

---

# Critical Essay: Wicked problems in the Age of Uncertainty

human relations

1–15

© The Author(s) 2022



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: [10.1177/00187267211070770](https://doi.org/10.1177/00187267211070770)

[journals.sagepub.com/home/hum](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/hum)



**Keith Grint** 

Warwick Business School, UK

## Abstract

We are, apparently, living in unprecedented times, an Age of Uncertainty, when wicked problems whirl all around as we struggle to cope with Covid-19, environmental catastrophe and the right-wing populism that threatens to unravel all kinds of international agreements. In this personal reflection, 15 years after I wrote an article on wicked problems and the social construction of leadership, I take a look back, and forward, to see whether there ever was an Age of Certainty when only tame problems temporarily troubled us, or whether our understanding of the world is itself a social construction, open to dispute and thus we have always lived in uncertain times. In the process of this evaluation, I consider whether collaborative leadership, often associated with wicked problems, is as ubiquitous and effective as some proponents make out, and if it isn't, what this says about our ability to address such problems.

## Keywords

command, critical problems, leadership, management, social construction, tame problems, wicked problems

## Introduction

In Grint (2005), I wrote ‘Problems, problems, problems: The social construction of leadership’ for *Human Relations* as a way of rescuing Rittel and Webber’s (1973) groundbreaking article on Tame and Wicked Problems from contingency theory and locating it within a social constructionist frame. It was also a means by which I could position the Bush/Blair decision to go to war in Iraq against a theoretical background rather than just a maelstrom of public anger. Sixteen years on, in what many seem to assume is now the

---

### Corresponding author:

Keith Grint, Warwick Business School, Warwick University, Coventry, CV4 7AL, UK

Email: [Keith.Grint@wbs.ac.uk](mailto:Keith.Grint@wbs.ac.uk)

Age of Uncertainty, where we choke on Covid-19 and an environmental crisis, I want to revisit the original article briefly before considering whether the problems' typology can help us navigate the contemporary storms, whether it has a future, and indeed whether it had a longer past than I was aware of at the time of the initial writing.

My contribution to the problems' literature was limited to three issues: first, to turn the Rittel and Webber 'hard' binary – where it was self-evident whether a problem was Tame (we knew how to fix the problem with standard operating procedures (SOPs)) or Wicked (we did not know how to fix it) – into a softer typology. In effect, to argue that the division between the problems categories was itself dependent upon the very conflicts that made the wicked category wicked. Thus, for instance, heart surgery for most of us would be a wicked problem because we have no understanding of the process to engage in the surgery. But for heart surgeons the problem was tame because they did it day after day and generally knew what worked, and what didn't. Second, I suggested that we can usefully expand the category of problems from two to three to include Critical Problems or crises that were self-evident and thus not wicked, but also beyond SOPs, and therefore not tame. Again, the softness, or socially constructed nature of the category meant, for instance, that for road traffic police officers most road traffic accidents were routine – tame problems that they had met before and had SOPs for, but for those drivers involved in the incident it was more of a critical problem that they hoped someone else would sort out. Were there to be a sequence of road accidents at the same spot then we might have a wicked problem that needed some collaborative work to address. The third contribution was to suggest that we could loosely associate these three problem types with three decision-styles: critical problems required 'commanders', decisive individuals who could provide the answer to the problem and coerce others, where necessary, to ensure the collective good. Tame problems required 'managers' whose job was to provide or delegate the process that would resolve the problem, though this usually meant ensuring some skilled subordinate would take the responsibility and thus management was often regarded as relatively boring, by comparison with the allegedly more exciting world of leadership (Carroll et al., 2010) that I confined to wicked problems. Such 'leaders' who, recognizing their own limits and the wicked nature of the problem, would engage the collective to address the problem. This was intended as a heuristic, not a contingency approach, because many problems categories would be contested, the problems often involved more than one category in the typology, and because decision-makers usually had default preferences for their style of acting, such that what counted as a crisis, for example, would depend upon the ability of the decision-maker to persuade sufficient followers that a commander was required and it was thus a legitimate response. Hence, one could not legitimately invade Iraq if the decision-maker portrayed the situation as tame or wicked because neither required a coercive response; thus, the importance of the weapons of mass destruction and the 45-minute issue – which effectively allowed Bush and Blair to insist that there was no time for debate, there was only time for an invasion.

I write this reflection on the original article in the midst of the Covid pandemic of 2020/2021, a period that has generally been categorized as the Age of Uncertainty, when the context has changed so radically that an innovative approach to leadership is required. This, as readers of the original article will recognize, reflects another contingency

approach: in the face of a crisis, what I originally labelled a ‘commander’ would be required: a coercive and decisive person willing to wrestle the pandemic – the ‘invisible mugger’ – to the floor, as Boris Johnson, the British Prime Minister, suggested (Shariatmadari, 2020). But the pandemic is not an objective fact that we can all agree on to ensure a consensus that facilitates the appropriate form of decision-making. In effect, because we don’t agree on the nature of the threats or opportunities nor the appropriate response to them, we are effectively facing different problems and have different ideas about the legitimacy of lockdowns, face coverings, furlough schemes or stockpiling food and so on. In fact, these problems exhibit not just different aspects of wicked problems but elements of different kinds of problems that add yet further levels of complexity and confusion to the public debate.

