



## Review

## Leadership of socio-political vanguards: A review and future directions

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## A B S T R A C T

With the influential rise of the Alt-Right throughout the West in recent years, there has been a renewed interest in the leadership of these forms of fringe political groups. While some work on the leadership of these types of groups was done in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, less work has been done since then. Given the important role of these groups in today's political environment, a review and theoretical integration of this past leadership work, along with suggestions for future research directions, is overdue.

This paper begins by reviewing what literature exists regarding the leadership of socio-political vanguards, as well as what additional literature exists that may also be relevant to better understanding the phenomenon of vanguard leadership. Vanguard leadership is then placed within the historical context and goals of past vanguard groups. This analysis then leads to further defining some of the components of vanguard leadership along with a review of typically associated leadership traits, skills and behaviours.

While few theories directly address the way in which vanguard leadership operates, this paper reviews related leadership theories that might offer meaningful contributions to our understanding of socio-political vanguard leadership. Some theories, such as those related to social movements (particularly burgeoning), minor but influential mainstream political groups, and advocacy/activist collectives are particularly relevant here and are reviewed along with more general leadership theories that might also hold applicability, such as those related to leader and follower (and public) information processing and sensemaking under crises. The paper then concludes with some suggestions for future research directions.

## Introduction

With the influential rise of the Alt-Right throughout the West, there has been a renewed interest in the leadership of fringe political groups. Although it is neither a political party nor a social movement as typically defined, the Alt-Right's influence on mainstream journalism, politics, and even governments has been indisputable. While the sensational political approaches of the Alt-Right have been garnering a large amount of recent press, there has been less work investigating the leadership processes within these forms of socio-political vanguards. Although some references have been made to the leadership of and within these groups in the social movement literature, very little has been done in other literatures; and of the work that has been done, much of it has often been peripheral to other investigations, with the focus of these prior studies being primarily on issues apart from the leadership of vanguards. Given the important role of leadership of vanguard groups in today's political environment, a review and integration of this past work with more recent leadership research is overdue.

This paper will begin by reviewing what literature exists regarding the leadership of socio-political vanguards, as well as what additional literature exists that may also be relevant to better understanding the phenomenon of vanguard leadership. Vanguard leadership will then be placed within the historical context and goals of past vanguard groups.

This analysis will then lead to further defining some of the components of vanguard leadership along with a review of typically associated leadership behaviours.

While few theories directly speak to the way in which vanguard leadership operates, this paper will also review related leadership theories that might offer meaningful contributions to our understanding of socio-political vanguard leadership. Some theories, such as those related to social movements (particularly emerging), minor but influential political parties, and advocacy/activist collectives are particularly relevant here and will be reviewed, along with more general leadership theories that might also hold applicability, such as those related to leader and follower (and public) information processing and sensemaking under crises. The paper will then conclude with an evaluation of the extant literature and some prescription for future research directions.

Some key questions that this paper will address include:

1. What are socio-political vanguards and what constitutes vanguard leadership?
2. What are its goals?
3. What does vanguard leadership look like (i.e., what are behaviours that might typically be associated with vanguard leadership)?
4. What existing theories might help explain and help us better understand vanguard leadership?

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2019.101372>

Received 16 November 2018; Received in revised form 29 October 2019; Accepted 1 December 2019

Available online 23 December 2019

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5. What further research and theoretical development could we be doing?

### Socio-political vanguards – definitions and historical background

The definition of a socio-political *vanguard* (in French, *avant-garde*) is one that has evolved quite a bit since Lenin – one of the first to popularize the term in its political sense – began to theorize and apply it as a strategic approach back in the early 1900's. The term has roots in military expeditions – it described the most forward unit that would disrupt the enemy and secure ground in advance of the main army. Lenin later developed the idea of a vanguard as a party (*en avant*) comprised of dedicated members – often intellectuals and activists – whose primary purpose was to spread Marxist concepts and educate the proletariat in Marxism, while disrupting the status quo; in Lenin's case, the status quo being the Imperial Russian government (Lenin, 1973).

Since then, the term vanguard has evolved to include groups of intellectuals and activists that work towards spreading their own particular brand of political ideas (whether Right, Left, or other), often through propaganda and other forms of agitation, in an attempt to subvert and overthrow the prevailing mainstream culture and – ultimately – the political establishment. Given the importance of the communication function within the vanguard approach, it is little surprise that a large number of contemporary socio-political vanguards have either emerged from cultural vanguards or have had a strong cultural component. Groups such as the Futurists<sup>1</sup> and the Situationists<sup>2</sup> were both initially aesthetic movements that eventually grew to incorporate and extend socio-political elements.

Drawing from its military pedigree, the term as presently used also suggests a separate unit and one that is in advance – more forward – than other groups engaged in a similar fight, albeit to a more moderate degree and in quite different environments (i.e., the hostile front that a vanguard typically contends with as contrasted with a more benign rear area); in the socio-political sense, this implies that a vanguard is “ahead of the characteristic beliefs and norms of the wider society” (Wood, 2002) and in direct contestation with those status quo beliefs and norms, while the larger social movement is more moderate and in-line with the public's belief, values, and worldview.

<sup>1</sup> Futurism promoted a “dynamic modernization” (Wood, 1999, p.196); its advocacy of violence contained both anarchist and Fascist elements. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876–1944) authored the 1909 *Futurist Manifesto* which advocated for the violent rejection of traditional forms of art in favor of the incorporation of modern technology and the use of violence as artistic methods. Italian Futurism as an avant-garde soon became widespread across Europe during the inter-war period. Marinetti wrote *Fascist Manifesto* in 1919 and later became an active supporter of Mussolini. Marinetti himself actively supported the Italian fascist regime and volunteered for military service during WWII. He became a notable force in developing the party philosophy throughout the regime's existence but did not insert himself directly into political life (Berghaus, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> The Situationist International (SI) was an international social revolutionary organization active from 1957 to 1972 made up of avant-garde artists, intellectuals, and political theorists, founded by Guy Debord. While the intellectual origins of the SI were rooted in Marxist critiques of capitalism the underpinnings of this critique also absorbed into this a rejection of spirituality, hedonism, and avant-garde art movements of the first half of the 20th century. Debord (1931–1994) was a French writer, artist, and theorist who authored the 1967 book *The Society of the Spectacle*; both this book and Debord himself are frequently cited as having been highly influential towards instigating the May 1968 student uprisings in France, where both students and SI members occupied universities as a revolt against modern-day capitalist exploitation. The central activities of the SI targeted the spread of commodity fetishism, or the ‘spectacle’ – meaning the reliance on objects rather than expression to mediate social relations – into every aspect of life and culture (Home, 1991). Although Debord's name is often associated with the 1968 uprisings, he himself did not participate directly in partisan electoral politics.

This in fact is a key differentiator between vanguards and their counterparts, social movements; as has been noted by Bill Moyer, McAllister, and Finley (2001), “Movement activists will be successful only to the extent that they can convince the great majority of people that the movement, not the elite power holders, truly represents society's positive and widely held values and sensibilities.” He goes on to note that “movements are self destructive to the extent that they are defined as rebellious, on the fringes of society, and in opposition to the society's cherished core social values, symbols, rituals, beliefs, and principles.” This latter warning of course is an apt description of vanguards. While behaving in such a way would be self-defeating for many social movement leaders, these defining factors are often levers of profound influence for vanguard leaders.

This division speaks to the evolving perspective on vanguards as groups that are somewhat autonomous (in the modern use of the term – not directly, or at least publicly, affiliated with an established political party or mass social movement) and not inherently a direct part of the political process. Rather, vanguards work to shift public consciousness to set the stage for *other* individuals and social movements to effect political change. Political parties are typically defined as organizations that seek to influence public policy by getting its candidates elected to public office. Party members share the same ideology and run electoral campaigns based on political platforms linked to this ideology. In this respect, political parties are entrenched in the structures of society and serve to link governmental institutions to elements of civil society. By contrast, vanguards also work to gain the attention of the mainstream public, but not as an institutionalized group or political party – they often diverge from party politics to concentrate their impact on shifting cultural and political norms or ‘public mindshare’. Vanguards do not see themselves as participating members of the status quo political process and typically do not have as a goal becoming a part of it in the immediate future.

