

Suze Wilson: And when I'm talking about power, I'm not saying power is only used negatively. I'm also using empowerment as part of that. Power can be used for positive, constructive, uplifting, pro-social generative purposes. Or it can be used for toxic purposes. That is its nature. It's not that one is power and one is not. That, that is all part of power.

In the same way, I think that, you know, leadership can be used for good purposes or it can be used for bad purposes. To try and pretend that leadership being used for bad purposes is not leadership when clearly there is a dynamic of leading and following going on is to engage in a desire to preserve leadership as some kind of sacred, sacred thing, rather than understanding it as a social force that we're all implicated in.

Candice Schutter: Welcome back to The Deeper Pulse and the first release in a short running series of episodes where my guests and I will be taking a critical look at leadership.

You may or may not have heard of critical theory, which is a very broad intellectual tradition that examines society, culture, and power dynamics with the goal of revealing and challenging patterns of domination, inequality, and oppression. And critical theory can be applied to many different things, to socioeconomics, race, gender, and also leadership.

Laying out the history of critical theory would be an episode unto itself. But what's important to note is that its aim is descriptive, in the sense that it helps us to understand existing social systems. But it's ultimately about deconstructing the way that knowledge and power have come to be in order to transform them .

Stacey Patton writes, "discomfort is often the necessary beginning of ethical reflection." In order to take a critical perspective, we have to be willing to brave some uncomfortable truths in order to, essentially, look at the operating system that is running in the background.

A couple of days ago, I dropped a bonus episode over on Patreon, in which I share about how I'm navigating political friction and conversations that require me to step outside of my comfort zone. I go back, again and again, to the quote from Martin Luther King Jr. where he emphasizes, "true peace is not merely the absence of tension. It is the presence of justice."

King advocates for what he called a "constructive nonviolent tension, " and in that one hour bonus episode, I talk about how I'm striving to embody this and I share clips and commentary on some people who are in the public eye currently risking it all. If you'd like to listen to that episode, you can check it out over on Patreon.

But I'm bringing it up today, because one consistent theme in those difficult conversations that I've been having is that, as I think out loud and speak more critically about things, an argument that I am hearing more and more often is, damn Candice, like, why are you so critical? What about everything that's working? What about the best parts of capitalism, spirituality, wellness influence, and even contemporary leadership practices? Why are you harping on the bad stuff all the time?

What about the other side of the story?

Well, I'll tell you what.

9 times outta 10, I'm critiquing socially-embedded systems that are very well worn. That have either been in place for so long that they're rarely if ever questioned, or that represent a vantage point that's dominant, and therefore for the large part goes unquestioned. And so, in this way, the story's already very one-sided. In fact, the dominant narrative is so deeply embedded that whenever I question it, a common and reflexive deflection is employed. But what about the story that we've always told? What about that?

And I think to myself, you mean the one that we all accept without question? The narrative that is driving the assumptions of how we operate when it comes to said structure or system? That one? It's had plenty of airtime. It's not going anywhere anytime soon.

So in the interest of justice and equity, critical perspectives are all about looking at the hidden undercurrents that more often than not go ignored.

So I'm halfway through a graduate program in Organizational Leadership at Arizona State University. And I am taking a critical perspective. Which means that I am often disrupting business as usual and challenging unspoken assumptions that really have provided the foundation for modern leadership studies.

Even in a higher education setting, when it comes to conversations around leadership, status quo bias is the norm. And admittedly, this is in large part due to the fact that most folks quite literally cannot afford to do much other than devote their blood, sweat, and tears to getting the grade, getting the job, and feeding their families. And in order to participate in grind culture, it generally speaking, means following the leader or leading your own followers, sometimes both simultaneously.

Because power hierarchies are baked into the language that we use every day when we talk about how we wanna *get ahead* or *climb* the corporate ladder and *rise* to the top. We decided long ago that wealth and status are our primary measures of success, and this is reinforced by the myth of meritocracy that suggests those at the top earned their way there. This gives the hierarchy itself a moral framing that conceals structural barriers that exist like race, gender, and class.

Even our consumer culture operates on hierarchies, *luxury*, *premium*, and *high end* products are coded signals of wealth and value. While *cheap* and *discount* imply not just lower costs, but also less worth. And in this way, capitalism teaches us to sort everything, including ourselves according to perceived value.

Through the use of language we have given hierarchy credibility and a presumed logic, while late stage capitalism has given it form and function. Together they sustain a world where inequality feels necessary and inevitable, which rewards those at the top while convincing the rest of us that if we just hustle harder, we'll get there too.

Last week, in what many presume to be a reaction to the recent No Kings protest, Trump decided to flex his power by demolishing the East Wing of the White House. This dictatorial powerflex is an exaggerated demonstration of what can happen when we place too much faith in the socially-constructive narratives of wealth, status, and leadership.

And I am not on any sort of high horse here. I am an ethically-minded person, but I have been myself punchdrunk on leader-power before, and I know how intoxicating it can be. Especially when we believe ourselves to be a chosen leader who's been tasked with the practical *and* moral authority to guide our followers.

Transformational leadership is considered by many out there to be the most effective leadership model, where leaders set a virtuous example and guide a vision followers are helping to shape. And this all sounds beautiful and noble on its surface. It can work sometimes. But a lot of the promises of transformational leadership are flawed in the sense that they're overlooking the dynamics of influence and power. Followers are, consciously or unconsciously, surrendering agency to the leader's vision. They may even be infantilized, encouraged to mimic the leader's prototypical behavior in order to rise through the ranks.

All that to say, an inherent ethical tension exists when we build an org chart top down, reinforced through job titles and vast salary divisions. But in reality, what keeps the pyramid intact isn't just money and management. It's belief and the reenactment of the hierarchy through repeat performance. I am not gonna deny that hierarchy can be functional. But are we sure this is the only way?

Michel Foucault, a French philosopher and social theorist, was adamant about the beauty and danger of modern power that doesn't command us to fall in line. It teaches us to speak ourselves into place. In fact, Foucault argued that power is something that we collectively animate through our relationships and institutions. Through the stories that we tell over and over again until they become accepted as truth.