In what follows, I adumbrate the original theory of wicked and tame problems before adding my own suggestions. Then I consider where the original model has gone over the last half century before considering whether that model owes its existence to the Age of Certainty, now apparently long gone. I then focus on what the Age of Uncertainty has in store for wicked problems before summarizing the key aspects of the debate. Let us start at the beginning, with an outline of the hard binary typology: tame and wicked problems.

## Original theory and developments

The original work on wicked problems by Rittel and Webber (1973) suggested that while planners appeared to operate as if the world was accessible to rational planning and thus open to control and predictability, in reality, and contrary to the arguments of Simon (1969), the planners’ world was full of problems beyond the deterministic reach of human, or even artificial, intelligence. The originator of the terms seems to have been Horst Rittel in seminars given in 1967 at the University of California, Berkeley, under the control of West Churchman, a systems’ analyst, and against the background of social unrest in the USA throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. At that time, it became self-evident that the values of the American population were divergent, not convergent, and this had significant implications for any kind of scientific public planning process (Crowley and Head, 2017: 541). In fact, Rittel and Webber’s claims are closer to the pragmatic school of Dewey (1984[1927]) than the rational school of Simon, and in particular the role of questioning to construct a pragmatic response to a particular problem (Kelemen et al., 2018).

Rittel and Webber’s article starts with a reflection on the role of professionals before settling on the nature of tame and wicked problems. Tame problems are ‘benign’ and are the source of interest to most engineers and scientists. They can be explored, explained and resolved through a rational and scientific approach and it is always possible to know whether we have understood the problem and resolved it properly to the point where there is one best answer. Rittel and Webber spend little time on defining and discussing tame problems and would probably be happy to put all of these under the mantle of FW Taylor’s Scientific Management. The rest of their article concerns wicked problems and these, they insist, can be described in 10 propositions:

1. There is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem.
2. Wicked problems don't have stopping rules.
3. Solutions to wicked problems are not true or false but good or bad.
4. There is no immediate, and no ultimate, test of a solution to a wicked problem.
5. Every solution to a wicked problem is a 'one-shot operation' because there is no opportunity to learn by trial and error, every attempt counts significantly.
6. Wicked problems do not have an enumerable (or exhaustively desirable) set of potential solutions, nor is there a well described set of permissible operations that may be incorporated into the plan.
7. Every wicked problem is essentially unique.
8. Every wicked problem can be considered as a symptom of another problem.
9. The existence of a discrepancy representing a wicked problem can be explained in numerous ways. The choice of explanation determines the nature of the problem's resolution.
10. The planner has no right to be wrong.

Although this has often been taken on merit as the bible of wicked problems, there are several inherent concerns. For example, the assumption that wicked problems don't have stopping rules has a universal claim that undermines its utility. Thus, we might accept that there will never be an end to crime in large-scale and long-lived human societies, but that does not imply that all wicked problems feature this. So, the wicked problem of how to stop the Nazis in the Second World War did eventually construct a stopping point. Similarly, the claim that solutions are not true or false but good or bad, first undermines the claim that these are necessarily value judgements (good for whom?), and second inhibits the shift towards a search for better or worse, not good or bad, solutions. And to claim that there is no opportunity to learn by trial and error implies that we can work solutions out by some kind of scientific or logical determination – which is precisely what we cannot do in their own claim. On the contrary, learning by trial and error, and the incrementalism and reversibility required by this approach, are exactly how we should approach wicked problems because we cannot know whether what we are about to do will work – that would be a sign of a tame problem. Thus, there are many occasions when wicked problems actually require what Keats called 'negative capability', that is, the ability to not make decisions and to be comfortable in the land of uncertainty and ambiguity. As Keats (1899: 277) put it: 'I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.' Or, as Brook et al. (2016) argue, when facing wicked problems we may have to 'unlearn' existing responses and accept that not knowing and non-action are perfectly legitimate and indeed necessary responses. Finally, the claim that planners have no right to be wrong replicates this value contradiction. Ultimately, then, as others have pointed out in similar contexts (Gibeau et al., 2019), the necessity of responding to wicked problems with a collaborative approach often ensures that this style of decision-making is most difficult to do when it is most needed; this is the irony of 'leadership'.