While vanguards are sometimes similar to interest and activist groups in some of their tactics, their missions generally account for more than one issue – they often have an entire worldview they are trying to bring to fruition, one that is typically utopian (Lindholm & Zúquete, 2010). And while the propaganda and agitation that vanguards put forward often lends support to some social movements and/or their primary political goals, it is important to draw distinctions between the actions of vanguards and those of mass social movements as they often quite differ in how they work to achieve political objectives, particularly in terms of mission, strategies, and tactics.

Historical reviews of past social change sometimes further muddy the distinctions between different leaders involved in these periods. While hagiographies of prominent social movements often describe leaders as ‘vanguards’ at early stages in their movements (thereby lending credibility to their reputations of integrity, courage, and tenacity), many such leaders actually espoused positions that, while certainly challenging, were still more moderate and socially acceptable forms of vanguard positions of the same period (for example, Mussolini's more moderate form – fascism – of Marinetti's Futurism, or Martin Luther King's civil rights movement as compared to Malcolm X's black nationalism). This conflation of vanguards with the beginning phases of social movements further overlooks a key strategic pillar of vanguards that was developed as far back as Lenin: namely, that vanguards are best employed as levers for change when *juxtaposed* with mass social movements. In effect, as vanguards open up political space in the consciousness of the public through direct contestation, mass social movement agendas appear less challenging/extreme.

Similarly, while some mass social movement leaders have been erroneously labeled vanguard leaders due to loose criteria and historicization of the beginnings of social movements, the proper definition and delineation of vanguards has also suffered from later violence committed by some vanguard groups. This has led to further confusion, leaving the categorization of some vanguard leaders to either ‘social movement leader’ or ‘terrorist leader’, instead of more tightly defining

the boundaries between these groups (i.e., a group definitively moving into a distinctly different phase and thus category).

In the strictest sense, the primary goal of a vanguard is not to lead social movements, nor to commit violence, but to help shift the public's consciousness to such a degree as to make it more amenable to future political propositions that would lead to the vision that the vanguard espouses. Those realized political propositions, however, and the social movement and/or political party that might share or adopt them, are not the goal of a vanguard to propose or to become (and nor should it be – as the tactics typically employed by effective vanguards are extremely contentious, there is often little political capital remaining to build a subsequent mainstream movement and/or campaign).

Further, being the leader of a vanguard requires a particular set of complex skills that do not always translate to the equally complex leading of mass movements and/or political parties – there are few people that have the cognitive complexity as well as the wide-ranging behavioral repertoire to be effective as leaders in all of these environments (Aminzade, Goldstone, & Perry, 2001; Suedfeld & Rank, 1976). As a result, the general fate of most vanguard groups is not to transition to more mainstream political or even cultural success, but to either fade into obscurity if they fail to shift the public's consciousness, or to have their agenda co-opted by more mainstream movements (such as the case with Futurism and fascism) if they are more successful.

Some recent examples of such vanguards include (but are not limited to) the Situationists and the Alt-Right. Both of these groups have proven to be very influential with inserting ideas into mainstream social and political debates, and have at times even created physical activity (such as demonstrations or protests) that have disrupted mainstream societal expectations.

Attending to vanguards as a unit of study for the purpose of examining leadership roles and strategies within these groups is important for a number of reasons. First, while infrequently attended to in the literature, the leadership of vanguards remains a very visible and noteworthy subject of study that numerous disciplinary areas could shed important light on; and yet, it has rarely been the primary focus of investigations and has often been subsumed within other studies (social movements, history of political groups, the psychology of ideology and social change). Second, the influence of counter-cultural socio-political groups appears to be a growing and significant force in shaping contemporary political debates and expectations. This is evident in the way in which the Alt-Right, to name just one recent vanguard, has made such a strong impact on North American political discourse in the past couple of years; its use of the Internet in spreading information and platforms for sharing ideas has been extremely influential. In contrast to political parties which have typically wielded influence through campaign donations, promotion by public news, and electoral success, many of the present-day social issues that have been taken up and worked through by the public began with vanguard members using anonymous forum boards, Twitter hashtags, and social networking.

Third, the number of these groups also appears to be growing, with multiple groups vying for public attention and warring both with themselves and the public. And finally, while the long-term effect of some of these present-day groups such as the Alt Right has yet to be determined, there is plenty of evidence that past vanguards, such as the Situationist International, have played an important role in helping to shape and inform the political landscape that we live in today.

Given these factors, a review which would primarily concentrate on these forms of vanguards and, in particular, the way in which leadership operates within these groups would appear to be of some present value. Although not all leaders of vanguards go on to command political power (given the confrontational approach of vanguards, this is often not an option), these forms of leadership have certainly been very influential and thus warrant further investigation.

## Vanguard leadership – context, goals, and levels of analysis

While the Alt Right has created a unique stir in the past couple of years (and continues to have a presence), the Alt Right as a political vanguard is not as novel an entity as some journalists today might suggest. Vanguards on the political *right* (meaning, right-wing) have not held as prominent a place in the public eye since the 1930's, but the history of socio-political vanguards in general is quite lengthy. Although a somewhat 'modern' phenomena (meaning, since the onset of modernism), there have been a series of vanguards that have been very influential culturally and politically since at least the early 1900's.

Arguably one of the most influential socio-political vanguards within the past fifty years was the Situationist International (SI). Led by Guy Debord, the SI is often credited with being one of the primary instigators of the civil unrest of May 1968 in Paris, France. The SI began as an artistic avant-garde, creating works of art that were in contestation with the forms and meaning of the prevailing aesthetic and cultural styles of the day (Hussey, 2001; Kaufmann, 2006; Marcy 2015; Merrifield, 2005). They then moved into a political phase in which they adopted a central mission of combatting the "commodification and domination of social relationships in Western society by the media and other cultural productions of the status quo, leading average people to live disconnected and increasingly meaningless lives that are in essence 'scripted' by elites and intended to serve them" (Marcy, 2015, p. 373–374).

After moving into this political phase, Guy Debord and the SI shifted their artistic efforts towards creating unique socio-political strategies and tactics, which they then used to attack the hegemony of status quo power. Some of these tactics included *détournement* (the art of removing text and other elements of graphic design within mainstream publications and replacing them with text informed by their own political viewpoints), extreme public displays (in which they would capture the public's attention through outright provocation), and the 'construction of situations,' which involved the creation of social experiences that would be free of or subvert the contaminating influence of status-quo notions related to everyday ways of living (such as those primarily based on status-laden, market-driven desires).

The Alt-Right has clearly drawn from this legacy and has incorporated a number of these same tactics (albeit with a different political foundation), such as:

- the execution of subversive cultural approaches, such as *détournement* - some Alt Right members, such as Walt Bizmarck, have 'detoured' Walt Disney films and replaced their dialogue with Alt-Right memes associated with immigration and IQ;
- the development and dissemination of coherent social theory (as in the works of Richard Spencer and Jared Taylor);
- extreme public displays - as evidenced by the provocative public appearances of Alt Right leaders like Richard Spencer);
- and the construction of situations which undermine and subvert status quo social assumptions – as developed through various real-world trolling initiatives such as the "It's ok to be white" poster campaign.

All of these tactics serve an important function in breaking the public's "false consciousness" (i.e. "a way of thinking that prevents a person from perceiving the true nature of their social or economic situation"; Gramsci, 1971; Stevenson, 2010). This is an important first step in achieving the primary goal of a vanguard: to shift the public's consciousness to a state that is more amenable to the political vision that the vanguard supports. Explained more in cognitive terms, these tactics serve an important sensebreaking, sensegiving, and sensemaking function. These processes are no small matter as the outcomes of these tactics by the SI were profound: the student occupation of the Sorbonne in May 68' was greatly influenced by evolving Situationist theory and practice (Hussey, 2001; Kaufmann, 2006; Merrifield, 2005), and the

actions of these students in turn led to the civil revolts of May 1968 in Paris, France. Similarly, the 'Alt-Lite' – the more moderate and much larger faction of a growing, US populist movement leading up to the 2016 presidential election – was greatly influenced by the Alt Right, having a high degree of overlap with their various tactics, strategies, and political positions. The Alt Lite in turn was highly influential in galvanizing support for Donald Trump in the presidential race of 2016, helping in his election.