When we call someone a leader and we say they worked their way to the top, we're not just describing success, we're reinforcing a moral code that is justifying the hierarchy itself.

Throughout the 'cult'ure series, lots of personal stories were shared and leaders have been critiqued. I've sometimes been accused of trying to cancel someone or of having a personal vendetta against folks who are just trying to keep their head above water in a capitalistic system that relies on monetization and followership subjugation.

Said system is an explanation. It's a prevalent rationale that can be used to defend and justify behavior, but it's not an excuse to shy away from accountability when it comes to the ways that we reify these hierarchies day in and day out.

So when it seems like I'm throwing shade at leaders, that's a failure of communication on my part, because in reality, I'm most concerned with the systems that anoint them. With the ways in which, despite lip service and mission statements, our behavior and business models insist that hierarchies are the only natural and necessary way to get shit done.

In the same way that words and patterns of behavior have built systems over time, they can also be deconstructed and reimagined. But we know for sure that high-minded lingo doesn't always lead to equity. In order to get there, we have to grapple with our biases, our assumptions, and the ways in which we participate in social structures that reaffirm that some humans are higher up and better than others. This short form series is an effort to begin that conversation.

I was introduced to the work of Dr. Suze Wilson in a graduate class on leadership, and when I cracked open her book, it really was like a eureka moment for me. Because this text, which is filled with supplemental sources, gives language and context to so many of the questions that have been plaguing me for the last few years.

Similar to the way in which Heather Cox Richardson is able to use historic context to reveal patterns and give meaning to everyday current events in her Letters From An American newsletter; many of us receive it in our inboxes daily. I had a similar experience reading Suze Wilson's work, because she provides a sociohistoric context that explains how the quote unquote "science" of leadership studies has been shaped throughout history. And how, despite appearances a lot of leadership is still operating under the guise of some pretty outdated assumptions.

So if when we start digging into the history of leadership you feel tempted to skip over that part, I encourage you to stick with it, because some of the same figures who shaped early theories of leadership, the ones that led to Nazism and the Second World War, those same voices are still indirectly informing current events.

For example, you're gonna hear reference to Thomas Carlyle who some consider to be the founding father of fascism because his Great Man Theory informed Hitler and dominoed into the eugenics movement and Nazism.

Well, you may have heard of contemporary philosopher Curtis Yarvin. One of Peter Thiel's financial benefactors is a very vocal supporter of Carlyle's work. And if you don't know, Thiel is the billionaire co-founder of Palantir Technologies. He's the dude that was recently satirized on an episode of South Park. Thiel is a longtime supporter of Trump, a fan of Curtis Yarvin's work, and this orientation towards leadership and really the dominion of kings, has made its way into the White House. The shit show that Trump and his cronies are starring in is based on a logic that was shaped a very long time ago. It's an amplification of hierarchical norms that, at their very best keep productivity humming along practically, but at their worst, reinforce and reward the worst aspects of human nature.

Dr. Suze Wilson is a leadership scholar and senior lecturer at Massey University in New Zealand. Her research is extensive, including inquiry into issues surrounding power, gender, and leadership. Her doctoral thesis won an award in 2014, and she's a respected author of two books, including the one that inspired me to reach across oceans to invite her to sit down for the conversation you're about to hear today.

You're gonna hear a bit about Suze and her background, her early in life activism, and the hands-on work she did in senior leadership positions prior to becoming an important voice in

critical leadership theory. You're gonna get a crash course in the history of leadership studies and how culture has shaped political policy. This conversation was recorded back in June, but I think the insights shared are evergreen.

And just a quick disclaimer, this episode is just the beginning. It's meant to provide a sort of skeletal introduction to critical theory that in later episodes will expand as we advance into intersectionality and what non-dominant and traditionally marginalized cultures can teach us about more collaborative and inclusive models of leadership.

Here's my conversation with Dr. Suze Wilson.

Candice Schutter: Welcome to the podcast, Suze. Welcome to the Deeper Pulse. Thanks so much for being willing to sit down with me today.

Suze Wilson: Thanks for having me.

Candice Schutter: So if you wouldn't mind introducing yourself to the listeners and tell them kind of where you're coming to us from.

Suze Wilson: Okay. I'm an associate professor at Massey University in Auckland, New Zealand. So Kia ora from Tāmaki Makaurau. So my specialist area of research is leadership. And I'm particularly I guess influenced by more critical perspectives, issues, interested in issues of crisis leadership, gender and leadership, um, how leadership has constructed, the idea of it. How it's done more as a relational process rather than just something that is a reflection of leader, character, and traits.

I finished my PhD in 2013. But I came to the study of leadership, having been involved in leadership practice really since, um, I guess my early, early twenties through activism, through student unions, through trade unions, and then through working in industrial relations and human resource management roles.

Candice Schutter: It's usually a slow burn, our interests or passions, like how things come to pass. Anything formative in your background that you feel like led you to want to take a critical approach to studying leadership?

Suze Wilson: Yeah, I suppose a few things really. I mean, my first kind of experiences into leadership. So, you know, I was quite a shy, not very confident kid. And when I was in, hmm, I'm not sure quite how to relate it to sort of senior high school. Um, the, the conservative government of the day invited the South African rugby team to New Zealand. Rugby is our national game. It's the national game in South Africa. But this was apartheid South Africa. And there was a lot of other countries who were boycotting sporting engagement with South Africa.

And we had just the previous year in school studied Nazi Germany. And so as I started to learn about apartheid South Africa, to me the connections were very clear that at the, the core, you know, this racist ideology that said some people were somehow naturally inferior to others that had led to the Holocaust was the same kind of core idea that was shaping South African Society. And so that seemed very, very wrong to me that New Zealand would want to validate and give legitimacy to a regime like that. Particularly when Black Africans were saying, please don't do this. You know, this will give credence and credibility to the South African government. Please don't do this. Please boycott 'em.

Um, and so my best friend in the school and I, we were like, well, you know, we should be opposed to the tour and we should try and get our schoolmates, uh, on board. But the town I was in was actually a very pro tour town. And so we kind of were complete failures really in trying to influence our classmates to take a stand opposing the tour. We were basically ostracized by pretty much everyone in the class. I remember going to a protest march, that was the first time I'd ever been to such a thing like that, walking down the main street in our little town, and people spat at us. And I was just like, wow, okay. So that's wrong, but also I'm not gonna back, back down.

