization, we are particularly inspired by Erin Rand’s (2014) notion of choric collectivity. Originally developed as a conceptualization of the collective identity formation of Camp Courage, a particular activist training session that drew on experiences from the Obama campaign to mobilize and equip community organizers, we will transfer the concept to the leadership of the Women’s March. Like Rand, we are interested in how one voice becomes many and many voices one, but unlike her, we will follow this process as it cuts across space and time and ties together offline events and online media.

This takes us to the question of the empirical material of our study. The circulation of affective signs does not have easily identifiable temporal markers of beginnings and ends, nor any neat spatial boundaries (Chaput, 2010; see also Gulbrandsen and Just, 2011), meaning the very putting together of the material to be analysed becomes part of the analytical process (McGee, 1990). Narrative scholars actively co-construct the narratives they study, and while this may be a more general condition of organizational scholarship than some care to admit, recognizing one’s constructive role means taking responsibility for the construction (Rhodes and Brown, 2005).

In our study of the Women’s March we have relied heavily on the book from which this article takes its title; *Together We Rise. Behind the Scenes at the Protest Heard around the World* (The Women’s March Organizers and Nast, 2018) may be seen as a choric collectivity, an array of voices speaking as one, but also as one text containing many voices. As such, it looks back at the events from the election of Trump through the moment of the march and forward to the midterm elections of the autumn of 2018 and provides the official or authoritative narrative of these events as experienced and interpreted by some of its central actors, the organizers of the movement/leaders of the organization.

While this text is both rich in its material and nuanced in its accounts, we would not be true to our ambition of studying the narration of the organization if this were our only source. Thus, we supplement it with an array of other sources so as to illustrate and analyse the force and direction of the circulation of the Women’s March not only as the organizers later understood it, but also as it happened, when it happened. For this part, we rely on narrative fragments, the debris of the Internet, picking up pieces and weaving them into the story as we go along so as to better understand both the narrative collaboration and the contestation that shaped – and continues to shape – the Women’s March. Including this array of sources means we have added voices to the choir, but also that the collective they form speaks of – and to – our own sympathies (as reflected, for instance, in our search histories and, hence, in Google’s algorithms). The studied texts are not

all celebratory or, indeed, uncritical of the Women's March, but they are constructive. While some or the more virulent criticism of the march is recounted in our materials, we do not present this criticism first hand; the different narrative contestations that we find all engage with the march rather than reject it. This, of course, is a limitation of our study, but one that enables us to focus more clearly on the narrative constitution of the march.

Analysis: Collaboration and contestation as narrative drivers of the Women's March

In our study of the narration of the Women's March, we have identified two main trajectories marked by turning points, understood as decisive events or moments in time at which something important is retrospectively recognized to have happened even if it did not necessarily seem crucial to the participants at the time (Abbott, 2001). In the following, we first analyse these turning points and trajectories in terms of their narration, identifying both the narrative process as such and its organizational outcome, understood as the configuration of the Women's March and its leadership. Here, we seek to uncover and explain the links between narrative collaboration and contestation, how many voices become one and one voice many, assembling the collective leadership of the Women's March.

Inception

The origin story of the Women's March has been told and retold so many times that it has gained mythological status; meaning, it is seen to express the true identity and original purpose of the organization (McWhinney and Batista, 1988). Even if the story of how the idea of a Women's March came about is strictly factual and thoroughly documented in the sense that it involves identifiable people taking confirmable action, it has also become highly symbolic; this is not only the story of how the Women's March was launched, but also a tale of who the participants are and what they aspire to achieve. The corroborated version of the story (see e.g. Agrawal, 2017) runs as follows:

"I think we should march." On the night of November, 2016, while processing the outcome of the presidential race, Teresa Shook, a retired attorney from Hawaii, posted those five simple words on a private Facebook group before she went to bed. By the time she awoke the next morning, 10,000 women has heeded her call to action, signing on to march. And around the country, other women were plotting. (The Women's March Organizers and Nast, 2018: 33)

The Women's March, then, was conceived as an almost instinctive reaction to the election of Donald Trump. In the telling and re-telling of those first hours and days, feelings of frustration and despair circulate along with defiance and hope. What is common and characteristic of the Women's March in its earliest iterations is that it emerged as a beacon of light in the darkest hour. As many mourned the election of Trump, the idea of a Women's March became not only a much needed distraction, but also presented an opportunity for putting negative feelings to good use, of doing something meaningful and productive. This has proved a strong and enduring foundation (Graves, 2018).