Given the great influence that these vanguards have wielded, it bears delineating further what leadership of such a group might entail. Unfortunately, research on the leadership of vanguards has been quite limited and often embedded in larger studies of other phenomena, as well as spread across a number of literatures over time, and often conflated with other forms of leadership, to include leadership of social movements (especially 'revolutionary' social movements), activist leadership, cultural leadership (and the leadership of subcultures), community leadership (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005), and the leadership of marginal political groups. While all of these forms of leadership hold some relevance and overlap with vanguard leadership – along with more general research on charismatic and ideological forms of leadership, leading for creativity and innovation, and leader cognition (such as sensemaking) – none of these should stand alone as a proxy for vanguard leadership.

In moving more closely to a better understanding of vanguard leadership, as differentiated from other forms of leadership, it might be helpful to first define some goals that might be particularly unique to the leadership of socio-political vanguards at different levels of analysis.

#### *Inter-organizational and societal level goals*

The primary goal of a vanguard leader is to gain and then shift the public's consciousness to the socio-political worldview of the vanguard, thus allowing the space for later groups and movements to further particular political agendas. Doing so often means combatting the status and power of elites in well-established social relationships through the transformation of these social relationships. Given this hostile relationship towards elites, collaborations between leaders of vanguards and societal elites is often unlikely, necessitating tactical approaches such as propaganda and agitation. Specht's (1975) taxonomy of social change (see Table 1) provides some nuance as to what vanguard leaders can expect from elites when working to change the status and power of relationships within a social system. Specht suggests that there will likely be dissensus between vanguard leaders and societal elites, which in turn suggests that collaboration between the two will not likely be an option. Given the imbalance in power between the two, there is also a threat that elites may try to co-opt vanguard leaders and their ideas (a common hazard for vanguards), leaving vanguard leaders with little choice but to avoid collaborating with the 'enemy'.

Given that collaboration with elites is typically not a viable goal for vanguard leaders, as it results in a less-than-optimal outcomes, other

strategic approaches for social change need to be devised and implemented. One approach relies on influence attempts aimed directly at the public. As vanguard leaders and their immediate followers often do not have any form of institutionalized political power, they need to commit to other ways to directly influence the public, such as engaging in protest and otherwise leveraging institutionalized forms of communication, such as mainstream media channels (and now, with the Alt Right, the internet). The desired outcome is to gain the public's attention and, once this has been achieved, to then subvert their common understanding of politically informed relationships (i.e., sensebreaking), while at the same time providing viable alternatives (i.e., sensegiving) (Marcy 2015).

Gaining the attention of the public, however, is not an easy task, particularly today. There are now multiple channels of information and entertainment all vying for this very limited resource of public attention. To be able to compete with all of these other channels, a vanguard leader needs to be creative and have a firm understanding of not only public interest, but also of what tools might best be used to create novel and sensational displays that will leverage this understanding. In the case of the Situationists, Guy Debord once walked off a television set in the middle of an interview while commenting, "We're not here to answer cuntish questions" (this was in response to the question, "What is Situationism?") (Merrifield, 2005). Similarly, Richard Spencer – a leader in the Alt Right – has given a number of provocative, televised speeches, one of which he infamously concluded with what appeared to be a 'Roman salute'.

This understanding and subversion of a public "mental model" has parallels to research on leader vision and the development of both a general and prescriptive mental model. In the case of vanguard leaders, it is vitally important that they not only have a strong understanding of their own mental model for prescriptive social change, but they also have a firm grounding in a more general model of public beliefs, values, and political assumptions (Caughron, Shipman, Beeler, & Mumford, 2009). Situationist critiques of mass political understanding, most notably in the development of notions such as the 'false consciousness' of the working class, reflect some of this distinction between prescriptive and general public mental models; as do some of the critiques made by Richard Spencer on the difference between adopting an avant-garde position in political struggles and one that is more mainstream, as in his commentaries on the political trajectory of Paul Nehlen.

In developing an understanding of both of these models, a vanguard leader is then better able to create and implement strategic approaches that can effectively subvert elements of the public's general mental model, which in turn will then provide the space to offer viable political alternatives. In effect, a vanguard leader's task at the societal level is to first 'sensebreak' a general public mental model of how social and political relationships work, and then help move the public towards a prescriptive mental model through sensegiving (e.g. vision creation and implementation) (Foldy, Goldman, & Ospina, 2008; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Pratt, 2000). In doing so, they are not only calling attention to and making salient particular social and political problems, but they are further providing solutions to those problems.

#### *Group level goals*

Given the size of the primary goal at hand – the shifting of the public's consciousness towards the worldview of the vanguard – a vanguard leader will need a group of dedicated followers to help in accomplishing this goal. As this goal requires a high level of intelligence to understand, as well as creativity to generate and implement effective strategies and tactics for dealing with it, it's little surprise that vanguards are often comprised of innovative intellectuals, activists, and artists. With these types of group members, a vanguard leader will need to know how to be effective in leading other creative people in teams (Basadur, 2004; Byrne, Mumford, Barrett, & Vessey, 2009; Mumford,

**Table 1**  
Perceptions of social change, elite/challenger response, and mode of intervention.

	When change is perceived as:	The response is often:	The mode of intervention is:
1	Rearrangement of resources	Consensus	Collaborative
2	Redistribution of resources	Difference	Campaign
3	Change in status relationships	Dissensus	Contest or disruption
4	Reconstruction of the entire system	Insurrection	Violence

Adapted from Specht (1975).



Scott, Gaddis, & Strange, 2002), as well as providing the requisite autonomy for others to exert leadership, both within the team as well as with external constituencies. As these members are often highly capable and do not typically suffer from a lack of options, vanguard leaders must be up to the challenge of dealing with the some of the usual internal threats that can occur in creative groups (such as petty bickering) as well as external threats (such as members being attacked and/or swayed by elites to abandon their vanguard positions). Vanguard leaders must help provide resources that enable the team to do its work, to include the provision of emotional resources (such as emotional support during times of acute stress) as well as financial resources, when possible. They must also help establish networks that link to other groups of like-minded others and create useful alliances.

An additional related leadership task is for vanguard leaders to provide exemplary role modeling to their immediate followers along with the general public, and to act as a living embodiment of the alternative political views that they are espousing. This example, especially if picked up by vanguard group followers, can also further serve as a “demonstration project” to the public (Mumford, 2002), effectively providing an enticing subculture for other potential members to consider adopting and enacting. These new ways of working and living help validate the superiority of the socio-political approaches and identity that the vanguard group is proposing. Likewise, the vanguard group can also be a way for a leader to further test and refine hypotheses related to these approaches.

#### Individual level goals

At the individual level, vanguard leaders need to be able to create and implement novel strategies and tactics that will help gain and then shift the public's consciousness in the direction of the social and political worldview that they are trying to bring into being. This will require the employment of a set of cognitive skills that will help with creativity and social innovation, such as effective forecasting and problem identification, as well as having a foundation of expertise on which to build new mental models of, as well as new approaches to, their community's problems.

Additionally, vanguard leaders need to provide through their own analysis and behaviour a clear example of why their approach to social and political life is superior to the existing paradigm. They need to convince followers and potential followers that they are someone worth following. As suggested by Shanteau (Shanteau, 1992; Shanteau, Weiss, Thomas, & Pounds, 2000), it is not enough that someone has the knowledge of an expert – they must also look like and behave like an expert, which is to say that they have the expected cognitive and behavioral repertoire of a leader worth listening to.