So I think I'd sort of, there was some sense of there are some things that are important enough that you have to put yourself out of your comfort zone to stand, stand up for and, and defend. And that that's just the right thing to do and that, that the alternative is completely unacceptable. So that kind of, I guess, was my route into activism.

When I went to university in my early twenties. I then got involved in the women's group and the student union that led me into the trade union and so forth, and then into HR. So I had kind of lots of experience of like doing leadership work, but basically from a, I guess, a values or cause based kind of foundation. You know, student unions are there to represent student interests. Trade unions are there to represent the interests of workers. And even when I was working in HR, you know, even in senior roles, I still felt that what I was trying to do was make sure that how the place ran was, was as fair as possible. That people were paid fairly and treated fairly, and that we had a workplace culture that, you know, was healthy, not toxic.

Um, but one of the things I really started to notice as I was in, you know, I was by this stage in quite senior roles in, in large organizations, was that the more we kind of talked about, we want good leadership, and this is the support that we're putting in place to develop our leaders, and our leaders are very important within the organization. The more it seemed like people on the shop floor kind of just were passive.

So particularly when I was at New Zealand Post as the general manager of HR. And I would travel around, you know, we had about 500 different work sites around the country, 'cause that's the no nature of postal service here. You have lots of small branches. So, you know, go and visit people. How are things going? What's going on in your branch? That sort of thing. And often they'd be able to identify like local problems and you know, so what is it you think should be done? And they go, oh, well this is what the solution is, but we need the executive leadership team to support us.

And I found myself getting more and more confused about, but you know what the problem is? I, I didn't know there was a problem. You know, I don't work on your side every day. You know how to fix it. You've got the authority. You've got the budget. So what possible use would the executive leadership team be here?

And so there was this, just this kind of dependency dynamic that had started to develop that somehow, you know, everything needed the blessing of the senior leadership team. And we were like 10 people in a company of 10,000. And it was just, well of course we can't make all the decisions. That's not how the place is set up to run. You know, there is, people have delegated authority within their sphere of influence, and that's what we're relying on people to do, is to show that, show that initiative and, and fix problems.

And I also noticed that, you know, along with that dependency thing was kind of this, just this expectation that somehow we could be all knowing and all powerful and perfect beings. That, you know, somehow any error, any flaw was not acceptable. And I was just like, this is really weird. Why are we,

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Suze Wilson: thinking about leadership in this way, this, these really heroic expectations?

Because, you know, I could look in my own mirror and, and be deeply aware of all my own limitations. But I also could look at, you know, all of my colleagues and, you know, particularly being in HR, you know, I could point to pretty specifically, you know, they're not good at that. They're not good at that. You know, that's a weakness, you know?

And so, yeah, just that got me really curious is why is this happening? And I moved from that role to another role in government with a basically strategic HR oversight for the public sector. And again, saw these same dynamics, these expectations that particularly senior leadership should somehow know all the answers and be able to fix all the problems and be, should be perfect. And I was like, this is really very strange.

And I was at that point, I guess thinking, where am I going with my career? I feel like I've had a couple of big HR jobs. I don't wanna just keep doing the same thing year after year. I don't really wanna be a chief executive. What am I gonna do? I know, I'll go back to school.

So it was like.

Candice Schutter: Isn't that always the answer?

Suze Wilson: Yeah. Yeah. And so it was like, I sort of had a year off traveling, which was great. And then came back, turned up at my local university and said, I wanna do a PhD. I wanna do something on leadership. There's something not right in how we're thinking about leadership.

And that was, that was kind of the start of the process.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Suze Wilson: That's what kind of drew me into it. That sense of, there's something very strange about the expectations we have of leaders.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. Well, and I think that's one of the reasons your book spoke to me really specifically. 'Cause it made it really clear that the critical perspective that you were bringing had come out of actual pragmatic experience. And it felt so relatable. Do I understand that the *Thinking Differently About Leadership* book came out of your dissertation? Okay.

Suze Wilson: Yes.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. So it came out of the work you ended up doing in your studies. And I think there's something really potent about the merging of the critical perspectives and the lived experience. I hear you trying to build that bridge, to create some practical solutions. Because critical theory for the sake of itself can be

Suze Wilson: Hmm.

Candice Schutter: like a snake eating its own tail, right? Like

Suze Wilson: Yes. Yeah.

Candice Schutter: Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

Suze Wilson: Yeah. I mean, I, I think that is a concern for people who are interested in more critical perspectives to be wary about it. So one, a lot of it is informed by continental philosophy rather than the, the kind of the analytic philosophy tradition. And, you know, continental philosophers are notoriously difficult to read and understand. Um, and so it can become very intoxicating to try and engage in that kind of abstracted discourse to prove that one has understood them.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Suze Wilson: And therefore to end up speaking in ways that, that only people who are deeply read in that particular philosopher have even the faintest clue what you might be talking about. I get that is a legitimate intellectual pursuit for some people. But if you're wanting to make a difference in the world, you have to figure out some ways of translating those ideas.

And I think another caution to think about with critical work is to try to make clear to people, it's not just about being negative, you know? So like all, all scholarship of any credit involves, if you like, identifying gaps and faults in a theory and a model and a body of evidence. And that obviously has value because if we can identify something's missing, something's not right, we can then figure out, well, what might we do?

So if you like capital C, critical obviously engages in that sort of work. But if, if we take leadership as our objective inquiry and all we want to do is be hostile towards it, it's gonna be pretty hard to engage people around that. I can think of some work that is of that nature. And, I can see again, the intellectual value of just really going hard at something to interrogate it.

I suppose I am somewhat more pragmatic that, you know, the reality is we are deeply enculturated to value leadership and value leaders. We are structurally living in societies and organizations where there are people designated with leadership roles. And so our lived experience is going to be shaped by leaders and leadership. And so trying to figure out how do we move the dial around the actual practices that people in those roles deploy, you know, seems like a, a useful thing to do to actually make some kind of impact.