Such were the foundational forces of circulation: women came together against the common adversary of the president-elect, turning from commiseration of the defeat of their preferred candidate to questions of how most effectively to harness their disapproval of and resistance to the Trump-presidency. Here, contesting Trump was the unifying force; the president-elect was, in fact, expelled from any positive circulation and only present as the antithesis of the Women's March, as that which the burgeoning 'we' was initially united against. Within the organization, collaboration was the all-encompassing mechanism at this stage, serving to bring the initial collective together around unspecified feelings of solidarity and sisterhood – in so far as a positive alternative to anti-Trump sentiments were even expressed at this time.

In sum, the idea of a march immediately resonated with thousands of women and became circulated as a meaningful way of turning from defeat to resistance. At this point the meaning of the march was not specified or explicated; it was only directed against Trump, and the identity of the organization had not been articulated beyond a common front against a mutual enemy. Thus, everyone who was against Trump, could find something to agree upon and do together despite any and all potential differences. This harmony within the organization, however, did not last long.

Formation

The idea of the Women's March had been formed and it was circulating incrementally, but growing Facebook groups and intensifying internet chatter hardly merits the label of an organization in any formal sense of the word. That is, people were gathering around a common purpose, but there was no strategy, no structure, no division of labour or any of the other features that characterize formal organization (du Gay and Vikkelsø, 2017). And importantly, the Women's March did not have any leaders. Although identifiable individuals (while recognized as the first, Shook was not the only one to suggest a march) had established the common purpose and momentum was gathering around the cause, as of yet no specific means of turning intention into action, of actually organizing the march, had been articulated.

According to the official story, this began to change when Bob Bland, who had called for a march the morning after the election, asked Teresa Shook and other would-be march-organizers to merge their prospective events (The Women's March Organizers and Nast, 2018: 36). At this point, the narrative shifts from that of a purely spontaneous and organic process to something more organized. Bland explains:

Part of the reason that we were able to launch all this so quickly is that we ran it kind of like a viral start-up; we made changes on the fly and weren't afraid to fail and try again. And I think that's actually one of the reasons why it was successful – it's all about the moment, you know? (The Women's March Organizers and Nast, 2018: 44)

Indeed, about the moment, but also about bringing in people who had experience with start-ups – and with social organizing. In a matter of hours, a number of organizers had been named and official 'state chapters' were popping up; the Women's March was coming into being as an organization – and, as such, it also became realistic as an event. 'We will march on Washington', turned from an angry cry of defiance, a vent for frustration, into a promise of things to come, a plan to be carried out.

With this change, however, the organization also became contentious and the question of its leadership emerged. Here is Bland's re-telling of what happened:

...people started asking things like "Where are the people of color?" and "where are the Muslims?" And they were going through the lists of people that we were saying that we wanted to march in unity with [...] and saying, "Yeah, but where are they in the leadership?" And for the first time, oh wow, we realized that we hadn't really thought about who was going to lead this. We were just organizing as a bunch of people, and it was just like this huge, viral thing. And at that point, people said, "Look, y'all are white. Like, all of y'all". (The Women's March Organizers and Nast, 2018: 47)

Race, then, became the first point of contestation within the Women's March, and it has been a recurrent source of tension and intervention throughout, a main narrative driver, we might say. Or, in the words of Vanessa Wruble, another of the organizers, "...the march was immediately a lightning rod for race dynamics" (The Women's March Organizers and Nast, 2018: 47). While such dynamics drove the organization apart, they also provided it with vitality; the Women's March might be said to have become such a source of inspiration because of its willingness to embrace internal contestation (Talentino, 2017).