Finally, as they are social and political outsiders, vanguard leaders need to maintain and defend the integrity of their individual and group identity, vision and platform in the face of sometimes-great opposition by status quo institutions, such as the media, mainstream political parties, and governments. This means that they need to have and maintain a certain resilience when meeting mass condemnation.

#### Towards a model of vanguard leadership

A diagram of a model of vanguard leadership is shown in Fig. 1, which illustrates two primary routes of influence that vanguard leader attributes can have on effecting change: the route of leader influence on groups and group membership, which in turn affect mass society norms and values; and the route of leader influence directly affecting mass society without the intervening group variables. Change in this context refers to ‘sensebreaking’, ‘sensegiving’, and ‘sensemaking’, which together comprise a process of the public adopting new ideas and beliefs about the larger socio-political setting, some of which may contradict earlier status quo norms and values. The figure provides a representation of the effects of vanguard leader attributes into three basic

components: the level of individual leader behavior, the level of group behaviours, and the level of mass society behavior/outcomes. Before going into the model in detail, we first introduce its components below.

The first route identifies vanguard leader attributes within a group setting as being relevant for strategic planning and culture-setting, both in terms of the social/political/ideological parameters of the group as well as the group's organizational culture within and amongst the group members. The antecedent implications of the group members (personality variables, cognitive skills, identity, and worldview) interact with leadership attributes to shape the outcome behaviours of the group. These group behaviours include the creation of authoritative texts, the re-purposing of existing cultural symbols into new representations of the vanguard (detournement), and worldview and lifestyle shifts. These in turn influence outcomes on mass society beyond the groups, in the form of large-scale public sensebreaking, sensemaking, and sensegiving.

The second route identifies the interaction of vanguard leader attributes with a leader's behavior within the public space and not within an internal group setting. Such behaviours include public speeches and other displays of expertise, the publishing of authoritative texts, a publicly unyielding and uncompromising position on socio-political issues and official displays of commitment, and other potentially sensational public displays which challenge acceptable status quo public behaviours. The outcomes on mass society – change in norms – are the same as those via the first route but bypass the element of a group setting, going directly from the leader to the public.

The background setting of the general socio-political context provides an important contextual factor in this model of vanguard leadership, by way of providing the climate for which certain issues are more or less relevant. This background can include economics (public financial austerity or economic growth), the presence and severity of ‘crises’ (natural or man-made disasters), the general ideological worldview (for example, the importance of democracy), the political landscape (the number of political parties, the presence of fringe parties, the level of divisiveness between parties, general political orientation), and the presence and substance of other vanguards and social movements within mass society.

#### Vanguard leadership traits, skills, and behaviours

Due to issues such as the muddiness of definitions of vanguards, along with vanguard leadership being conflated with other forms of leadership such as ‘social movement leadership’, there are few studies that can be said to have definitively focused on the different traits, skills, and behaviours of vanguard leaders. This is not to say that some studies have not come close though, particularly those that have focused on ‘revolutionary’ or ‘rebel’ leadership.

Two excellent research studies on the theme of revolutionary leadership – *Rebel Leadership: Commitment and Charisma in the Revolutionary Process* (1973) by James Downton, and *Leaders of Revolution* (1979) by Mostafa Rejai and Kay Phillips – highlight some of the strengths and weaknesses that can more generally be found in the literature when trying to define and better understand vanguard leadership. Both of these studies provide individual, group, and societal level criteria that are important to consider when attempting to define vanguard leadership, such as the important roles that personality, motivation, and context respectively play in these forms of leadership. Downton's *Rebel Leadership* attends more to vanguard leadership as the role is more tightly defined within this study, while the other – Rejai and Phillips' *Leaders of Revolution* – does in fact speak more to revolutionary leaders of mass movements. Although both cover Lenin, who was one of very few leaders who was both a mass movement leader and a vanguard leader, both researchers spend the rest of their studies covering quite different leaders.

In their study, Rejai and Phillips note that defining and identifying principal revolutionary leaders was more difficult than they expected, and they go on to note that they ended up needing to distinguish “the

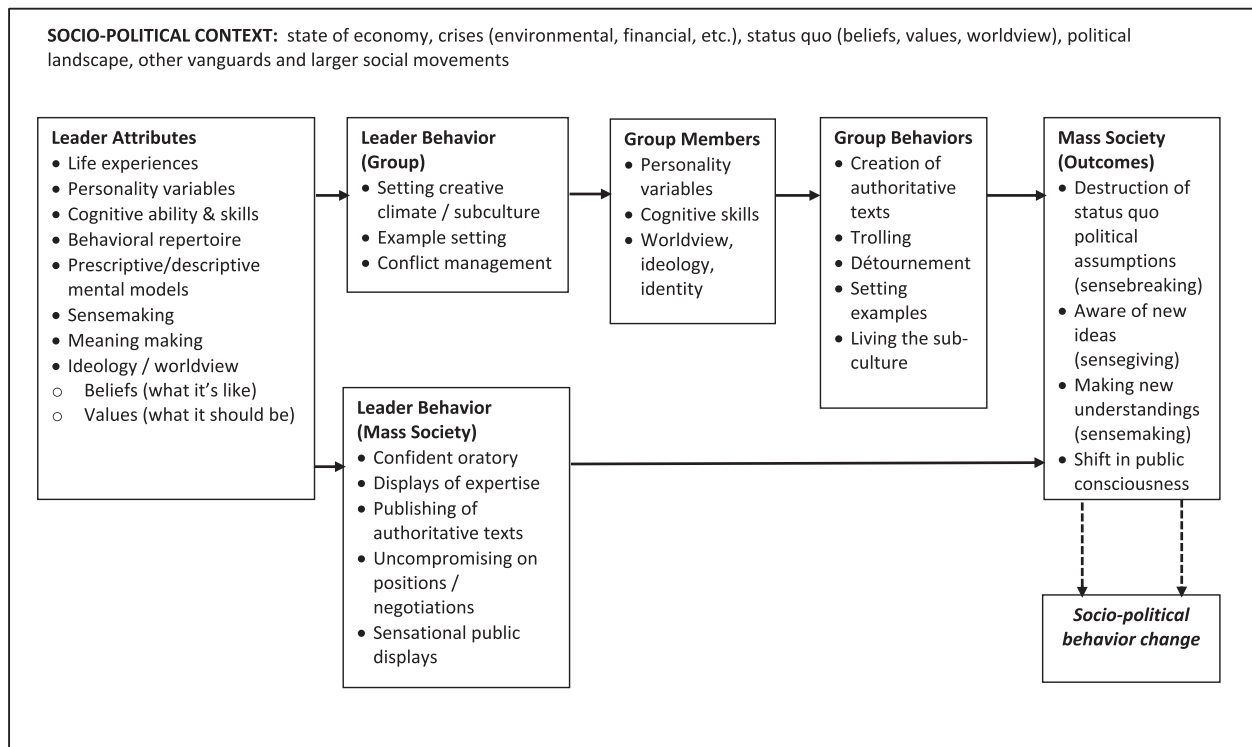


Fig. 1. Model of vanguard leadership.

‘real’ revolutionary [leader] from the dilettante, the propagandist, the pamphleteer” (p. 13). These comments speak to some of the issues raised earlier with the conflation of vanguard leaders with mass social movement leaders: while few people would heartily accept being called a dilettante, both propagandist and pamphleteer are roles that vanguard leaders would immediately recognize and acknowledge that they need to regularly fill. Interestingly, in a review of the revolutionary leaders that Rejai and Phillips covered, they have done well in *not* including/conflating vanguard leaders with ‘revolutionary’ leaders of mass social movements. For example, in their review of leaders that were involved with the events in France, May 68’, they note Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Alain Geismar (two social movement leaders of the period) but fail to note Guy Debord or Raoul Vaneigem (two vanguard leaders in the same period). This can be contrasted with Downton’s “Rebel Leadership” qualitative study wherein he also was investigating ‘revolutionaries’ (and also covered Lenin), but gave more prominent coverage to leader such as Malcolm X of the Black Muslim movement (a leader of a vanguard) and Marian Keech of the “End of the World” movement (another leader of a vanguard).