And I think that, you know, a lot of what potentially connects a more critical orientation with, if you like, more mainstream organizational behavior literature is actually a concern to try and make workplaces healthy and more constructive and places where humans can flourish. I think what the critical edge tends to bring often is a, a greater clarity about maybe the structural forces that lie behind why that's not happening, rather than always psychologizing it. Yeah.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. It is a bit of a, and I am so new to all of this in terms of the language that's wrapped around it in, in academic pursuits and whatnot. I've, I've done a lot of inquiry into this when it comes to cult dynamics, and I can talk for days about that. And one of the things that kept coming up for me as I was exploring cult dynamics is I was like, there's really this continuum and what's happening here is just an amplification of things that have happened in every workplace I've worked in. Right?

Suze Wilson: Yes.

Candice Schutter: And what's beautiful about the research that you did, and this, this particular piece of work is that you go through history and sort of explain how these assumptions around leadership came to be like going all the way back to Greek philosophers like Aristotle. And that, it's sort of embedded in our psyches to make certain assumptions about leadership.

I'm wondering if you could share, because we're talking about making this practical, and I think it's like turning a light on in a room, the things that have always been there, suddenly we see them and we can't unsee them. And I feel like that's the brilliance of when this is done well for practical purposes.

And so I'm curious if you can talk about maybe some of those assumptions that just seem to be operating behind the scenes that we rarely question that we need to maybe.

Suze Wilson: Yes.

Candice Schutter: Look closer at.

Suze Wilson: Yes.

So when we, I, I think what did help me do that, because I did draw on the work of Michel Foucault, French social theorist, so continental philosopher. So, one of his ideas, um, and it, it's not only his ideas, others raise it as, as well, is that when we read words on a page or when someone speaks from a position of expertise, what we are generally encouraged to believe is that, that what they are telling us is a representation of the world that exists out there. And that our job is to, as the listener, is to judge how accurate is that representation of reality or, or not. You know?

So if I look out the window and I tell you, you can see that the sun is shining and I tell you it's raining. You can go, no, no. She's not accurately representing reality here. I can see that for myself.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Suze Wilson: That that's not, not true. Foucault on the other, on the other side, and, you know, various strands in social psychology do this as well, understands that language is actually what constructs our reality. Okay? That the words that we use to try and interpret what is going on and are not ever merely an objective account of reality, they are always an interpretation and a construction of it.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Suze Wilson: And so in any field of knowledge, as ideas develop over time, they build a credibility and authority about them such that they come to be regarded as capital T. Truth.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Suze Wilson: That is the truth. But what Foucault's work shows us is actually there was a history to how that came to be. And it wasn't ever as simple as we did this really robust science that allowed us to eliminate falsehood and determine what was truly, truly true. There was always chance. There were politics. There were certain things that were regarded as acceptable and other things that weren't according to cultural norms and customs. There were certain things that seemed important because of the issues that people were dealing with at the time, and so they kind of focused in on that, but ignored other things.

And all of this builds up and builds up so that the truth comes to be shaped in a certain way. It's sedimented over time. But it only, it's only ever a construction. Other things are always possible.

And so taking that kind of broad understanding from Foucault and applying that to leadership and my initial question of why are we thinking about it like this? Where did these ideas come from? And so that's what I was trying to do is to trace back and understand, what was it that those guys believed and took? Guys, literally guys.

Candice Schutter: Literally guys. Yeah.

Suze Wilson: Believed and what was going on in their world that made certain things seem so important, but other things weren't. And you know, how did those ideas get passed on from, you know, that era? How do they then turn up in the next era?

I jumped from ancient Greek to medieval Europe to kind of mid 19th century US and UK scholarship. So there's a huge, you know, it's not a continuous history that, that I'm telling there, but I could start to see connections. I could start to see things that had changed and things that hadn't changed over time.

So by going back that when I came to look at the present day in which we are so deeply immersed, it's very hard to, to gain distance from, I would be able to see it through different eyes. That was my hope and um, that's how it felt actually in the end is like, oh my God, these are really strange ideas that we've, we've got here.

But also like this idea that for the last three decades people have been trying to say to us, this is really new and modern. And, um, you know, this is absolutely the bee's knees. This is the kind of the most potent ideas about leadership we've ever developed. It's really an ideal model that we should all be promoting that actually, I could see that the roots of that idea, you know, lay back thousands of years ago. And that at its core, there was some magical thinking involved in it that, you know. That leaders had, well, Plato talks about that they have gold, their essence is imbued with gold. But also, you know, that their job was to, basically, so I'll use the word now, transform the great masses, and the inherent failings as he saw them, that only leaders could, could do that.

And here we are, you know, thousands of years later, and that's what's been promulgated as, you know, the most significant and most idealized leadership theory that most people are now exposed to. That somehow leaders have this magical quality that they can transform others. It's, yeah, so I do look at that theory and find its claims to novelty, uh, pretty dubious.

Candice Schutter: Absolutely. Yeah.

So the Transformational Leadership framework.

And I think a lot of folks out there, regardless of what environment they're in have probably experienced or heard of this style of leadership. I know in the cultures that have been most specifically critiqued on this podcast, transformational leadership is like the go-to. And I kind of came to your work trying to suss out. It's like, it's a shined up version of something that feels oppressive to me, that feels very old in terms of social constructs and hierarchies and whatnot.

You went in all these different places historically.

Do you wanna speak to that a little bit?

Suze Wilson: Yeah. Yeah. So we're kind of, if you like, modern scientific. Sorry, I did little air quotes then, um, the modern science of leadership kind of it starts becoming a conversation again in the mid 1840s with Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes and Hero Worship*.

Candice Schutter: Right.

Suze Wilson: Okay. So, and his kind of core thesis is, you know, that history is made by great men. And he does mean men.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Suze Wilson: And so he does this kind of attempt to engage in a characterological assessment of what was it about these great men that shaped history that allowed them to do that. And then in the late 1800s, Francis Galton starts to try and understand, from a trait theory perspective, what were the inherited traits of great leaders.

He's Darwin's cousin.