Indeed, it is perhaps ironic that the citations of the article by Rittel and Webber are five times more prevalent in environmentally-oriented journals than those concerned

with systems, design or planning (Crowley and Head, 2017: 540). Yet, there are articles that consider the ethical aspects of leadership development and ‘conscious capitalism’ (businesses that try integrating corporate responsibility and sustainable practices) as a wicked problem in a way that the originators of the term would probably find very appropriate (Fyke and Buzzanell, 2013). The focus on green and ethical issues is perhaps unsurprising in a context where 95% of the science supports one particular interpretation of the context and the future predictions and yet still some people, and some national leaders in particular, dispute the ‘facts’. This has led others to argue that problems like Climate Change are actually ‘super-wicked’ (Levin et al., 2012: 123) where ‘time is running out; those who cause the problem also seek to provide a solution; the central authority needed to address it is weak or non-existent; and, partly as a result, policy responses discount the future irrationally’. Actually, none of these necessarily holds true: time is always running out, irrespective of the nature of the wicked problem, and the issue of time in Climate Change rather shifts the problem from wicked to critical, requiring a different kind of decision; those who cause the problem are not always interested in addressing it (take the burning of the Amazon forest, for instance); the central authority need not be weak – it just isn’t interested in resolving the problem; and discounting the future irrationally depends on whose version of rationality we are considering – that seems to me to be a cornerstone of the contested nature of all, not specifically ‘super’, wicked problems. But super or ordinary, are we currently beset by wicked problems in this new Age of Uncertainty?

### **Retrospect: Age of Certainty?**

The popularity of the ‘Age of Uncertainty’ frame is only outshone by the ubiquity of the associated words: unprecedented, unpredictable and exceptional. As *Time* magazine wailed, ‘Seldom has a nation been confronted with such a congeries of doubts and discontents.’ Usually, this contemporary uncertainty is associated with the Covid-19 pandemic but it has been associated with Brexit, Populism, Environmental Extinction, a VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) world and so on. But the *Time* magazine quote above is from 1 March 1969 and we should acknowledge that Galbraith’s original *Age of Uncertainty* book was published over 44 years ago, in 1977, but we will ignore that unfortunate point for the immediate future. So, what must it have been like to have lived in the previous eras when none of this applied, before wicked problems began to accumulate?

Well, that’s easy to recall. It was the Age of Certainty for those old enough to remember what life was like before Covid-19 or Brexit in 2016, or the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, or the Iraq War in 2003, or 9/11 in 2001, or the Gulf War in 1991, or the end of Apartheid in 1990, or the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, or the Vietnam War between 1959 and 1975, or AIDS, or the Space Race, or the Women’s Lib movement, or the Civil Rights Movement in the USA, or the Chinese Revolution in 1945, or the Second World War, or the Holocaust, or the Spanish Civil War, or the rise of the Nazis to power in 1933, or the Great Depression of 1929, or the Spanish Flu from 1918 to 1921, or the Russian Revolution in 1917, or the First World War, or the beginnings of the automobile, flight and relativity; and that’s only in the last 100 odd years, so don’t get me started on the

19th century or earlier. But apart from all those events, and a thousand more that I haven't mentioned, life was really predictable in probably one sense – everyone would die at some point, but apart from that, nothing was predictable because there never was an Age of Certainty. Uncertainty, then, is an essential condition of humanity and it's the existential anxiety that flows from that which explains our desperate search for certainty, for regularity, for predictability, for causal logic, for science and perhaps for religion. Or in the words of Chris Rea trying to explain the inexplicable inequities and irrationalities of life and find some solace somewhere: 'Tell me there's a heaven.'

But if Rittel and Webber turned their back on the pretensions of the scientific approach to social planning, others did not. Starting with Bertalanffy's (1968) General Systems Theory and continuing in the leadership field with arguments for Complexity Leadership (Rosenhead et al., 2019), many have suggested that science, or rather the science of systems and complexity, can indeed rescue us from wicked problems. Snowden, for example, one of the architects of the Cynefin (Snowden and Boone, 2007) model of problems and decisions, has some basic similarities to the original wicked problem approach but his predilection for claiming the mantle of science, rather than contested judgement, is manifest not just in the approach taken but in his title as Chief Scientific Officer of his consultancy (Snowden, 2015). In a similar vein, there is an argument that, in the light of advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Big Data, we should be able to generate sufficient computing power to address wicked problems that we previously had been unable to tame. But this is to confuse analysis with choice: even if we had super-computers to handle all the variables, we are still left with choosing what to do with data results. For instance, were we to understand how to curb global hunger with the help of AI, we would still need to consider whether we had the right to force farmers to change their practices, to displace existing market mechanisms with administrative controls, and to allocate power and rewards on some 'rational' basis. After all, this was precisely the dream of Lenin – to marry the central planning of the USSR with the productivity leaps embedded in Scientific Management. For all kinds of reasons that failed.

And yet the desire for a rational model of management persisted in a whole variety of arenas. For while Simon's later (1969) work reached for a scientific or at least rational model of decision-making, his earlier work (1957) on 'satisficing' had already suggested that we often look at the least worst option when addressing complex issues, rather than search out the definitive 'best' solution. And it might be useful to return to the incrementalism or 'muddling through' of Lindblom (1959) in this context, for this also encapsulated the idea that in the face of uncertainty and heterogeneous values, we would be restricted to trying things out in an experimental way so that we could learn from experience.