Race issues – or rather, considerations as to how the organization might become 'less white' and more representative of everyone it sought to include – also drove the appointment of an official leadership team. This team, everyone agreed, had to include women of colour, and, importantly, this decision also meant experienced social activists and organizers came on board. In fact, Bob Bland, the only white woman in the top leadership, is the only co-chair whose organizing experience comes from business rather than activism. The appointment of Tamika Mallory, Carmen Perez, and Linda Sarsour as the three other co-chairs, to the contrary, not only meant representation of different minorities, but also endowed the Women's March with a leadership of experienced social organizers.

This is where the story really speeds up. Having overcome the first challenge to its representative ability and emerged with a broader base and a stronger leadership, the Women's March organization quickly grew into a huge and sprawling network. While the central leadership became clearer and more focused, the organization remained decentralized – even more so as local marches gained momentum; first in the US, then around the world. At this point, the Women's March also began to garner serious attention outside of its own circuits. That is, the news media began paying attention to what was happening, meaning the march-in-the-making became known to the public at large – not just to people involved in or sympathetic to its planning.

This meant the Women's March had its first encounters with its exterior adversaries; not only Trump-supporters, but also people who argued that the anti-Trump position is deferred by, rather than strengthened through, feminism (Dalmia, 2017). At this point, some also questioned the organization's legal and/or moral right to march. As Sarah Sophie, an organizer, re-called:

We were getting slammed with the hoopla around the permits, and really it was thinly veiled sexism. I remember being in the office and Linda was on some call, and at one point she was like, “Did anyone ask Martin Luther King Jr. if he had a permit? I’m just wondering”. (The Women’s March Organizers and Nast, 2018: 96)

While being challenged on its racial inclusiveness opened up the organization from within, facing external critique brought it together. That is, meeting adversaries galvanized Women’s March organizers and supporters in their fight for the common cause.

As the Women’s March organization consolidated itself, a further form of contestation appeared; one neither easily characterizable as a challenge from within or from the outside, but rather as negotiation of in- or exclusion. Centrally, the question of men’s role in the Women’s March had to be settled. Here, the notion of male allies became central; unlike some feminist movements, which have been sceptical of men’s participation, the Women’s March welcomed men from the beginning, but also made clear men had to join on women’s terms – and on the terms of the Women’s March. One issue here was that of safety and of the manner in which the march would be conducted. In one early invitation to ‘feminist men’, the terms of their participation were laid out as follows:

We need every male ally to take a stand for women and with women, just as it’s incumbent upon white people to stand up for/defend black lives. However, we can’t afford any random acts of violence at events meant to address women’s safety, and just a few anarchists acting with the white male Left can hijack the outcome of a carefully routed, nonviolent demonstration. (Morris, 2016)

Men’s participation, then, was negotiated as being welcome, indeed necessary, but as having to conform strictly to the terms set by the march organizers. In the words of Jose Antonio Vargas: “Women, as ever, will lead the resistance, and men must be their allies” (The Women’s March Organizers and Nast, 2018: 146). Thus, men were positioned as potential allies; neither fully part of nor necessarily exterior to the women. As such, their position continued to mark a boundary; men had to prove their worth to be able to participate.

Similarly, the organizers had to negotiate the participation of organizations with their own established agendas and interests; as more and more established groups and collectives wanted to partner up in the organization of and/or participate in the march. Again, the basic stance was welcoming, and the complete list of partners now tallies about 600 organizations, ranging from large national and international organizations like Americans for Democratic Action and Amnesty International through small local groups such as San Francisco Asian Women’s Shelter to initiatives developed specifically for or around the Women’s March, e.g. the Pussyhat Project (to which we shall return). The list is as impressive for its length as it is for its diversity, but it is also interesting for who is not on it. With more and more organizations asking to join, the unifying force of being against Trump was challenged by differences within the Trump-opposition, and the Women’s March had to take a stand on various contentious issues. In this process, it became clear that not every difference could, in fact, be accommodated within the organization, and the emerging leadership team had to make decisions of who to in- and exclude by taking a stance on various

incommensurable issues. Thus, the Women's March began to take more specific shape as more than a catch-all for Trump-resistance and, hence, to define its purpose in substantial terms.