So he's very influenced by what Darwin is discovering about, you know, evolution. Yeah. Um, and so, he's basically like an early Social Darwinist of, you know, how can we, how can we figure that out.

So starting from about when Galton does his first work, which I think is about 1888 maybe through kind of the 1940s, trait theory is kind of basically the only way that leadership is being understood and studied scientifically.

And, you know, part of their problem, and this is what Stockdale's famous 1948 review of their work says, is they keep finding contradictory findings. One study would show, you know, these are the traits of leaders. And someone else would go, well, no, it's, it's, it's these ones. Stogdill does nonetheless acknowledge, actually there were some common traits that did seem to appear across different studies. But the unacknowledged history in there, and I still wanna write a specific article about this, is quite a few of these leadership scholars in this early period were eugenists.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Suze Wilson: So they weren't just interested in, you know, how can we identify great leaders. They were literally interested in how do we breed for great leaders. And it's, it's not an accident that Hitler was a great fan of Carlyle. This idea of kind of that there is a master class of, you know, elite men who have within them the capacity to, to change history. Is very consistent with Hitler's the whole kind of ideology of their führer as the center of everything, the führer principle.

So because trait theory starts to, you know, not a million miles from Nazi ideology because, you know, mic drop, it's not a, a million miles from Nazi ideology, right.

Candice Schutter: That's right.

Suze Wilson: Um, I couldn't find any literature where leadership scholars consciously acknowledge that. But you get Stogdill's paper in 1948, a major review of trait theory saying, look, you know, yes, there's some things, but you know, it's clearly also situation matters. But Ohio and Michigan state studies that started studying leader behavior, that really was in the post-war period, the kind of the sudden shift in the field and the reinvigoration of it. They had started their work before Stogdill had done his review anyway.

Candice Schutter: Sure.

Suze Wilson: And the, the guy who started that, I just had this sense, you know, he'd been in the war office. He'd been involved in the war effort in the US trying to recruit in the kind of personnel of the army. So trying to identify who was a suitable person to be involved in officer roles, you know. So he was involved in the all kind of officer selection and development stuff. And so he was like, you know, I just had the sense that behavior was the thing. But I mean, it, it just gave them a, it gave them a way forward without having to, you know, ever kind of say anything deliberately.

And so,

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Suze Wilson: Rather than us being able to say, well, this was a scientific process where this theory was discarded because it was disproven and there was evidence to prove that this theory helded promise, and that's why we moved in that direction. No, no, no. There was none of that evidence there. There was just a whole bunch of other circumstances and drivers that, you know, shifted the direction.

And so off we, off we went.

Candice Schutter: And the context coming out of the war of everyone, just, I don't wanna look at the, the elephant in the room and actually address.

Suze Wilson: Yes.

Candice Schutter: How those perspectives actually were feeding this ideology.

Suze Wilson: Yes.

Candice Schutter: I'm just gonna turn and look in this other direction.

Suze Wilson: Yeah. Yeah. To, I mean, to, to say in post-war U.S., oh, we think some people are born to lead. That's what we are studying. It would just be like,

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Suze Wilson: No, let's not go there. Because that just sounds so much like

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Suze Wilson: Nazi ideology.

Candice Schutter: And yet.

Suze Wilson: And yet, yeah.

Candice Schutter: So how did we move back into that, in this new framed way do you think?

Suze Wilson: So there's kind of, the Ohio and Michigan schools, you know, they start with behavior theory and you get the task and relationship is the kind of the two kind of core axes that both of their models are really oriented around. There was some work done by Lewin around autocratic democratic laissez-faire.

But I mean, it became fairly obvious, I think fairly quickly that something as complex as leadership couldn't be reduced to just a, a, you know, kind of a two factor model.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Suze Wilson: Which is why by the sixties you start to get situational and contingency perspectives coming up. So that you're getting a little bit more complexity, but it's still pretty mechanistic kind of orientation.

But then, you know, what's also happening during that time is you've got the whole counterculture movement coming up. You've got civil rights coming up. And you're seeing really inspirational leaders build movements. Demand and advocate for really dramatic social change. And as you move into the seventies, you've got the US facing real difficulties with competitive pressures. Its position of dominance on the world stage is not quite so secure. It's got problems of inflation and then stagflation, and then you've got Watergate, you know, a massive scandal. And all of this is starting to cause doubt about, well, you know, what is the state of American leadership actually?

And that's where James McGregor Burns comes in, political scientist and says, actually, look, we need to distinguish between the kind of leadership which is just about power broking, versus the ideal type of leadership, which is transforming. Where, you know, genuine change happens because leaders engage with followers and challenge and encourage them to, you know, think big, be better than they are. And so offers, offers up a new model.

The important thing about Burns work is he's thinking about it in the context of democratic society. So he's thinking about it in the context of leaders who are elected, who are chosen.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Suze Wilson: By their followers. People choose to follow that person, or they choose to follow some, somebody else.

His idea gets taken up in the early eighties by business school academics, you know, industrial psychologists, Bass and colleagues. And they get very excited about this. But they're, they're putting it into a commercial context.

And of course, Burns was a qualitative researcher. Bass, being a, a, a psychologist wants to turn it into formal constructs and mediating and moderating variables and all that kind of stuff. So you get, if you like, a more formal theory with, you know, a series of hypotheses which they then test and so on and so forth.

But the big thing, I think that, the big assumption that I think Bass doesn't pay attention to is he's put this idea that leaders should transform followers, that that's the ideal kind of leadership. He puts that within a workplace context, and he just completely forgets about the power dynamics.

Candice Schutter: Right.

Suze Wilson: That exists within those contexts. You know, where employees do not get to choose their bosses. Right?

And also, most of us don't turn up at work with the expectation or giving consent to the idea that somehow our bosses have the right to reconstruct our sense of reality. Reconstruct our morality. Reconstruct our sense of self. But that is what he is tasking transformational leaders to do.

And no doubt many people in organizations who are wanting to make a positive impact, who are wanting to help people learn and grow and develop, they are trying to use transformational leadership in pro-social ways. I don't doubt that for a moment. But if we don't pay attention to those power dynamics.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Suze Wilson: Um, and if we don't recognize the risks that claiming that right to kind of colonize your employees hearts and minds and souls carries with it, then we are creating a, a risky dynamic. And that I think is the, the bit that is often missing when people talk about this theory is as if it's got no, no dark side risk to it. And it very clearly, it very clearly does, I think. That's one of its dark side risks.