That, in turn, posed some problems for the role of management as a profession, and what we would now call leadership. If, as the post-war consensus held, management was a rational profession involving logical, nay scientific, decision-making, then presumably this occupied most of the time of such people: they spent their time making decisions and enacting those decisions and both were framed by rational logic. Only the early research of Carlson (1951), Stewart (1967) and Mintzberg (1973) suggested something quite different: rather than deciding and 'doing things' all day long, managers spent three-quarters of their time just talking, because other people – that is, their subordinates – actually

executed their verbal decisions. And this explains why the utility of conceptual schemas like wicked problems depends on the requirements of all language games: if the population do not understand the language, then they cannot act as requested. Moreover, teaching one group (the employers) about wicked problems often generates resistance from other groups (the employees), precisely because the latter have been excluded from the (new) language game.

One alternative to the wicked problems typology that gained significant traction was adaptive leadership, stemming from the work of Heifetz (1994) and Heifetz et al. (2009). They distinguish between Technical Challenges and Adaptive Challenges with the former mirroring tame problems and the latter reflecting wicked problems. The differences between the two approaches are, however, significant. As in the original work of Rittel and Webber (1973), there is no third category of critical problems and thus no associated decision-style of command. Instead, the adaptive leadership approach suggests seven practices for ‘adaptive leaders’ to follow. First, to identify the adaptive challenge by ensuring the focus is on the right issue. Second, to ‘get on the balcony’; that is, to make sure you distance yourself from the action now and again to gain a different perspective and see the patterns. Third and fourth, to regulate the distress and ensure people keep disciplined attention to the challenge. Fifth, give the problem back to the people who have the problem. And finally, to protect the voices from below and maintain a ‘holding environment’ to ensure the conflict is managed. These all seem to be important aspects for how to manage a wicked problem and there is probably little that Rittel and Webber would disagree with. However, there are radical discontinuities in the way a social constructionist might approach the points suggested by both models. First, Heifetz et al. operate as if the problems and challenges are objective, rather than deeply contested. We only have to consider how various governments have responded to Covid-19 to see that the virus is not an objective phenomenon that has a predicted set of actions required to resolve it. Second, the absence of a critical problem or challenge category means that there is little space for any coercive action in the adaptive model, especially when Covid-19, for example, has required extraordinarily coercive action on the part of many state actors. Indeed, the pandemic has embodied the two frames that appear to be antithetical to each other: it is the kind of problem that is both critical – requiring the individual, immediate and decisive action of a commander, and wicked – requiring the collaborative and time-consuming acts of a leader. Third, the deeply problematic nature of some issues means that relying upon a set of seven practices may be both insufficient and overly prescriptive. Thus, in a crisis it may be totally appropriate to protect the voices from below for a temporary period, and the fact that it is a wicked or adaptive issue does not necessarily mean that others have not already solved this problem, so the better response might not always be to give the work back to the people with the problem but to pursue a strategy of positive deviance (Pascale et al., 2010) and discover who has already fixed the problem elsewhere. Finally, the simplicity of the ‘seven practices’ is simultaneously their weakness because many wicked problems are entirely novel – for which there is no resolving blueprint. In effect, the prescriptive ‘elegance’ of the seven processes might be more valuable if situated alongside the more pragmatic ‘clumsy’ model advocated by Verweij and Thompson (2006) (see also Grint, 2008).

The much looser responses embodied in adopting an approach closer to that of a *bricoleur* – an experimental and incremental individual or group that assembles practical prototypes from whatever is available – may be a better bet in the long run (Kroll-Smith et al., 2007). Just such an approach saved Apollo 13 in April 1970 when an oxygen tank failed, but the real problem was removing carbon dioxide that was usually absorbed by canisters of lithium hydroxide. There were not enough canisters of the right shape in the lunar module, but engineers on the ground devised a way to bridge the gap, using only material available in the module: plastic covers from manuals, duck-tape and other items to create ‘the mailbox’. The procedure was then read to the crew on the lunar module who successfully rebuilt the prototype on board (Cortright, 1970). So, if there never was an Age of Certainty where every problem was tame, what does that mean for the Age of Uncertainty – is everything going to be wicked for the foreseeable future, and, if it is, how should we lead?

### **Prospective: The Age of Uncertainty?**

It would be remiss of me and illogical to suggest that the future will be either certain or uncertain, since prediction is beyond us, or at least me. However, it would seem clear that if the wicked uncertainty that has prevailed in the past at one level, in association with a large swathe of predictable tame issues and solutions in another, punctured by an occasional critical problem continues, then more of the same uneasy conjunction of problems and decision-styles is likely. But this is not necessarily how everyone views the future.

For example, when the collapse of parts of the finance and banking system occurred in 2008, the subsequent response of the British Conservative-Liberal coalition government at the time was not to seek ‘reparations’ from that industry but to persuade the British public that the cause of the problem was a profligacy in public expenditure that necessitated a decade of austerity (Clarke and Newman, 2012). In short, the argument that the British treasury was no different from the average household and therefore it was ‘inevitable’ and ‘necessary’ to reduce funding to the health service, schools, housing and all the other elements of the public sector – which led to it being ill-prepared for the current pandemic. As the then Prime Minister David Cameron erroneously claimed in 2010: ‘we are not doing this [austerity] because we want to, driven by theory or ideology. We are doing this because we have to’ (quoted in Harrison, 2021). Intriguingly, the British government only recently paid off the debts incurred for the Battle of Waterloo (1815) and the First and Second World Wars. So, when governments repay debts is not determined by the alleged situation but by political choice.