Although there have been few studies that have had vanguard leadership traits, skills, and/or behaviours as a primary focus (the above being notable exceptions), there have been a number of historical reviews conducted on many of these vanguard leaders, sometimes resulting in rich case studies that can be mined for clues as to what traits, skills, and/or behaviours these leaders might have had. Through analysing these historical reviews, we can begin to determine the different components of vanguard leadership at the individual, group, and societal levels.

#### Individual level traits, skills, and behaviours

##### Early life experiences

In reviewing the histories of past vanguard leaders, it becomes clear that many of them were forced to work through what Rejai and Phillips (1979) refer to as ‘relative deprivation and status inconsistency’. Guy Debord, leader of the vanguard *Situationist International*, suffered a

number of hardships as a young child. Debord’s father died when Debord was only four years old; this then led to his family losing their fortune and descending into poverty (Merrifield, 2005). His father’s death, the loss of his family’s fortune and status in society, coupled with the turbulence from World War II, very likely contributed to Debord’s character. Debord made numerous mentions of his childhood in his work, often noting that he had seen “nothing but troubled times and immense destruction” (Debord, 2004) (Kaufmann, 2006).

This same level of relative deprivation and status inconsistency is noted amongst other vanguard leaders as well. While maintaining excellent grades in school, Malcolm X often spoke of the crime and drugs that were also a part of his daily life in the neighborhood he grew up in as a child; similarly, many leaders of the Alt Right have spoken of the drug crisis and general decline of status of whites they feel has taken place within their own neighborhoods over the past couple of decades.

These types of catalyst events have been shown to have large repercussions for future leadership in the leadership developmental literature (Ligon, Hunter, & Mumford, 2008; Moxley & Pulley, 2004), impacting attitudes, cognitive development, and behavioral skill development.

##### Traits and attitudes

While it can be difficult to disentangle the development of particular attitudes and traits from some of these formative experiences, and whether they would have been inherent and/or further developed without these experiences, it is clear that many vanguard leaders share some of the same attributes. For example, it is clear that vanguard leaders would not rate very highly in Agreeableness on the Big Factor Five personality assessment; given the contentious nature of the mission of a vanguard, it would seem that this would come with the territory. Similarly, it would seem that vanguard leaders often contrast with social movement leaders in their degree of extroversion, with vanguard leaders, such as Guy Debord and Malcolm X, being somewhat more critical of everyday social life, or in the least, more socially-removed (i.e., introverted) than social movement leaders, who seem to be more positively energized by engagement with the public. It is also likely that

most vanguard leaders would not be very high in need for social acceptance, as well as in conflict avoidance.

Given that many historical reviews of vanguards and vanguard leaders are either thinly veiled hagiographies or denunciations, it is difficult to determine how highly these leaders might rate on different personality factors, such as the Light (Kantianism, Humanism and Faith in Humanity) and Dark Triads (narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy). Vanguards do not typically suffer from a lack of very passionate supporters or detractors either, making it sometimes difficult to more objectively determine how these types of leaders might rate on these factors. Drawing from the extremist literature (a literature that also somewhat suffers at times from conflating violent radicals with vanguard leaders), it's been suggested that serious psychopathology is rare amongst these types of radicals (at least on the Right where these investigations have taken place) (Caiani & Borri, 2016), and it is further unlikely that an "extremist personality profile" will ever be found (Hafez & Mullins, 2015).

As might be expected, given the history of a number of socio-political vanguards emerging from artistic vanguards (such as Dada and Futurism), many vanguard leaders seem to have an "aesthetic and/or romantic streak" (Rejai & Phillips, 1979). For example, Guy Debord was an artist before, during, and after his leadership of the S.I. (Hussey, 2001; Kaufmann, 2006; Merrifield, 2005). More surprising, however, might be the artistic leanings of leaders of the Alt Right, a connection that has been far less publicized. For example, Richard Spencer has repeatedly referred to past vanguards throughout his career, whether through the naming of his internet podcasts (i.e., "Vanguard"), his suggestions that he always wanted to become an "avant-garde theatre director," or in his discussions with other members of the Alt Right of past artistic and socio-political avant-gardes (Marcy, 2019, in press). Others, like Ramzypaul (a popular Alt Right vlogger), have directly made references and comparisons to 'samizdat' (a Soviet-era political dissident publishing practice) in relation to Alt Right information dissemination; another Alt Right leader, Greg Johnson (head of Counter Currents, a key Alt Right website), has just finished writing a 'manifesto' for the movement (a manifesto being another strategic tool that has its roots in earlier artistic vanguard approaches). Millennial Woes, in a recent podcast, even went so far as to suggest that the Alt Right is an art movement.

These artistic leanings suggest that vanguard leaders may be taking in different types of information than the norm (Ansburg & Hill, 2003; Smith, Ward, & Finke, 1995), such as information related to aesthetics and power, which often inform the ways in which people build their worldviews. An awareness and facility with these forms of information may be another fundamental difference between typical political leaders and vanguard leaders. As outsiders, vanguards may have a perspective on status and social aesthetics that is arguably deeper than many status quo political leaders.

#### *Cognitive skills*

Drawing together these attributes with the previously discussed life experiences, it is easier to see how past vanguard leaders might have been motivated to develop particular cognitive skills that would then later help them to be more effective in their roles. For example, given their background and traits, it is likely that they might develop multiple mental models of how society might effectively 'work'. This may be yet another differentiator between vanguard leaders and some other types of leaders: the depth and breadth of alternative mental models available to draw from and combine (Scott, Lonergan, & Mumford, 2005). Malcolm X spoke frequently of the different worlds that whites and blacks live in, despite living in the same community, while Guy Debord often detailed the struggles between social and economic classes, highlighting their great differences. As a parallel, Alt Right intellectuals have frequently made mention of a large divide between social elites and the white working class.

As elites have little incentive to venture out of the status quo, their

understanding of the issues of those from less privileged backgrounds becomes more limited. Many vanguard leaders, who have had wider-ranging experiences due to the status inconsistency discussed earlier, could arguably have richer informed models, as well as unique heuristics for problem identification. Some empirical support for this comes from a recent study of sensemaking which found that the "more an actor's cultural capital is privileged by existing organizational schemata, the more likely it is that his or her disposition toward profession-centrism will promote sensemaking about organizational change that will not disrupt existing organizational schemata." (Lockett, Currie, Finn, Martin, & Waring, 2014). Research on marginalization and status quo deviance further supports that 'outsider' experiences can lead to the richer development of alternative mental models and heuristics (Förster, Friedman, Butterbach, & Sassenberg, 2005; Kim, Vincent, & Goncalo, 2013; Runco, 1999; Simonton, 1994; Simonton, 1999).

One often overlooked advantage to having personally experienced deprivation and status inconsistency is not only in having a fuller understanding of the experience so as to more effectively solve similar problems, but also in the building of coping skills to surmount future challenges. These enhanced coping skills then in turn build a resiliency that can be very helpful in facing future status quo rejection. Facing rejection head-on is no small task, as it is a considerable challenge to adaptively work through it (Leary & Terdal, 1995). Given that contestation and social rejection is a fundamental part of being a vanguard leader, it's important that leaders of such groups have considerable resilience. Having had past life experience with social rejection, and having overcome it, especially when it is considered to be unjust, may very well be the experiences that vanguard leaders need to face future challenges to the status quo.

#### *Group level traits, skills, and behaviours*

##### *Team leadership*

Most past vanguards have been comprised of a small set of very committed members (typically no more than twenty), with other associates filling roles of 'allies', meaning that they generally serve as more of a support function. As originally conceptualized and implemented by Lenin, subsequent vanguards have typically been comprised of intellectuals, artists, and activists. The Situationist International, as led by Guy Debord, was no exception to this and was primarily made up of painters, filmmakers, and architects, with some playing a primary role as political theorists. They hailed from a number of different countries, as well as class backgrounds. Being able to draw from these varied skill sets and knowledge structures likely contributed to their creative output (Kabanoff & Rossiter, 1994; Mumford et al., 2002). As an artist himself, Debord was able to draw from his own experience when executing particular leadership tasks at hand, such as distributing resources effectively to followers (Byrne et al., 2009; Marcy, 2015; Mumford et al., 2007). This is no small point as resources are typically limited in vanguard operations and vanguard leaders need to well understand the roles that they are asking others to fill. Leaders of other vanguards such as Richard Huelsenbeck (Dada) and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (Futurists) were all artists as well.