Most notably, it had to settle its view on abortion and decide whether pro-life organizations could be Women's March partners. While the Women's March generally seeks to be an inclusive organization and responds to challenges to its inclusivity with attempts to broaden its scope (as has already been illustrated with the issue of race), the question of abortion turned out to be one on which the organization was both willing to take a stand and draw a line. Not only are pro-life organizations not welcome as partners, but the major pro-choice organization Planned Parenthood is one of only two 'premium partners' (the other being the Natural Resource Defence Council). With decisions such as this one, the Women's March gradually developed its policy platform.

Creating the platform also became an act of formalizing the organization and sanctioning its leadership; the organizational form and content grew together. By mid-January this platform was formalized in the Unity Principles, which support the overall goal of creating:

...a society in which women – including Black women, Native women, poor women, immigrant women, disabled women, Muslim women, lesbian, queer and trans women – are free and able to care for and nurture their families, however they are formed, in safe and healthy environments free from structural impediments. (Women's March, n.d.A)

This laid the foundation of the practice of 'intersectional feminism' that became a hall-mark of the Women's March in its post-march iterations in the course of which the organization has both popularized and nuanced this hitherto primarily theoretical notion. Thus, intersectionality, as we defined it in the introduction, has been turned from an analytical concept into a normative principle on which the Women's March bases its practical actions. Indeed, intersectionality may be seen as the foundational value of the organization, particularly as it re-defined its purpose after having attained the initial goal of conducting the actual march (see the section on 'Movement' below).

The many different circuits that developed in the run-up to the march, then, led to variation in terms of the affective valence of the circulation. Such variation, however, not only appeared as the circulation spread, but also cropped up within the organization as the initial unity and consensus was contested. The Women's March wanted to represent all women, meaning all women potentially had to decide whether to accept this representation or not – and all men could consider whether to be allies or not. The high intensity of affective dynamics around the Women's March's ability to include everyone remained, as we will see, an important organizing force during and after the march. With this in mind, let us turn to the moment.

Moment

The Women's March was exuberant; a more powerful message of resistance and solidarity than anyone could have hoped for when its planning began. In less than three months 653 marches had been organized in the US alone and five million people had been mobilized to march around the

world. With an estimate of 800,000-1,200,000 participants, the march on Washington remained the centre of attention; the 'eye of the storm', so to speak, around which everything swirled. The magnitude of this swirl and the power of its ripples, however, went beyond anyone's imagination. That is, even if the exact numbers can be – and have been – contested, there is no doubt that the Women's March was a massive success, and that it outperformed the inauguration that had taken place the day before in both the number of attendants in Washington and national as well as global reach (Broomfield, 2017; Wallace and Parlapiano, 2017).

The trajectory from the idea was conceived until it was realized, was not exactly smooth, but the momentum that was built up along the way gradually became undeniable, indeed, unstoppable. Whatever one's specific reasons to attend (or stay away), the Women's March had hit a nerve; for many it met a deep need to speak up, to act up...to do *something*. On the day of the Women's March, just as at its very inception, collaboration was the overriding sentiment. As Teresa Shook, who had initially suggested the march, described her experience of participating in it: "I'm overwhelmed with joy. A negative has been turned into a positive" (Woerner, 2017). Similar articulations of redemption recurred in many reactions to the march; for instance, one of the organizers of the Women's march in London said: "It's an opportunity to come together, to grieve and then to turn that around to celebrate unity" (Espinal in Adam, 2017). And, across the world, marchers said their participation was 'about healing', 'felt empowering, and 'showed solidarity' (Tamkin and Gramer, 2017).

Also, and invariably, the march was anti-Trump, but somewhere in the process from election day to the day after Trump's inauguration, anger and frustration had, indeed, turned into something else or become supplemented by other intensities of feeling. Blind rage had become cunning, creative, even fun as witnessed by the protestors' signs and costumes, not least the knitted pink 'pussyhats' worn by a large number of participants in response to Trump's infamous remark about being able to 'grab them by the pussy' (Pussyhat Project, n.d.). And importantly, the protest was peaceful; in spite of minor skirmishes with counter-demonstrations it did not lead to any arrests (Hambrick, 2017; Seipel, 2017).