An associated leitmotif is what Collinson (2012) calls *Prozac Leadership*: the countries led by alpha males have incurred the greatest numbers of Covid-19 deaths through a combination of over-positivity, denial and desultory performance. Of course, in other countries the response to the ‘same’ situation was markedly different, with New Zealand, Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore enforcing a much stricter quarantining policy and generally emerging relatively unscathed by comparison with the USA, the UK and Brazil. The more empathic and less macho leadership style of several women leaders may be significant, though there are male leaders who have been relatively successful (Nguyễn Xuân Phúc in Vietnam) and female leaders that have not been so successful



(Sophie Wilmès in Belgium), so it is likely that success is as much rooted in different cultures (especially their level of preparedness and the trust of their citizens) as much as in different individual leaders. Indeed, it seems likely that the choice of data is as important as the choice of leader (Windsor et al., 2020). In short, how we see situations is not a transparent consequence of ‘the situation’ but a translucent result of the ideological prism we inhabit. The most successful countries in the pandemic appear to have considered it a deeply wicked problem requiring collaborative leadership with importance aspects of tame problems (managing the vaccine rollout) and critical problems (coercing the population into lockdowns and quarantines). The ability to deploy different decision-styles for different aspects of the same issue requires a flexibility not just to admit that you might be wrong, but that not knowing the answer is a sign of intelligence manifest in Socratic ignorance, rather than a demonstration of fatal weakness and indecision.

So, is the solution to move wholeheartedly into the land of collaborative or systems’ leadership, putting our faith in the wisdom of the crowd rather than those who crow at the weak? Certainly, the last decade has seen an upsurge in interest and support for such an approach, manifest, for example, in the work of Raelin and the Leadership-as-Practice (LAP) approach that is, according to the author, ‘destined to shake the foundations of the very meaning of leadership in the worlds of both theory and practice’ (Raelin, 2016: 1). In fact, the focus on practice rather than individuals hardly merits such grandiose claims, especially when the notion of ‘practice’ seems particularly empty beyond ‘agency emanating from an emerging collection of practices’ (Raelin et al., 2018: 372) rather than the traditional leadership traits or behaviours (Collinson, 2018). The world that Raelin (2003) describes is comprised only of ‘leaderful’ organizations for there are no followers in this post-hierarchical power-free world and it is worth exploring how this fits with claims that wicked problems require a collaborative approach (unlike tame and critical problems). This may be true in a limited temporal and spatial sense, for an organization where everyone takes a turn to lead might facilitate the kind of exploratory and engaging work required, but this can only ever be temporary because at some point in time a decision will need to be made, and for that some form of hierarchy will be necessary, if only to process the votes and execute the decisions. Moreover, most problems facing the world – which are tame – do not require the removal of hierarchy, they simply require the deployment of technical skill; and the last thing a fire in a theatre needs is for the removal of a hierarchy and the constitution of a leaderless or even leaderful group to investigate what should be done about the fire, after a consensus has emerged presumably. And while everyone seems persuaded that systems leadership is necessary for addressing wicked problems, and the number of publications favouring this approach has grown markedly in the last two decades, there are precious few empirical cases to justify the clamour for abandoning vertical hierarchies altogether and simply adopting a more horizontal approach (see Bigland et al., 2020; Van de Mierop et al., 2020). And this is the point: wicked problems are unlikely to be resolved just by everyone collaborating, even if that is a precondition of progress. Collaboration is necessary, but neither simple nor sufficient.

Of course, hierarchies bring with them inequalities of power, and ideas about how to combat them to generate a more egalitarian distribution of power have been with us for generations. We might usefully resurrect Jo Freeman’s (1972) ‘Tyranny of structurelessness’ article, written against the background of the American women’s liberation

movement of the late 1960s when power seemed to be controlled through formal political parties and organizations, structured by rules, and dominated by men. One solution to this hierarchical tyranny was to create movements that were free of structure, processes and rules – except, as Freeman witnessed first-hand, it was the very absence of these that allowed the new elites to dominate, or even the old elites to retain control. In effect, because some participants were more experienced, better educated and better networked than others, the absence of structure actually facilitated the (re)centralization of power rather than decentralized it. Indeed, as Polan (1984) argued, when the Bolsheviks abolished all private ownership in the young Soviet Union to create an egalitarian society – and thus ostensibly removed the cause of political discontent (and thus the necessity for institutions and processes to channel power) – any remaining discontent had to be generated by malcontents and counter-revolutionaries, both of whom required a coercive state apparatus to restrain them.