Important resources that vanguard leaders must weigh and consider include not only financial support but emotional and intellectual matters. Creative and intelligent people, as those often found in vanguards, need a high degree of autonomy to fulfill their tasks. Vanguard leaders, similar to scientists and artists, must cultivate a careful balance between allowing creativity to manifest itself in tasks and ensuring that standards are met. Some vanguard leaders, such as Guy Debord, have maintained this balance by allowing great latitude on the development of a task on one hand, but expelling those from the group that did not meet particular standards or did not deliver on a particular project (Kaufmann, 2006); while vanguard groups, like the Alt Right, have maintained commitment and exclusivity through the sheer offense of their platform (i.e., people need to be committed just to be a member of

the group). This management of deviance to internal group norms extends to the effective management of deviance in the wider society. Group members of vanguards are typically under a great amount of social pressure to conform and this is something that needs to be further managed by vanguard leaders.

This exclusivity of vanguards contrasts sharply with social movement and political party approaches, which tend to work towards accepting as many people as possible into their ranks and making as many concessions as is possible to accommodate them, sometimes even going so far as to render their agenda unrecognizable from its beginnings. In contrast, Guy Debord turned more people away from the S.I. than he welcomed (Kaufmann, 2006). There was a regular purging of the ranks of the S.I., and once someone was expelled, Debord never admitted them back. He notes in his autobiography that he “never sought out anyone, anywhere” and that his “entourage [was] composed only of those who came of their own accord and were capable of getting themselves accepted” (Debord, 2004). Similarly, groups such as the Alt Right have even fashioned jargon around the purging of members, creating the terms “cuckervative” and “Alt Lite” to define those that don’t meet the ideological standards of the Alt Right.

Unlike social movement or political party leaders, vanguard leaders tend not to make concessions to deviations. This style of team leadership is particularly harsh, but there are elements to this approach that are arguably adaptive. Vanguard groups are often under constant threat by elites within social and political systems, whether it be co-optation of their agenda or, even more extreme, attempts at violence. There is literature, however, that suggests that there are ways in which a minority group can counter these threats by maintaining a close-knit group of loyal members (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005).

One is by sending clear signals to potential members of their compatibility with the group by purging incompatible others (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Another is by presenting a strong and unified front to the status quo. While some research suggests that there will likely be short term losses in these approaches, it also suggests that there will also be larger gains in influencing the majority over the long-term (such as the conversion of majority beliefs to minority logics) than if a more incremental approach were taken (De Dreu & West, 2001; Moscovici, 1980).

#### Team behavior

As an instrument of leader influence, vanguard groups are not only representatives of new socio-political relationships, but they are also agents of change in helping to shift public consciousness. Debord along with the S.I. created and implemented a number of tactics with which to directly attack status quo understanding of the social environment along with providing solutions. These tactics, such as detournement and the “construction of situations”, were designed to break social norms and help people reconnect with themselves, each other, and their environment in ways that were not directly or implicitly socially engineered by the status quo (Marcy, 2015). With detournement, the S.I. would strip the dialogue from cultural objects, such as comics and films, and replace this dialogue with S.I.-informed theory. With the Alt Right, Walt Bismarck has repurposed old Walt Disney movies in the same way to help spread Alt Right ideas related to IQ and immigration. In a similar fashion, Alt Right ‘trolls’ (anonymous members of the Alt Right) have helped spread their message on the internet through the use of provocative “memes”, further co-opting status quo cultural objects.

The S.I.’s ‘construction of situations’ was an attempt to create social situations that were free from the contaminating aspects of elite social conditioning; to jar people out of their false consciousness, and thus help them create more meaningful social relationships (Debord, 1967; Debord, 2009; Kaufmann, 2006). In a similar fashion, anonymous members of the Alt Right have instigated a number of “real world” interventions, such as the “It’s OK to be White” campaign; a poster campaign which was designed to provoke the public and prompt white identity consciousness. Through these social and cultural engagements,

vanguard leaders are hoping that they are ‘waking people up’ (i.e., sensebreaking) and offering them an enticing vision (sensegiving) of how new social relationships might work.

#### Inter-organizational and societal level traits, skills, and behaviours

##### Vanguard leader as credible public figure

Being a vanguard leader in the public eye is somewhat of a balancing act akin to the balancing act implied by some theories of humor (this comparison is no small point, as humor has often played an important role in vanguard strategy and tactics). Some theories of humor, such as benign violation theory (McGraw & Warren, 2010), suggest that humor may come from moral violations that are simultaneously seen as benign; said another way, for something to be funny, it needs to both break moral norms *and* be acceptable on some level. Similarly, for a vanguard leader to be optimally influential, they need to not only be someone who is provocatively breaking the norms that society espouses, but – at the same time – also need to be a credible public figure (i.e., someone who is, at least on some levels, a socially acceptable person).

As vanguard leaders are in contestation with the status quo and status quo institutions, there are many forms of power and influence that are not under their control, such as reward power or coercive power, and thus cannot help in establishing their legitimacy (Yukl, 2009). To be influential with the general public, vanguard leaders must work towards acquiring and leveraging other forms of power, such as informational and expertise power. To be a true expert in the eyes of the public, however, is more than just having an important and helpful body of knowledge and skills at the ready; a vanguard leader must also look and behave like an expert to be accepted by the public as one (Shanteau, 1992; Shanteau et al., 2000). This means that a vanguard leader must take steps to executing behaviours that the public would recognize as being those of an expert.

One way in which a vanguard leader can more readily be accepted as an expert is in the publication of authoritative texts (Marcy, 2015). As head of the S.I., Guy Debord wrote several highly influential books, the most important arguably being *The Society of the Spectacle* (Debord, 1967). In this book, Debord details some of the S.I.’s most important critiques related to commodity fetishism, the mass media, and the ‘spectacle’ – the commodification and domination of social relationships in Western society by the media and other ‘spectacular’ devices as designed and implemented by the status quo, leading average people to live disconnected and increasingly meaningless lives that are in essence “scripted” by elites and intended to serve them (Hussey, 2001; Kaufmann, 2006; Merrifield, 2005). Debord also wrote or co-wrote a number of articles within the *Situationiste Internationale*, the official journal of the S.I.

Similarly, leaders within the Alt Right, such as Jared Taylor and Kevin MacDonald, have published extensively, in both the more academic, as well as in the popular, literature. Kevin MacDonald is a well-published, retired academic who has written a number of scholarly, peer-reviewed articles in addition to his popular-press publications in support of Alt Right political positions. Jared Taylor, who has also published widely, has been described by both his supporters and his critics as someone who brings a “measure of intellectualism and seriousness” to the Alt Right (SPLC, 2018), as well as having a “cultivated, cosmopolitan” approach (Roddy, 2005).

The establishment of vanguard leader credibility, to include the vision of the vanguard, is also furthered through the actions of the immediate vanguard group. As suggested in the group-level behavior analysis, vanguard groups are not only tools to execute particular leadership tasks (such as the publishing of persuasive texts and other dis/information campaigns), but they are also effective as demonstration projects, signaling to the public how and why the new norms and behaviours encouraged by the vanguard lead to better outcomes for themselves and their relationship to others (Mumford, 2002). In the



case of Debord and the S.I., a large contingent of the students of both the University of Paris and the University of Strasbourg, were clearly influenced by Debord and the S.I. Emulating the S.I. through the development of their own Situationist-based theory and praxis, some students created and disseminated the pamphlet, *On the Poverty of Student Life*, which some scholars have credited with leading to the further dissemination of Situationist ideas, and the eventual crisis of May 1968 (Plant, 1992).