I think it's other dark side risk is. And I kind of got to this by doing a thought experiment with myself of imagining, I'm a transformational leader. And, if like, soaking myself in the language of that theory, what it was telling me about who I was and what I could do, and just noticing how that made me feel about myself. And it did make me feel super powerful.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Suze Wilson: Right? But also like super special.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Suze Wilson: Like I was entitled to just, you know, here is my vision and you need to buy into it. And you know, like, I felt like that's another risk is that is actually encouraging people to become very narcissistic. Um, very I know best.

Candice Schutter: Yes.

Suze Wilson: Um, yeah, quite unhinged from the value of humility.

Candice Schutter: Yes.

Suze Wilson: Um, which I think actually is really important for leadership to not think that you do know best. Because particularly if you're surrounded by smart, capable, enthusiastic people, you know, they're gonna have ideas that you won't have thought of.

Candice Schutter: Absolutely.

Suze Wilson: Yeah. So I think there's, there are those risks that go with that theory that we are not talking a lot about. And you know, there is this kind of constant frustration when you see the scandals break out of, you know, oh, this big ego leader turns out to be a complete asshole. Right.

And it's like, well, yeah, because he's had people blowing smoke up his ass for decades, right.

Candice Schutter: That's right.

Suze Wilson: Telling him he's a transformational leader.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Suze Wilson: What did we think was gonna happen to him when we gave that person that much power, that much scope to act, told them they were marvelous, believed as if they were somehow faultless. Of course, they're gonna turn into monsters.

I'm not only putting this stuff on, on leaders. We become complicit in these dynamics.

Right.

Candice Schutter: And followers are incentivized to reward that behavior.

Suze Wilson: Yeah.

Candice Schutter: You know, a lot of the environments that I was in, interestingly. I, first of all, what you said in terms of those risks, like resonate so deeply for me and my own experience as a follower and as a leader. And what was, would happen to my own psyche on both sides of that equation. How I played into that dynamic, and it fed a sense of entitlement.

Suze Wilson: Yeah.

Candice Schutter: As a leader. And most of the environments that I was in were women-led environments. And what I have found fascinating and what I'm kind of potentially looking at in my research is the way in which this transformational leadership style and what you've just described in terms of the risks. How an emphasis on emotional intelligence has become very prevalent. And in the, in the spaces that I was in, it's essential for followers and leaders to sort of adhere to these guidelines around the domains of emotional intelligence.

And what I find is there's this dark underbelly of the way that emotional intelligence is weaponized in these environments.

Suze Wilson: Mm.

Candice Schutter: And so the way that, you know, when I took, I took a course on emotional intelligence for my graduate program. And we spoke about resonant leadership styles and dissonant leadership styles. And I was like, this is all really interesting. I can think of examples of every single one of these. But there's a space that's missing here.

Suze Wilson: Yes.

Candice Schutter: Which is when the resonant leadership is created and then it is misused. As a follower, it is tremendously disorienting, because there's a lot of gaslighting that happens.

Suze Wilson: Yes.

Candice Schutter: There's a lot of sideways manipulation. What are your thoughts about how emotional intelligence plays into this? And particularly behavior of women toward other women? 'Cause I know we wanna talk about.

Suze Wilson: Yeah.

Candice Schutter: Gender and leadership as well.

Suze Wilson: Yeah, yeah. I mean, I think that, you know, again, like a lot of these ideas, people who've developed these are full of, I do take it that they are genuinely wanting to make a positive impact. They have good intentions and that they are trying to offer us guidance on what it would be to be, if you like, a well-functioning person.

But one of the limitations of mainstream psychology, I think is that it, it so often ignores the reality of power dynamics.

Candice Schutter: Yes.

Suze Wilson: That exist between people, but also in the institutional context in which we operate. And if you, if you don't have a clear understanding of power, which is not just about formal authority. It's not just a possession that one person has and the other person has, and it is a dynamic from moment to moment thing that flows around.

And therefore, it's something that if we're trying to be an ethical leader, we need to be mindful of from moment to moment.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Suze Wilson: And that requires a lot of careful work. But it also involves creating spaces where we're encouraging people and making it safe for people to say, actually that was, that was a bit of a power move just then, dude.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Suze Wilson: You know, or sis. Um, you know, 'cause it's very hard. You know, it's very hard to maintain a kind of egalitarian ethos, right?

But when we have that, then we can actually speak the truth to each other as we see it.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Suze Wilson: And when there is, is that inequality there, it becomes much harder for the person who feels subordinate to speak the truth as they see it to the person who is super ordinate. And there are benefits, short term benefits, at least, albeit at the price of, you know, deteriorating the quality of your character. There are short term benefits that the person who has the more power can get through just, you know, grabbing it and using it.

And when I'm talking about power, I'm not saying power is only used negatively. I'm also using empowerment as part of that. Power can be used for positive, constructive, uplifting, pro-social generative purposes. Or it can be used for toxic purposes. That is its, that is its nature. It's not that one is power and one is not. That, that is all part of power.

In the same way, I think that, you know, leadership can be used for good purposes. Or it can be used for bad purposes. To try and pretend that leadership being used for bad purposes is not leadership when clearly there is a dynamic of leading and following going on.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Suze Wilson: is to engage in a desire to preserve leadership as some kind of sacred, sacred thing, rather than understanding it as a social force that we're all implicated in.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. It's interesting timing that we're having this conversation as well, because when you speak about power, it can be used in a variety of different ways. And a particular individual, your former Prime Minister who you've done some studying on.

Suze Wilson: Yes.

Candice Schutter: Who's just released a memoir.

How would you say, 'cause I feel like in some of the things I've read, you used her approach to leadership as an example of that more positive expression of power and sort of, acknowledging these dynamics and doing things differently.

What are your thoughts on Jacinda Ardern?