The implications of this argument, that removing hierarchical processes to install non-hierarchical organizations simply facilitated their institutionalization, went well beyond women's groups trying to develop non-hierarchical organizations and might explain why many allegedly egalitarian organizations, such as those in Silicon Valley, end up as hierarchical as those they pretend to transcend. And as anarchists have discovered over many years of attempting something similar, once the alternative becomes something more than a 'disorganized' protest group, then Michels' (1945[1915]) pessimistic iron law seems to kick in: 'who says organization, says oligarchy'. That does not mean we are doomed to suffer tyrannical oligarchies; the very presence of such tendencies advertises the importance of constructing alternative procedures to limit the growth of an oligarchy, such as regular elections, rotation of positions, diffusion of information and limits on tenure, and so on. However, it does mean we need to be ultra-cautious about promises of freedom and should make the processes to inhibit this visible to all and robust enough to deter the worst excesses. In other words, the collaborative efforts necessary to constrain or restrain wicked problems are not impossible to construct, but they are extremely difficult to start and maintain, as often as not because the key ingredient is the level of trust that facilitates the construction of the relationships necessary to overcome some of the problems associated with wicked problems. Indeed, this is one of the main reasons why the Covid-19 track and trace systems have worked in some countries (South Korea and Germany, for example) but not in others (England stands out in this category) – because the population either do or don't trust their government enough to use it (Han et al., 2020). In the same vein, rather than attempt to facilitate systems approaches by replicating or adjusting conventional change leadership models, we perhaps need to learn from social movements about how to lead in the absence of a formal hierarchy but without the naïve faith in groups common among some collaborative approaches (see Ganz, 2010; Holt, 2016). One of the most significant problems with the collaborative leadership literature, then, is that there is precious little empirical research compared with the proliferation of theoretical ideas and conjectural assumptions (see Ospina et al., 2020 for a review of current approaches).

In such times of uncertainty and existential anxiety, according to Plato, people need comfort and sustenance and that requires the formulation of a 'noble lie', an untruth, a myth, a fabrication designed to calm the people, and for Plato this is where religion

operated. Such deceit, however well-intentioned, was completely reprehensible to Popper, for whom the truth, however disquieting, was essential. This, of course, was also the frame for Ibsen's trilogy of plays (*The Wild Duck*, *Vildanden* and *Enemy of the People*) that dealt with the difficulties – and importance – of telling people the unvarnished truth that they would rather not listen to. Thus, in *Enemy of the People* (1999[1882]), the townsfolk do not want to accept that the tourist season is over before it began because the public baths are poisoned in precisely the same way that Larry Vaughn, the Mayor of Amityville in the first Jaws movie, denies the importance of half-eaten bodies on the shoreline, given the imminent opening of the beaches for the summer season. In this context, we might see why leadership, defined in part as the ability to tell people truths they would rather not hear, might seem so difficult to deploy. This is especially the case where popularity is a requirement for continuing support, such as in democratic political systems. We know that voters are seldom that interested in the political designs of their putative leaders, voters tend not to understand policy details, and frequently vote against their own interests (Achen and Bartell, 2016), so giving followers a vote in the choice of their leaders is not a guarantee of selecting the right leader. But the alternatives are all markedly less favourable and, this, in itself, is often the mark of how to address a wicked problem: what is being proposed is not great and it may not solve the problem, but in the circumstances it looks like the least worst option. Nor should we necessarily assume that people are driven to unite to protect their own interests for rational reasons that might facilitate a more collaborative approach to a wicked problem. As Le Bon (2009[1895]), Asch (1951), Tarde (2014[1890]) and Tajfel (1970, 1981) have all demonstrated, group behaviours are driven by all kinds of impulses, some imitative, some irrational and many rooted in loyalty rather than logic. And that loyalty may not just be restricted to specific small groups, but actually contain an entire eco system, as Spiller et al. (2020) suggest about understanding collaborative leadership from a Māori perspective. Indeed, how individuals and groups act in the face of uncertainties like wicked problems may have as much to do with luck as with anything else (Chengwei and de Rond, 2016; Frank, 2017).

But none of this means that wicked problems and their prerequisite collective response means that individuals or technical systems are irrelevant. If we take Covid-19 again, it should be clear that the pandemic embodies all three kinds of problems and requires all three decision-styles: we need commanders to coerce the recalcitrants to comply with the critical problem of lock downs, we need managers to ensure the technology of track and trace systems and vaccine programmes actually work, and we need leaders to engage the collective that supports the vulnerable wherever necessary. How the pandemic plays out over the foreseeable future is anyone's guess but we can be fairly certain that different people will attribute responsibilities in markedly divergent ways because they construct the problem, the results and responsibilities in different ways. For some people, Covid-19 isn't any kind of problem because it's all a conspiracy to deprive us of our liberty; for others, it's tame – it's little more than flu and we just need to wait for the vaccines to work; for others, it's wicked – we are in great danger unless we pull together and help each other out. Of course, it may be all three problem types combined and that requires the most sophisticated forms of decision-making because in the absence of a common language for the problem types, and in the absence of a consensus, what political leaders

seem to demonstrate is inconsistency, rather than different decision-modes for different aspects of the pandemic. As I have discussed in another article (Grint, 2020), sometimes power is a poisoned chalice.