The stories of the march itself, as they circulated during and immediately after the march, are overwhelmingly positive, defiantly joyful in their celebration of present unity and anticipation of future struggle (Baker, 2017). The Women's March, then, in its moment of culmination immediately looked beyond that moment and saw the chance of continued resistance, of turning from march to movement. As Shook continued: "All these people coming together to unite to try and make a difference, that's what we're going to be doing for the next four years. I see it's really going to happen" (Woerner, 2017). In the moment of the march, then, the affective dynamics bore the promise that love might, indeed, as the slogan proclaimed, trump hate.

Movement

In the immediate aftermath of the march, however, collaboration and harmony gave way to criticism and contestation. While the Women's March remained united against its opposition, internal strife threatened to tear the movement-in-the-making apart, but also had the potential to redefine and reinvigorate it. And again, the most contentious issue was that of representation. For instance, the fact that no one was arrested could be re-interpreted as a racial matter; not a sign

that the demonstration had been particularly peaceful, but that it had been predominantly white (Blay, 2017). And the pussyhats became targeted for privileging white, cis-gendered women; they were ubiquitous on January 21st 2017 and became a central symbol of the movement in early days, e.g. featuring on the covers of *Time* and *The New Yorker*. At the anniversary protests a year later, however, they were all but absent (Shamus, 2018). In the process of defining and refining intersectional feminism, signs and symbols that emanated from privileged positions and had potentially essentialist connotations were extracted from the movement. The story of how the pussyhat was taken out of circulation and relegated to museums (Brooks, 2017; Jones, 2017) is but one illustrative example of how the question of whether or not the Women's March is "just another display of white privilege" (Ramanathan, 2017) is continuously posed and continues to be addressed within the movement (Mosthof, 2017).

While these centrifugal dynamics were not new and had previously worked to give new direction to the organization and leadership of the Women's March, the specifics of the contestation were now different in two respects: first, it did not seem possible to find any resolution to or respite from the internal strife this time; second, it now involved the leadership as part of the problem of representation rather than as its solution (Gessen, 2018; Weiss, 2017). Just as the critique persisted, however, so did the organization's and its leadership's willingness to face it; to engage in 'daring discussions' so as to turn internal differences into external unity (The Women's March Organizers and Nast, 2018: 149).

Thus, critique has been a staple of the process of turning the moment into a movement, but so has collaboration. When facing Trump-policies like the Muslim ban, centripetal forces are strong and people rally to the cause, but when activities and events are not direct responses to Trump, matters become more centrifugal and potentially divisive. Throughout, a central question recurs: Can the moment of the march lead to real and lasting political change? Can the movement keep momentum? (Chira and Martin, 2017; Kurtzleben, 2017; Wright, 2018).

In a first effort to establish its continued existence, the Women's March organized the 'ten actions in hundred days'-campaign so as to continue to show resistance as the Trump-presidency got underway (Crawford, 2017). Action number one was to send a 'hear our voice' postcard to senators asking them to take specific action on an issue of the sender's choice; a remarkably solitary and contemplative action after the collective outpouring of the march. While this action was not particularly controversial, it also did not create much of a buzz outside of the budding movement; it may have functioned "predominantly to keep people engaged" (Weindling, 2017), to give the protestors something tangible to do as they were coming down from the march. For its fourth action, coinciding with International Women's day, however, the Women's March planned 'a day without a woman', which got plenty of attention – and was highly contentious among supporters of the Women's March as well as with its opponents. The idea was that women should refrain from economic transactions, neither working nor shopping on the 8th of March, as a "one-day demonstration of socio-economic solidarity" (Women's March, n.d.B), and some, indeed, hailed the initiative as pivotal in turning the moment into a movement (Conteh, 2017). Critics within the movement, however, saw it as a 'protest of the privileged' (Redden, 2017), given that "for many women, taking a day off is a luxury they can't afford" (Fottrell, 2017).