Suze Wilson: Yeah. I mean, I think she's an interesting person to examine as a leader, because she is in many ways, counter the dominant model. Partly because she's incongruent simply by virtue of being a woman in a leadership role.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Suze Wilson: Leadership roles still predominantly held by men. Certainly at that, head of country level. Um, and her relative youthfulness when she took that role. And then she had a child in office as well. So, you know, there's a number of things that, that kind of mark her out as different. In terms of her approach as well. She's tried to be, I guess, unapologetically different in saying that there is value in empathy, in kindness in political leadership. And that that is something that we should expect from leaders. And that, she is generally loath to engage in personal criticism of other people. She tends to try to engage with people more at the level of issues, rather than personal attack.

She's unusual in being much more open about herself, than I think most leaders are. So not only in terms of explaining her thinking on a policy decision, but you know, talking about herself as a person, as a human being, what's going on for her in relation to that stuff.

So I think, you know, there's a whole bunch of things that make her very interesting. And I've only met her once for about 10 seconds, so I have no, if you like, inside,

Candice Schutter: Right.

Suze Wilson: Knowledge. And I'm also conscious of the danger of parasocial relationships. But I feel like I've just so been so analytically oriented around observing her and noticing, oh, that's what she's doing there. That's what she's doing there. That's what she's doing, doing there. I feel like I can, you know, have a real strong sense of, okay, this is how she's likely to handle a situation. I'm, I'm very rarely surprised by something she says. 'Cause it's like, yeah, that's how she would think about that.

So I think she's, um, an important role model for women and for people trying to lead differently. You know, not all the big, I'm in control. I'm powerful. I'm in charge, that kind of stuff. She's much more dialogical and collaborative in her approach.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Suze Wilson: And she's had a really hard time of it, partly because she had to deal with some really difficult crises. But also because here she was being a woman dealing with really difficult crises and doing so in ways that, if you like, blurred gendered norms. So she's had a lot of gendered abuse, because she's, she's too assertive to be a good woman.

Candice Schutter: Right.

Suze Wilson: Yeah. So she's, she's a, she's a bitch for being assertive.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Suze Wilson: But because she's also kind, you know, that means she's a weak leader. There's a real strong sense that a, I think it's a minority of people here, have of grievance towards her, very strongly felt. Some of that is shaped by just kind of conspiratorial views about vaccines. And, you know, other kind of disinformation narratives.

But some of it I think also is because, because she promulgated kindness. But then people found the policies were difficult. You know, so they, they couldn't travel, for example, and that they therefore took that personally that she was somehow being personally unkind to them. Which I'm kind of like, you know, that when you are running a country, you can't do something that works for every single person, right? Like, you know, like you're kind of being a little bit self-centered in taking that quite so personally.

Candice Schutter: And that's part of the naivety about leadership though too, that she should be a superhuman person who could potentially respond to a crisis in a way where everyone's happy, right?

Suze Wilson: Yes.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Suze Wilson: Yeah.

So, no, I think we can learn just so much about leadership from her experience in all sorts of different ways.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Including the backlash to the period of time where she was in leadership and which was right alongside the rise of Trumpism. And.

Suze Wilson: Yes.

Candice Schutter: It's hard to, I mean, would you agree that it's hard to separate that backlash from the rise of Trumpism? And how is, how,

Suze Wilson: Definitely.

Candice Schutter: is what's happening here impacted things there for y'all?

Suze Wilson: Yeah. So, um, I mean, it's been seeping in for years. Thank you very much for that exporting that to us.

Candice Schutter: I am so sorry. We're all so sorry.

Suze Wilson: Yeah, no. So it, it's been, you know, it's been a growing part of the scene here. And we have a coalition government at the moment. And, you know, one of them actively is, you know, using the language of wokeism now as, as part of, it's kind of how it's trying to appeal to its base. So we have, if you like, our own little kind of mini try hard trumps.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Suze Wilson: Um, but it's been a, I think his biggest influence here is more in the, because he has repeatedly violated norms of conduct about how we would expect significant leader to behave. And he's been doing that openly and even more confidently really since, since getting away with the Access Hollywood thing. Like to me, to me that was a real line in the sand.

Candice Schutter: Yep.

Suze Wilson: When he got elected, despite that happening.

Candice Schutter: We all thought that was going to be the thing, and it wasn't the thing.

Suze Wilson: Yes.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Suze Wilson: I think maybe the first thing was about the, the Mexicans are rapists. And it was just like, ah, what?

Candice Schutter: Yeah, yeah.

Suze Wilson: What the hell? How can you say that? How can you think that? How can you get away with it? And he got away with that. And then the Access Hollywood thing being so close to the election and people having that in their minds as they went to vote.

And it's just like, no, dude, we're gonna give you a pass on that. That was just like, to me, that felt like, okay, so that was such a big line in the sand. And he, you know, he's just got worse and worse since that in terms of how he's prepared to conduct himself.

And so it's that deterioration of, you know.

So I, I recognize there's a tension in my discourse here. On the one hand, I'm saying we should not expect leaders to be perfect. Okay. But I am also saying, you know, there should be some basic standards of, you know, decency.

Candice Schutter: Absolutely.

Suze Wilson: You know, like not bragging about assaulting people. Not being overtly, even frankly covertly, racist should be a no-go thing.

Candice Schutter: They should have a sense of humanity, and not.

Suze Wilson: Yes, yes. And that, you know, the punching down, I personally find really repugnant.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Suze Wilson: So it, to me that's a constant abuse of his power.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Suze Wilson: Either as a candidate or as the president to punch down on people who have less power, you know, seems to me to be really a dangerous thing. Dangerous thing to do, a really abusive thing to do.

So all of that I think has shaped. Political scientists kind of talk about the, the Overton Window of what the public will regard as acceptable. Often they're focused more on policy settings. But I think that Trump has widened that window in terms of how a politician can conduct themselves. How a leader can conduct themselves and get away with it.

And, you know, part of, I think what has made it permissible was his history as a reality TV star. And reality TV thrives on constructing moments of conflict.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Suze Wilson: And mostly constructing moments of abuse. You know, where one, one person is behaving in an abusive manner towards another. Because it wants to capture the drama of you said what to her? So we are there to try and catch that unguarded moment of.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Suze Wilson: You know.

