

# Let's Talk: Transformative Leadership and International Relations

Written by Jan Lüdert

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JAN LÜDERT, FEB 4 2020

Global leadership, as well as International Relations (IR), scholars pay relatively little attention to one another. For all their affinities in taking an interest in the study of global issues this is a regrettable state of affairs that hinders learning across disciplines. Innovation is possible, however. To bridge this unwarranted disciplinary gap between transformative leadership studies and IR, this pedagogy vignette offers a three-step teaching framework for the global leadership role by norm entrepreneurs, social movements, and intergovernmental organizations. By paying heed to how agency shapes and is embedded within social structures, this pedagogy vignette offers a teaching approach to engage students on processes of social transformation. The author emphasizes the role of transnational actors and activists engaged in various global issue areas. These leaders set the agenda, frame issues, and use their formal and network position to persuade others. In order to be persuasive, they mobilize actions and develop feasible policies, remain sensitive to available facts and information, while constantly adapting to changing social and political contexts. By gaining insights into pathways of change employed by actors across global issue areas readers are equipped with tools that underscore their own potential as agents of positive change, critical, and engaged global citizens.

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world: indeed, it's the only thing that ever has. This insight encapsulates a central aspect of transformative leadership, namely, the essential role of individual agents to bring about societal change. This vignette considers change at the international level by outlining the impact of three types of such purposeful agents. To understand pressing global issues, it is necessary to bring leadership studies with theories of International Relations (IR) into conversation. Especially realist IR scholars neglect questions of transformative leadership because their emphasis on structures, focusing on the state system, brackets the impact of individual agents, transnational actors, and global institutions. Yet, far from epiphenomenal, observing these actors suggest that their varying strategies affect global affairs in important ways.

### **Step One: The co-constitution of agency and structures**

Transformative leadership demands different pedagogic tools that go beyond a leader-centric approach. In this respect, social constructivists in the field of IR offer important insights to students seeking to learn about advocacy and allyship. This is because their scholarship emphasizes the mutual constitution of agents (e.g., leaders and followers) *and* social structures (e.g., the social space in which agents are embedded). Agency is,

not the prerogative of the strong [and] can be exercised in global transnational space of global norms and institutions. Agency means constructing new rules and institutions at the local level to support and strengthen global order against great-power hypocrisy and dominance [...] it involves conceptualizing and implementing new approaches to development, security, and ecological justice (Acharya, 2018, p.14).

Social structures here relate to shared meanings and norms that make up the international context and agents are those individuals and groups that operate as actors in that context. Structures and agents, in this understanding, are mutually constitutive in so far as they enable or constrain each other through continuous interaction.

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Transnational climate change advocacy, for instance, is a social structure composed of intersubjective understandings on detrimental anthropogenic effects on the natural environment and, in extension, humanities ability to maintain a livable planet. Climate change activists act transnationally as norm entrepreneurs and through global institutions, such as the United Nations system and non-governmental organizations, by drawing on scientific facts and evidence, rallying the public, and offering policy solutions with the intent to redirect political capital and resources by governments and corporate actors towards minimizing greenhouse gas emissions. A constructivist perspective on climate change thus helps capture elements of the co-constitution between agency and structure: Climate change is an objective phenomenon that exists and has social, economic, and political effects, and matters because how subjects perceive it and seek to address it through galvanizing multiple actors including states, intergovernmental organizations, corporations, and individuals. As climate change activist Greta Thunberg (2019) put it: "The climate crisis has already been solved. We already have the facts and solutions. All we have to do is to wake up and change." Indeed, constructivists consider processes of persuasion and social influence, as voiced by Thunberg and other climate change allies, as central mechanisms for understanding how social facts are critiqued, produced and have effects (Lüdert, 2019; Wiener, 2018). In short, social constructivists are able to inform the study of transformative leadership and vice versa by shedding light on how leaders in climate change advocacy and elsewhere frame issues, pursue goals, and have influence.

## Step Two: Appreciating how agents influence and persuade

To help students examine co-constitutive processes entails exploring pathways by which transformative leaders draw on deliberative processes of social influence and persuasion to alter social structures. Keck and Sikkink (1998) provide a set of discursive tactics transformative leaders typically draw on, namely: information, symbols, normative leverage, and instilling accountability. Information refers to agents and their ally's ability to generate salient information (e.g. factual evidence, credible statistics, objective data) and draw on such information where it will have the most impact (e.g. information campaigns). Symbolic tactics refer to agent's ability to call upon symbols, actions, or stories of lived experiences that persuades especially powerful actors including states and multinational corporations (e.g. providing testimony of directly affected people). Leverage signifies the ability to engage powerful actors to affect outcomes when transformative leaders lack direct influence and access to decision-making. Instilling accountability, in turn, denotes sustained efforts by transformative actors to hold powerful actors accountable to agreed principles, rules and norms (e.g. human rights standards, commitments to social and corporate responsibility). Students can investigate how social transformation occurs when agents draw on these types of discursive tactics and by analyzing whether and how their varied deployment influence outcomes.

Persuasion, based on deliberation, is the end point of social pressure. A transformational actor influences with the goal to create agreement with the target audience by using existing values and beliefs that resonate with the audience as leverage to convince them. Persuasion therefore "involves changing minds, opinions, and attitudes about causality and affect (identity) in the absence of overtly material or mental coercion" (Johnston, 2001, p. 496). Social pressure initially falls short of persuasion as it "elicits pro-norm behavior through the distribution of social rewards and punishments" (Johnston, 2001, p. 499). In this way social pressure often, if not always, precedes or occurs alongside persuasion with some actors becoming convinced while others are not persuaded. Indeed, transformative leaders influence international politics because they are able to construct and reconstruct social facts. Leaders do so by tapping into persuasion processes and may emerge as norm entrepreneurs (e.g. human rights activists, social movement leaders, experts) precisely because norms "do not appear out of thin air; they are actively built by agents having strong notions about appropriate or desirable behavior" (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 895). Persuasion is neither automatic nor straightforward, yet, as former US President Obama (2004), reflecting on transformative leadership, put it

One voice can change a room, and if one voice can change a room, then it can change a city, and if it can change a city, it can change a state, and if it change a state, it can change a nation, and if it can change a nation, it can change the world. Your voice can change the world.

## Step Three: Illustrating contestation and change through case study practice

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Provided that leader's agency typically involves challenging the status quo, or resistance and contestation about an existing state affair, consequently, entails tracing their practice through illustrative case studies. Students, exploring transformative leaders' practice, gain a deeper understanding when, how, and under what conditions transformation takes place. In addition, case studies provide a space for students to appreciate the role and relevance of various actors and by working through the perspectives of relevant actors reveals a more nuanced picture for other students in the class. Approaching events from different vantage points is an effective way of exploring the complex mechanics of an individual case: students gain a more meaningful understanding of transformative leadership and are equipped with conceptual and practical tools that they can use to solve complex, interdependent problems in small team settings. Aside from deepening cognitive learning, perspective-taking through case studies also helps develop students' empathy and ownership. Possible cases that illustrate contestation and change in practice include:

- "Security Threats: Perceptions and Priorities in Different World Regions"
- "Grasping Grand Challenges in Global Health Governance"
- "Re-thinking the Refugee Crisis"
- "Batty for Bananas: An Introduction to Global Trade Disputes"
- "Fending off Financial Crises"
- "Curbing the Proliferation of Nuclear Arms"
- "Climate Change Campaigning and Framing"

Students may work in small groups, throughout their learning journey, to design and present a global advocacy campaign on an issue of their choosing and by drawing on the insights gained in the three-step process outlined above.

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