## Conclusion

This article was a reflection on an article written 16 years ago. It suggests that the original problems typology still holds some utility and, contrary to popular opinion, we have always lived in uncertain times, even if it feels uniquely disturbing in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and the increasingly erratic weather patterns. Arguments that suggest we live in unprecedented times either suggest that we need to comply with commanders whose unique skill sets will guide us safely through the storm to the sunny uplands just around the corner, again, or we need to abandon our idolatrous love of commanders and pursue collaborative forms of leadership that alone can deal with the wicked problems we currently face. I have suggested that neither of these approaches can deal with the complexity of what faces us, and what has always faced us. Instead, we need to consider the role all three decision-styles might play in dealing with overlapping problem types, but this is set against the disputes and disagreements that bedevil our collective efforts. Indeed, we need to accept that existential uncertainty is an inevitable part of life and the critical element is not to focus on removing or denying this but more simply accepting and learning to live with it. Perhaps Keats put his finger on the biggest problem we actually face: our desperate need for certainty. When the problems, results and responsibilities are socially constructed, we are probably never going to approach a consensus, let alone find certainty, and are always going to remain astride a tiger; settle in for the ride. . .

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to Mark Learmonth for his editorial advice.

## Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## ORCID iD

Keith Grint  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5796-8990>

## References

- Achen CH and Bartell LM (2016) *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Asch SE (1951) Effects of group pressure on the modification and distortion of judgments. In: Guetzkow H (ed.) *Groups, Leadership and Men*. Pittsburgh, PA: Carnegie Press, 177–190.
- Bertalanffy L (1968) *General System Theory*. New York: George Braziller.
- Bigland C, Evans D, Bolden R, et al. (2020) Systems leadership in practice: Thematic insights from three public health case studies. *BMC Public Health* 20: 17–35.

- Brook C, Pedler M, Abbott C, et al. (2016) On stopping doing those things that are not getting us to where we want to be: Unlearning, wicked problems and critical action learning. *Human Relations* 69(2): 369–389.
- Carroll BJ, Parker P and Inkson K (2010) Evasion of boredom: An unexpected spur to leadership? *Human Relations* 63(7): 1031–1049.
- Carlson S (1951) *Executive Behaviour*. Stockholm: Strombergs.
- Chengwei L and de Rond M (2016) Good night and good luck. *The Academy of Management Annals* 10(1): 409–451.
- Clarke J and Newman J (2012) The alchemy of austerity. *Critical Social Policy* 32(3): 299–319.
- Collinson D (2012) ‘Prozac leadership and the limits of positive thinking.’ *Leadership* 8(2): 87–107.
- Collinson M (2018) What’s new about leadership-as-practice? *Leadership* 14(3): 363–370.
- Cortright EM (1970) Report of Apollo 13 Review Board NASA. Available at: [www.history.nasa.gov/ap13cortright.pdf](http://www.history.nasa.gov/ap13cortright.pdf) (accessed 4 January 2022).
- Crowley K and Head B (2017) The enduring challenge of ‘wicked problems’: Revisiting Rittel and Webber. *Policy Sciences* 50: 539–547.
- Dewey J (1984[1927]) The public and its problems. In: Boydston JA (ed.) *Later Works 2*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press, 59–235.
- Frank RH (2017) *Success and Luck: Good Fortune and the Myth of Meritocracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Freeman J (1972) The tyranny of structurelessness. *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 17: 151–165.
- Fyke JP and Buzzanell PM (2013) The ethics of conscious capitalism: Wicked problems in leading change and changing leaders. *Human Relations* 66(12): 1619–1643.
- Galbraith JK (1977) *The Age of Uncertainty*. London: BBC-Andre Deutsch.
- Ganz M (2010) Leading change: Leadership, organization and social movements. In: Nohria N and Khurana R (eds) *Handbook of Leadership Theory and Practice*. Boston, MA: Boston University Press, 509–550.
- Gibeau É, Langley A, Denis JL, et al. (2019) Bridging competing demands through co-leadership? Potential and limitations. *Human Relations* 73(4): 464–489.
- Grint K (2005) Problems, problems, problems: The social construction of leadership. *Human Relations* 58(11): 1467–1494.
- Grint K (2008) Wicked problems and clumsy solutions. *Clinical Leader* 1(2): 54–68.
- Grint K (2020) Power and the poisoned chalice: A provocation. *Leadership* 16(1): 129–132.
- Han E, Tan MMJ, Turk E, et al. (2020) Lessons learnt from easing COVID-19 restrictions: An analysis of countries and regions in Asia Pacific and Europe. *The Lancet*. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)32007-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)32007-9) (accessed 4 January 2022).
- Harrison K (2021) The futility of participation: Austerity and public reluctance to oppose it. *British Politics*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41293-021-00174-8> (accessed 4 January 2022).
- Heifetz RA (1994) *Leadership without Easy Answers*. Boston, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Heifetz RA, Linsky M and Grashow M (2009) *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press.
- Holt CA (2016) *Engaging individuals to be effective collectives: A Ganzian analysis of leader-follower relationships in times of challenge*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, Warwick University, UK.
- Ibsen H (1999[1882]) *Enemy of the People*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Keats J (1899) *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats*. Cambridge: Houghton, Mifflin and Company.