Candice Schutter: Right.

Suze Wilson: And all of that is kind of present in the culture. And he understands that so well. He understands how to play that so, so well. So yeah, it's influenced it here. But you know, it, it's a worldwide impact.

Candice Schutter: Absolutely.

Suze Wilson: Yeah.

Candice Schutter: So having all of that in mind, sort of the foundation you've laid for us. And circling all the way back to the beginning and you being, in your twenties working in these environments and having these conversations and realizing that folks are saying, we have this problem. It needs to be solved. We know what needs to happen. We are waiting for the leaders to address this issue. Or there's a sense of displacing a sense of agency, I guess, if you will.

Suze Wilson: Yes.

Candice Schutter: And so, if we look at where we are right now. And as an outsider who has understanding of leadership, and you look at, the situation that we're in here in the US and any of the situations we're in globally. The concept of followership and this spell that we get under where, in my opinion, we, myself included, become very paralyzed and immobile in the face of not having a leader to mobilize us and tell us what to do next and how to organize and where to go.

What are your thoughts on how we can apply some of what we've been talking about today to current events and our approach to making some social change around this? How can we constructively start to think about leadership and followership differently so that we can maybe make an impact?

Suze Wilson: Yes. So I think that people have to have their emotional responses to what's going on that violates their sense of right and wrong. And I think that's an important part of the process to try to, to say, just don't get upset when really upsetting things are happening is not helpful.

Like if we are just gonna suppress all of that, we're doing something bad to our own functioning and our humanity. There are things that are viscerally wrong. And that visceral reaction is how we partly, how we know how wrong it is. So we have to stay, I think connected to that.

What I'm trying to do is also then engage my analytic brain to dissect what's the move here that's being played out? How is it being played out? What makes it possible? What are the assumptions that make that claim credible? And how can we seek to erode or challenge or provide alternatives to that?

I think one of the things that I've really come to understand, that people who are not Trump supporter often don't get, is how much the connection between him and his, his followers is based on a sense of love. I know that sounds weird because he's so, he promulgates so much hate. But when he is talking to his own, he is sharing them in love. If you watch a Trump rally, the flow of energy between him and his followers is a really palpable thing. I'd love to kind of be physically present. But even just seeing it on the screen, you can, you can sense the interplay there. And it's because he showers them with love. He tells 'em they're wonderful people.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Suze Wilson: That they are true patriots. That, you know, he is there for them.

And so we need to find ways to disrupt that love language.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Suze Wilson: In ways that people can make sense of, to try and help them come away from what is a toxic relationship. Because his policy decisions will not serve the interests of his followers.

Candice Schutter: That's right.

Suze Wilson: Not the bulk of them. It will serve, you know, the 1% that's very much clear where his policy settings are.

So, so they need to understand that he might be giving them this kind of psychic sense of love, but his policy decisions will not meet their needs. And they need to feel love from the alternatives.

And all of us have, all of us who have the power of language be that written or spoken or sign or whatever, how we communicate with others. You know, in those conversations that we have every day, we can influence those around us. So I think we all have agency.

It might not feel like enough, but we have to remember people are influenced by those closest to them. There are

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Suze Wilson: multiple studies studies that show that.

So we can add to the ripples in the pond.

Candice Schutter: Yes.

Suze Wilson: And, even if we can't find physically around us, we can find online communities of like-minded people doing that. And so we have to remember, we are never acting alone in those spaces, even if, even if it feels like that.

So yeah, creating those ripples, I think is. It's like, you know, it's like dealing with climate change. None of us can fix the whole thing, but we can all make choices that cummulatively, you know, make some kind of impact. And we can continue to advocate and lobby and vote for people who are gonna address those issues.

And yeah, I mean, it's the, it's the Martin Luther King perspective, isn't it? About the long arc of history trying to recognize the historical moment we are in is. It's not bending forwards at the moment towards justice. It's bending backwards, but, you know.

Candice Schutter: We need to lean even harder though.

Suze Wilson: Yeah, yeah.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Suze Wilson: Yes.

Candice Schutter: Push it in that direction.

Suze Wilson: Yes.

Candice Schutter: Are you hopeful?

Suze Wilson: Um, as a deliberate choice, yes. Because, um. And, and so it's effortful, it's not like, oh, of course. I feel hopeful of, you know. It's an effortful determination to find comfort and assurance in, you know, what others are doing.

Um, you know, in new, in New Zealand, because we have a coalition government that is very opposed to the progress that we have been making over the last four to five decades and trying to decolonize the nation. And, and to actually recognize and value our indigenous culture. And the current government is pushing very hard back on that.

I take comfort from demographic trends that show us actually, you know, that the people that are of that view are dying out and they're being replaced.

Candice Schutter: Yes.

Suze Wilson: They are being replaced by. I shouldn't use that word, replacement actually 'cause of the great replacement theory. But, you know.

So yeah. I, it's a conscious, deliberate refusal to be undone.

Candice Schutter: Yes.

Suze Wilson: And to give up.

So it's effortful hope. Yeah.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. Well, conversations like these give me a lot of hope. And especially diving into nuance. Because I was in environments where hope was a very etheric, magical thinking kind of construct. And to, to actualize it and to understand how it is a verb. How we can actually actualize it together. And, and the work that you have done. I don't know how many copies of your book you've sold, but this particular copy is so near and dear to me. It means so much to me that you wrote it. And it just really wrapped language around so much of what I was feeling. I feel like it, it catalyzed my work moving in an entirely different direction.

I just wanna thank you so much for being willing to sit and talk with me. And you have made me feel less alone in this world, speaking the language that you speak and seeing the things that you see and describing them to us.

So, thank you, Suze.

Suze Wilson: Kia ora. Thank you very much.

Great to talk with you.

Candice Schutter: Thanks again to Dr. Suze Wilson for taking the time to speak with me, and share with all of you.

Next week, we'll begin exploring definitions of leadership at the intersection of gender, race, and embodiment. I hope you'll join me then. If you'd like to support the podcast or hear more in the meantime, you can access a vast catalog of bonus episodes at patreon.com/thedeeperpulse.

Bye for now.