In a similar fashion, leaders such as Milo Yiannopoulos of the Alt Lite – a more moderate, but larger offshoot of the Alt Right – garnered more media attention and were even more influential in creating the political space on the Right that allowed figures such as Jordan Peterson and Donald Trump to become even more prominent (Nagle, 2017). It is clear from these examples that the association with, and successful cultivation and recruitment of, other socially-credible figures, as well as the creation of a larger support bloc (e.g., students of the Sorbonne, members of the Alt Lite) can further contribute to vanguard leader credibility. The recruitment of socially credible people also helps ensure better vanguard group outcomes as these types of members are often more stable and more capable than those with no social credibility.

#### *Vanguard leader as provocateur*

While a certain amount of credibility is essential for vanguard influence, a vanguard leader's ultimate goal is not public acceptance but public provocation and eventual opinion shift. This shift is often achieved by vanguard leaders through uncompromising public debates and other sensational public displays. Along with being intriguing enough to capture and maintain the public's attention (no mean feat in any era, but particularly in our own with as many channels competing for our interest), public engagements should serve at least two key functions (although it is often enough that they serve one or the other):

1. A sensebreaking function, wherein the sensational message or messages being conveyed define and highlight status quo approaches as problematic (i.e., a provocative function); and,
2. A sensegiving function, wherein the sensational message or messages being conveyed define and highlight vanguard solutions as viable alternatives to the status quo (i.e., a credibility function).

Debord and the S.I. engaged in a number of provocative tactics in their ongoing battle with the status quo, to include their use of détournement of popular forms of media, as well as their involvement in contentious - and well-publicized - public debates. As defined in the Internationale Situationniste #1, détournement is “short for détournement of preexisting aesthetic elements” (Debord, 1958). In practice this meant taking everyday cultural materials (for example, popular magazines, cartoons, and films) and then editing them to:

1. Highlight the bankrupt nature of status quo norms and relationships; and
2. Replace status quo implied and explicit notions with text and images that would reflect Situationist solutions.

As noted previously, vanguard groups typically favor direction confrontation with elites, often through mass market media channels, as collaboration is not a viable option given their mission (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). Through détournement, Debord and the S.I. subverted mass-market cultural forms by replacing status quo notions found within them with Situationist-informed solutions,<sup>3</sup> thereby

<sup>3</sup> For one of the more sophisticated and funny examples of this approach, please see Can Dialectics Break Bricks? by Rene Vienet: [http://www.ubu.com/film/vienet\\_dialectics.html](http://www.ubu.com/film/vienet_dialectics.html) For a snippet, see here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEzrMGnRST4>

helping to first break maladaptive assumptions and then promote a shift in public consciousness (Foldy et al., 2008).

Debord further promoted these shifts to Situationist ideas through often contentious, public engagements. In one of the most outrageous interviews at London's Institute for Contemporary Arts, Debord was asked in a panel, “what is Situationism?” to which he responded in French, “We're not here to answer cuntish questions,” and then stood up and walked out (Home, 1991). There was an immediate uproar and this incident went on to become infamous, thereby further catapulting Guy Debord and the Situationist International into the public eye.

This incident is a good example of Debord's ability to create provocations that capture the public's attention and continue to resonate after the incident has passed; it also highlights Debord's refusal to collaborate or be co-opted by the mainstream, to even include the attempt at public understanding through the use of terms that Debord considered constraining. It is clear from all of this that Debord and the S.I. were one of the more uncompromising vanguard groups of the past century (Hussey, 2001; Kaufmann, 2006; Merrifield, 2005).

Taking a page from the S.I. playbook, leaders and group members in the Alt Right have also engaged in tactics such as détournement, as well as been involved in contentious, well-publicized public debates. Richard Spencer and Jared Taylor have both engaged in highly controversial public debates on the topics of race, IQ, and immigration, along with hosting conferences and rallies in which Alt Right ideas have been actively promoted in both the mainstream press and social media. Some well-established members of the Alt Right, such as Walt Bismarck, have used détournement to give new meanings to old Walt Disney films, while Alt Right trolls have employed détournement for “meme-making” on the internet.

#### **Vanguard leadership theories and future directions**

##### *Individual-level leadership theories and future directions*

Earlier, it was suggested that vanguard leaders often exhibit a set of similar attributes that appear to be helpful in the leadership of vanguards. Some of these attributes included both traits and skills. In terms of traits, it's clear that it would be helpful to turn to the wider, leader personality literature to see what constructs might further contribute to our understanding of vanguard leadership. Given the contentious nature of the role, along with the inevitable social opprobrium, vanguard leaders clearly need to be resilient, as well as be able to work through potential mass social rejection (along with potential violence from both state and independent actors). Self-esteem management, particularly as a measure of positive social approval, becomes an important skill to have.

Other general traits that are likely to be important to vanguard leadership are contrarianism (Runco, 1999), conformity (Sheldon, 1999), conventionality (Pariser, 1999), as well as (a lack of) need for social acceptance. While present research seems to suggest that there are not likely to be serious pathologies amongst vanguard leaders, it is likely however that particular traits run through different vanguards, depending on their socio-political approach. For example, Alizadeh and colleagues found that a need for certainty was particularly important to some far right groups (Alizadeh et al., 2019).

This focus in the literature on members of extreme groups such as the Alt Right (Forscher & Kteily, 2017) points to a number of interesting, and potentially contradictory, future suggestions for vanguard leadership research; namely, should we expect the same personality profile from the leaders of vanguards as we do from those that are group members? For example, while some research in the creativity literature has suggested that those that hold more conservative

(footnote continued)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Can\\_Dialectics\\_Break\\_Bricks%3F](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Can_Dialectics_Break_Bricks%3F)

viewpoints are less creative (Tyagi, Hanoach, Choma, & Denham, 2018), the intellectual and artistic production of Alt Right leaders, to include the innovativeness of their socio-political tactics, would suggest otherwise. This contradiction points to the need for more research into vanguard leadership and vanguard leaders.

In terms of skills, one particularly important area to explore would be in the area of cognition; namely, leader cognition skills. As the primary goal of a vanguard leader is to prompt a socio-political shift in the public's consciousness, a strong understanding of how this process works is vitally important. Marcy (2015) has proposed that this shift can be enacted by vanguard leaders and their groups through a sense-making process. The process begins with first having a strong understanding of the general public's mental model of society and politics, as well as a prescriptive mental model that is the foundation for the vanguard leader's vision for socio-political change. The vanguard leader, along with the vanguard group, then creates and implements tactics that help 'break' concepts and relationships within this general public mental model, which then creates the space for 'sensegiving' approaches to fill the gap.

These different steps are typically served through different roles within vanguards, with front-line activists often being the 'sense-breakers' through provocative assaults on mainstream culture, and intellectuals often being the 'sensegivers' through their production of authoritative texts. While this process has been theorized, the leader cognitive skills underpinning this particular vanguard social change process have not been detailed or empirically investigated. Leader cognitive skills such as scanning and forecasting will likely prove important.

#### *Group-level leadership theories and future directions*

Similar to the individual level, the available research literature at the group-level presents a number of interesting questions and challenges in determining its applicability towards better understanding vanguard leadership. For example, vanguard leaders and vanguard leadership has much in common with revolutionary leadership, social movement leadership, and political party leadership. Within these forms of leadership, the role of charisma is often a fundamental component of leader-follower relationships, with followers often wanting to identify with, and even emulate, some of these leaders; which leaders then leverage to accomplish group goals. For vanguards, however, leaders are often as combative internally as they are externally, often sowing long-lasting acrimony, and distancing other group members; and unlike some social movements and political parties, these group members often have strong identities and social credibility, resulting in a less than a need for a charismatic relationship. If not all vanguard leaders depend on charisma to influence followers, then what do they do to achieve group outcomes?