- Kelemen M, Rumens N and Vo LC (2018) Questioning and Organization Studies. *Organization Studies* 40(10): 1529–1542.
- Kroll-Smith S, Jenkins P and Baxter V (2007) The bricoleur and the possibility of rescue: First-responders to the flooding of New Orleans. *Journal of Public Management and Social Policy* 13(2): 5–21.
- Le Bon G (2009[1895]) *Psychology of Crowds*. Southampton: Sparkling Books.
- Levin K, Cashore B, Bernstein S, et al. (2012) Overcoming the tragedy of super wicked problems: Constraining our future selves to ameliorate global climate change. *Policy Science* 45: 123–152.
- Lindblom CE (1959) The science of muddling through. *Public Administration Review* 19(2): 79–88.
- Michels R (1949[1915]) *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*. New York: Free Press.
- Mintzberg H (1973) *The Nature of Managerial Work*. London: Harper and Row.
- Ospina SM, Foldy EG, Fairhurst GT, et al. (2020) Collective dimensions of leadership: Connecting theory and method. *Human Relations* 73(4): 441–463.
- Pascale R, Sternin J and Sternin M (2010) *The Power of Positive Deviance*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Polan AJ (1984) *Lenin and the End of Politics*. London: Methuen Books.
- Raelin JA (2003) *Creating Leaderful Organizations: How to Bring out Leadership in Everyone*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.
- Raelin JA (2016) Imagine there are no leaders: Reframing leadership as a collective agency. *Leadership* 12(2): 131–158.
- Raelin JA, Kempster S, Youngs H, et al. (2018) Practicing leadership-as-practice in content and manner. *Leadership* 14(3): 371–383.
- Rittel H and Webber M (1973) Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Sciences* 4(2): 155–169.
- Rosenhead J, Franco A, Grint K, et al. (2019) Complexity Theory and leadership practice: A review, a critique, and some recommendations. *The Leadership Quarterly* 30(5): 1–25.
- Shariatmadari D (2020) ‘Invisible mugger’: How Boris Johnson’s language hints at his thinking. *The Guardian*, 27 April. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/apr/27/muggers-and-invisible-enemies-how-boris-johnsons-metaphors-reveals-his-thinking> (accessed 4 January 2022).
- Simon H (1957) *Administrative Behaviour: A Study of Decision-making in the Administrative Organization*. New York: Macmillan.
- Simon H (1969) *The Sciences of the Artificial*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Snowden DJ (2015) About us – Cognitive Edge. Available at: <https://cognitive-edge.com/about-us/#about-dave> (accessed 4 January 2022).
- Snowden DJ and Boone ME (2007) A leader’s framework for decision-making. *Harvard Business Review* 85(11): 68–76.
- Spiller C, Wolfram RM, Henry E, et al. (2020) Paradigm warriors: Advancing a radical ecosystems view of collective leadership from an Indigenous Māori perspective. *Human Relations* 73(4): 516–545.
- Stewart R (1967) *Managers and their Jobs: A Study of the Similarities and Differences in the Ways Managers Spend their Time*. London: Macmillan.
- Tajfel H (1970) Experiments in intergroup discrimination. *Scientific American* 223: 96–102.
- Tajfel H (1981) *Human Groups and Social Categories*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tarde G (2014[1890]) *The Laws of Imitation*. Baltimore, MD: Patterson Press.

- Van de Mierop, Clifton J and Verhelst A (2020) Investigating the interplay between formal and informal leaders in a shared leadership configuration: A multimodal conversation analytical study. *Human Relations* 73(4): 490–515.
- Verweij M and Thompson M (eds) (2006) *Clumsy Solutions for a Complex World: Governance, Politics and Plural Perception*. Basingstoke: Palgrave/Macmillan.
- Windsor LC, Reinhardt GY, Windsor AJ, et al. (2020) Gender in the time of COVID-19: Evaluating national leadership and COVID-19 fatalities. *PLoS ONE* 15(12): e0244531. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0244531> (accessed 4 January 2022).

Keith Grint is Emeritus Professor at Warwick Business School. Prior to Warwick, he held chairs at Cranfield and Lancaster Universities and was Research Director and Reader in Organizational Behaviour at the Said Business School, Oxford University. He co-founded the journal *Leadership* and the International Studying Leadership Conference. His books include *The Arts of Leadership* (2000), *Leadership: Limits and Possibilities* (2005), *Leadership, Management and Command: Rethinking D-Day* (2008), *Leadership: A Very Short Introduction* (2010) and *Mutiny and Leadership* (2021). [Email: [Keith.grint@wbs.ac.uk](mailto:Keith.grint@wbs.ac.uk)]