A day without women heightened the intensity of contestation within the Women's March, but it also sparked external tension and debate, causing the circulation of and about the organization to surge and intensify – especially because a group of the Women's March's leading organizers got arrested during protests outside Trump Hotel in New York. This experience both harnessed the organizers' resolve to carry the movement forward and strengthened their awareness of the importance of checking their own privilege and constantly seeking broader representation. Cassady Fendley reflects:

Getting arrested was like the biggest privilege walk I could take. It made me think of [...] all the black and brown people who are arrested for things that I, a white woman, would not be arrested for [...]. Getting arrested was a privileged activity for me. But when the privileged people intentionally enter a system that isn't designed for us, we disrupt the bigger system of making some people worth more than others to begin with. (The Women's March Organizers and Nast, 2018: 387)

The events and narratives surrounding the day without a woman initiative illustrate how the Women's March has hardened its opposition to external adversaries while it strives to be as internally open and welcoming as possible. These two moves may not seem immediately reconcilable, but are, in fact, consistent with the founding idea of the march; in seeking to unite the Trump-opposition, the organization has become clearer and clearer about who it excludes and more and more articulate in its appeal to those it wishes to include.

The Women's March, we might say, has become more explicitly political and has turned from Trump-resistance to campaigning for alternative candidates at the 2018 midterm elections. The organization's success is now measured in the number of such candidates running and the number of people who might support these candidates registered to vote. In this respect, the central events, so far, have been the Women's Convention, held on October 27-29 2017, and the Power to the Polls-campaign. Launched on the anniversary of the March, the latter focuses on registering to vote (Women's March, n.d.C), whereas the former focused on mobilizing candidates and campaign organizers. Billed as "...the beginning of a political groundswell, showing that the rise of the woman IS the rise of the nation" (Women's Convention, n.d.), the convention offered its participants "...workshops, strategy sessions, inspiring forums and intersectional movement building" (ibid.). This stage in the organization's narration will culminate with the midterm elections.

In the time-span from Women's March to Women's Convention and onwards to Power to the Polls, then, a turn has been made from resistance to reclamation. In searching for alternatives to Trump, participants in the Women's March are now turning to themselves, proudly proclaiming: "We are the leaders we have been looking for" (ibid). In this respect, the movement is – and continues to be – 'leaderful', understood as a process of empowering 'the many' rather than 'the one', of being full of leaders and collective leadership. Thus, the organization draws its strength from the combined contributions of the collective, bringing many voices together to act as one (The Women's March Organizers and Nast, 2018: 78).

Through its post-heroic collectiveness, the leadership of the Women's March offers a positive alternative to Trump's heroic narrative. In the post-truth era, it seems, people are both drawn to heroic and post-heroic leadership narratives; both seem to offer directions in a time of uncertainty and both promise to give power back to the people. Thus, the Women's March may be said to fight the populism of the Trump presidency with populist means. However, Trump's heroic leadership narrative seduces its audience through a (male) saviour figure, offering an authoritative narrative and an authoritarian leader, whereas the post-heroic narrative of the Women's March offers a community around shared values that tie people together in the practice of these values (see e.g. Gehman et al., 2013). In this sense, the Women's March is both leaderful and collective – contested and collaborative – at the same time. And it is in this sense that the populism of the Women's March is better than that of Trump; it delivers on its promise of popular empowerment.

Discussion: A better alternative?

We have analysed the narration of the Women's March in detail so as to track the interplay of collaboration and contestation, the dynamic relations of moments of harmony and stretches of discord. Thus, we find that the Women's March is, indeed, a choric collectivity in Rand's sense, but that it is also an orchestration of less congruent voices, a negotiation of difference that does not lead to harmony and consensus but insists on staying with the trouble, as Haraway (2016) so felicitously put it. Thus, the leadership of the Women's March is not always as emergent nor as consistently collective as its narration tends to suggest. Rather, the Women's March largely owes its sweeping success as a social movement to the way the leading organizers carefully constructed and committed to a narrative that – despite its contestations – reflected a set of values that was recognized both within and outside of the movement. The leaders of the Women's March not only formulated the values, but also practiced and performed them in a persuasive way that helped construct a fundamental values discourse (Gehman et al., 2013) through which leadership was exercised.