Given that vanguards are often made up of intellectuals, activists, and artists, there is some evidence to suggest that a more pragmatic or ideological form of leadership is needed to influence group members (Mumford, Licuanan, Marcy, Dailey, & Blair, 2006). Rather than directly appeal to followers' identities, some scholars have suggested that some leaders carefully delineate category boundaries, differentiating the status quo and its interests from the interests of the vanguard. Leaders establish the boundaries of who is considered to be a part of the group and a part of the status quo, which helps to reinforce an "us" versus "them" phenomenon. With respect to contesting the status quo, leaders present a vision that reflects the collective social identity and conveys a shared alternative social reality (Subašić, Reynolds, Reicher, & Klandermans, 2012; Haslam et al., 2010). This envisioned reality "simultaneously marginalizes proponents of the status quo as 'them' while aligning the rest of 'us' with a change agenda" (Subašić, Reynolds, & Turner, 2008 as cited in Subašić et al., 2012).

The orchestration of this divide between "us" and "them" also further points to the leadership need to manage the stress that comes with

being group deviants on the outside of society (Bader & Baker, 2019; Chang, Turan, & Chow, 2015; Plucker & Runco, 1999; Williams, 2011). While there are unique, positive advantages that come with being a leader and member of a vanguard facing social rejection, such as the added fuel for creativity it brings (Kim et al., 2013), as well as added group cohesion and respect for group leaders (Linden & Klandermans, 2006), leaders of vanguards still must provide any emotional and financial resources that are available to support their followers during spikes in social disapproval.

While the present study primarily concentrated on vanguard group members for a group-level review, there are other groups that are also worthy of study to gain a deeper understanding of vanguard leadership; for example, the 'status quo' or society's elites (Milner Jr., 2015; Peffley & Rohrschneider, 2007). Both of these terms are often employed in critical analyses of vanguards (Gramsci, 1971), but are often much less defined in other disciplines and empirical studies. While there is quite a bit of research on how elites and their organizations have responded to pressure from related groups, such as interest groups (Julian, Ofori-Dankwa, & Justis, 2008), it would aid our understanding of vanguard leadership to empirically test how and in what way elites are affected by specifically vanguard positioning and tactics. Other groups of vanguard leadership research interest would be the mainstream media, political enemies (such as opposing vanguards), their base – meaning people who already support the vanguard's socio-political positions but are not active members of the vanguard or politically mobilized yet (i.e., a part of sympathetic social movements or political organizations) (Schönberger & Raemy, 2018) - and the 'masses' in general (Jonsson, 2013; Reicher, Drury, Hopkins, & Stott, 2001).

#### *Mass societal-level leadership theories and future directions*

While a large amount of theoretical work has been done on vanguard leadership in critical, art, and philosophical studies (Gramsci, 1971; Home, 1991; Wood, 2002), much less work has been done in other disciplines, particularly as it pertains to practice (Ganz & McKenna, 2017; Ganz & McKenna, 2019). The social movement leadership literature – arguably, one of the largest contributors to our understanding of vanguard leadership vis a vis social movement leadership (as suggested earlier, social movement leadership and revolutionary leadership are often conflated with vanguard leadership) – has had a tendency to focus more on constraints and other structural, rather than agentic, conditions (Ganz & McKenna, 2019; Guillén, 2010). This approach has helped in our understanding of important social movement leadership phenomena such as the role of elites, history, and networks (Ganz & McKenna, 2019), all of which play a role in better understanding vanguard leadership. This emphasis towards structure, and away from agency, within the social movement literature however has resulted in "a scarcity of research into the way in which movement leaders function" (Klandermans, 1997, p. 133).

If this is true of the social movement leadership literature in general, it is certainly true of the vanguard leadership literature. As noted before, some studies, such as Downton's *Rebel Leadership* (Downton, 1973), are – by the definitions we have provided in the present effort – studies of vanguard leadership; but these studies are few and far between. Even rarer are studies of social movement leadership that draw from more than one or two disciplines, with most reviews remaining within one body of knowledge.

Moving forward, it is clear that the investigation of vanguard leadership will have to be a multidisciplinary effort. In addition to critical theory, media studies, and political philosophy, disciplines such as sociology, psychology, political science, and cultural studies all offer important lenses in which to view vanguard leadership. For example, Rucht (2012) and Yaziji and Doh (2013) both discuss the importance of leadership, identity, and ideology in the leadership of social movements; this has strong overlap with the political psychological literature (Feldman, 2013; Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009), which also stresses the

importance of identity in political ideology, and has further overlap with the general psychological literature on worldviews (Koltko-Rivera, 2004) – an important leverage point for vanguard leaders, as worldviews are what vanguard leaders are targeting and prompting to shift.

Research on the leadership of social change organizations (Ospina & Foldy, 2010) has suggested that prompting cognitive shifts is a key leadership practice, a practice that is supported by the use of key leadership cognitive skills, such as sensemaking and planning, found in the leader cognition literature on solving complex problems (Marcy, 2015; Mumford, Todd, Higgs, & McIntosh, 2017), which then brings us back again to the literature on vanguard leadership and the ways in which Guy Debord was a strategic thinker (Shukaitis, 2014). All of these phenomena are important to integrate into a more holistic understanding of vanguard leadership.

## Conclusion

This article aimed to undertake a comprehensive review and theoretical integration of relevant work related to the leadership of vanguard groups. In doing so, this article attempted to provide some definition towards the construct of socio-political vanguard leadership; namely, leaders of groups that are somewhat autonomous from established political parties or social movements, and that are deliberately not a direct part of the political process. Vanguard leaders work to influence ideas and shift public consciousness in order to create the socio-political conditions for actors and groups to better effect political change. In this respect, vanguards are distinct from both social movements leaders as well as status quo political leaders, particularly in the lack of goals to become a part of mainstream decision-making. The military applications of the term ‘vanguard’ as being a separate, forward front also speaks to this idea of a vanguard being apart from the mainstream; in a socio-political context, the vanguard is identified by the introduction of new beliefs and norms that directly challenge those of the wider society.

The review of the literature on (but not excluded to) social movement leaders, political leadership, and advocacy/artist collectives highlight some particularly interesting gaps. The extant literature pertaining to avant-gardes and/or leadership within fringe socio-political contexts is heavily grounded in critical theory and the study of social movements. These works have contributed greatly to our understanding of the context of socio-political change, as well as the role that leadership can play in bringing this about; more work, however, on the practice of vanguard leadership would be advantageous to deepening our understanding of how particular leadership tactics influence and shape ideas within smaller collectives as well as larger societies. More specifically, this article identified that the goal of vanguard leaders – to shift the dominant worldview of public consciousness in order to allow space for later groups to further political agendas – is necessarily hostile towards established elites while at the same time not directly vying for elite power. Attending to this goal thus invites strategies that are geared less towards collaboration and more towards agitation tactics. In addition, socio-political vanguard leaders attend to different specific goals at different levels of analysis: amongst others, the individual level requires leader cognitive skills related to creativity and social innovation; the group level requires the leadership skills to form, cohere, and guide a team; and the societal level requires the creation, implementation, and the hopeful adoption of a prescriptive mental model by the public through unconventional means.

Using historical examples of the Futurist art movement of the early 1900s and the Situationist International of the 1960s, this article analyzes the goals and strategies of the vanguard leaders within these movements to illustrate parallels to the present-day Alt-Right movement in the West. In doing so, some future directions for research are suggested. First, the focus on the individual level of cognitive abilities of vanguard leaders, in line with the area of social innovation that is radical but non-violent, and of leaders that seek to shape mainstream

worldviews but not takeover the existing reigns of political power. Second, a deeper examination of the strategies employed to achieve the central goal of mindshare, and the intersection of new technologies with vanguard ideas. Third, longer-term inspection of the effects of different vanguard leaders on existing socio-political beliefs and values, to trace the impact of vanguard ideas on mainstream culture. Taken together, this article proposes that these insights offer a potentially rich area of future work within leadership studies.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank David Day, the LQYR Editor, and the anonymous reviewers for their time and effort in providing very helpful feedback on this article. I would also like to thank Debra Torok and Madison Douglas for their early efforts in providing research assistance to this endeavor.

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