These value practices were not only to the advantage of the Women's March as a social movement, but also placed its leaders – most notably Mallory, Bland, Perez, and Sarsour – in powerful positions as, for instance, indicated by *Time's* inclusion of them on its list of the 100 most influential people in the world (Gillibrand, n.d.). Despite its collective, distributed and relational nature, the Women's March was – and is – heavily dependent on the heroic construction of its leaders (and their values). Although the Women's March leaders were inclusive of various voices, and the critique these voices expressed, the heroism of the leaders themselves and the values they represented was paramount to transforming the many articulated positions and points of view into a unified resistance against Trump. Thus, leadership moments are not just important in order to understand how someone like Trump came into power (Ladkin, 2017), but also to be able to understand how a social movement, like the Women's March, can transform from dispersed resistance into a unified and powerful organization. As such, claiming that social movements like the Women's March are more collaborative (as defined by Raelin, 2016) and less cult-like (in Tourish and Pinnington's, 2002 sense of the term) than, for example, the leadership and followership of Trump, is naïve. To the contrary, the critique of the 'post' in post-heroic leadership (e.g. Fletcher, 2004) is as applicable to the Women's March as the critique of the Great Man theories (e.g. Mouton, 2017) is to Trump.

The leadership of the Woman's March, however, teaches us that charismatic leadership does not need to come from one great (hu)man, but can, indeed, be co-constructed by a group of leaders and their followers. Although it does create its own heroes and mythologies, it is a 'leaderful' movement in the sense of being empowered by collective vision and collaborative agency – its narration is fuelled by agreement as much as contestation. This process is not always unproblematic; for instance, the leaders' ability to represent the movement as a whole has been – and is being – put into question. However, the willingness to embrace such trouble and tensions is what makes leadership of the Women's March particularly powerful – and a particularly attractive alternative to Trump's brand of 'great man'-populism. The fact that the leadership has evolved around – and in conversation with – its own contentions, as opposed to try to silence critique, is the very reason that this leadership could move the Women's March forward from spontaneous protest to an established organisation with a vision and a strategy that reaches beyond the march itself. Supplementing Mailhot et al.'s (2016) findings that collaborative leadership made different world views possible, we have found that challenges and resistance from within the Women's March made collective leadership possible.

However, the analysis also shows that the organization of the Women's March is not organic and horizontally networked as the narration lets on. Instead, the top leadership and professional tier of the organization is, increasingly, managing local initiatives and cells, seeking to influence who uses the label of the Women's March and for what purposes (Stockman, 2018; Stuart, 2018). Thus, the social movement looks increasingly like a political party – if not in its dominant narration, then in its organization and makes increasing use of soft power that supports the collective post-heroic narrative while subtly steering the organisation in a specific direction guided by its leaders. Thus, even as the movement continues its rise to prominence, it continues to position itself in the minority position of a rebellious fraction or underground resistance:

The Women's March [...] represents the hopes of millions of Americans who were mobilized by the election of Donald Trump. A giant, influential organization finds itself in the emotional state of a tiny resistance cell, holding on desperately against a hostile world. This is a symptom of a disease of American political life, the descent into positional warfare in which politics – the art of compromise – is no longer possible. (Gessen, 2018)

In drawing on and seeking to intensify the positive (and populist!) affective valence associated with opposition to the powers that be, the Women's March shares more with its main antagonists – president Trump and his alt-right followers – than the chief narrators of the march might care to admit (or like). It creates followership from emotional and political engagement – just like most other successful leaders (Gabriel, 2005; Sinclair, 2005; Spector, 2016). More specifically, the rise of the Women's March resembles that of the alt-right (and other populist movements) in three key respects (for an exposure of the alt-right incarnation of these traits, see Nagle, 2017): first, the collectivity is primarily defined by its common opposition to an exterior force, perceived as a powerful and problematic 'elite'. Second, its activists and organizers are mobilized through a new amalgam of online and offline processes of narration. Although traditional offline events like marches and protests remain central, the new social movements are different from their

antecedents in that they would not have existed if they had not gone viral on social media. The new media platforms, then, support the affective circulation of the signs that come to constitute the new social movements. This leads to the third point, namely that the affective intensity of these movements is unprecedented; the new modes of circulation and intensification that characterize online media are also characteristic of the Women's March and its alt-right counterparts. The narration of these movements become an organizing force as specific signs are charged with energy and begin circulating, charging further as each new post or comment, each link or like, adds to the circulation and spurs it onwards. This process of affective circulation may follow different paths depending on the valence of the circulation. For instance, the affective sign of the 'pussyhat' was heavily circulated prior and during the march, imbued with positive affect it was central to the organization of the Women's March at this point. In the aftermath of the march, however, the hat became contested and while this contestation first led to even more circulation, the affective valence turned from positive to negative. Eventually, this development led key organizers to abandon the sign of the pussyhat and it gradually went out of circulation. Thus, processes of affective circulation are not irreversible nor predictable, but unfold dynamically and in undetermined ways.

We may see these three features as necessary conditions of social movement leadership, as what makes such leadership possible. But are they also sufficient conditions of such leadership? If so, we must conclude that social movements have no inherent normative stance or value, that their organizational practices and leadership narratives are not intrinsically good or bad, but can be used for all purposes. In the post-truth era, it may seem, everything is up for grabs. However, this is the very point at which the Women's March distinguishes itself from other – and, we argue, less laudable – social movements. In its very willingness to not only contest its opponents, but face internal contestation as well; to take the point that everything is debatable seriously and to engage in even the most difficult debates. This is what the Women's March organizers proudly call 'daring discussions', the willingness to always listen to and seek to represent all the voices that speak up within the movement.

The commitment to daring discussions not only distinguishes the Women's March procedurally from the organizational and narrative practices of other social movements, most notably the alt-right, it also sets it apart from its progressive antecedents. In the Women's March, the choric collectivity, which Rand identified at Camp Courage, is that of intersectional feminism (see e.g. Ulus, 2018; Villeseche et al., 2018); it no longer articulates the agency of many voices speaking as one, but instead insists on the power of articulated differences. In the post-truth era, intersectional feminism presents itself as a strong alternative to other populist movements; it not only promises to represent everyone, but insists on everyone's participation, foregrounding difference as a basis for unity. "In the rhetorical circulation model," Chaput (2010: 19) argues, "success derives from a better understanding of differently situated positions and an enhanced ability to engage differently situated people, processes that open dialogues rather than win debates." The willingness to open itself up to centrifugal forces, to circulate outwards in unknown directions, is what the Women's March has got right in both the instrumental and normative sense of the word, this is the core of its success, the basis of its appeal.

Conclusion: Towards intersectional leadership?

The Women's March, we may conclude, holds the potential to change not only the leadership of our society, but also how we perceive leadership exactly because it insists on not closing in on itself, because it is undetermined. But is there a need for change? Or, as Raelin asks: "are we happy with it [leadership] as it currently stands? Is it serving to advance our civilization in a way that is sustainable to ourselves and to our offspring?" (2016: 132). If the answer is no, as we suspect it will be, there is reason to continue the exploration of the alternative that the Women's March seeks to offer.

In doing so, however, we face a further question: if the attraction of the Women's March is that its leadership is undetermined, how may we investigate this leadership further without ruining it? Here, we suggest that one key to solving this tension is to stay with it; to continue the study and conceptualization of collaboration *and* contestation as the intersections(!) of the two continuously and simultaneously bring the Woman's March together and pull it apart. These forces allow the Women's March to counter Trump's authoritarian approach to post-truth, representing the many different plausible positions rather than the One truth that will always be a lie. Further, they may allow the organization to steer free of its own greatest temptation: the illusion of perfect representation. That is, as the Women's March seeks to include different voices, it also claims to represent these voices; meaning, if all were included, all would be represented: 'we are the leaders we have been looking for'. While this collective leadership narrative is an attractive alternative to the Great Man story that currently dominates leadership narratives, it runs the risk of post-heroic blindness to its own narrative veil.

In sum, the collaborative leadership of social movements challenges post-truth politics. However, collaboration only holds potential to re-install truthful communication in democratic discourse if it remains open to contestation. If we recognize that the task of inclusion and representation is never over, there is hope for better leadership – and better societies. The potential of and for positive change lies in continuing to branch out and open up, to always explore new intersections and their various paths. Together we rise, but only if we keep pulling apart.

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