

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Collective Command: Problems and Perspectives for Military Operational Leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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Anthony King's *Command: The Twenty-First-Century General* claims to present a new perspective on command, in which a radical change of command from an "individualistic" to a "collective" practice has taken place since the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this article, we critically assess two key ideas in King's work, namely "collective command" and "complexity". These are issues which are mirrored in contemporary collective leadership literature and complexity management discourse. We argue that this engagement with collective leadership and complexity has some unfortunate consequences for King's assessment of military organization and how command practices have changed. The outset for our critique is what we perceive to be a "surreptitious slide" – namely a slide from analytical insights about the present and past to generalizations and prescriptions about the future of command and the organizational context in which it unfolds. The slide is reflected in a lack of specificity concerning what *is* and what *ought to be*. We suggest that scholars and practitioners attend to the diversity of actions within timeframes, specific situations, and contextual settings rather than evoke wishful thinking and legitimize specific visions of future realities. This would, among other things, shed light on how concrete issues of power, conflict, and tensions co-exist in divisional headquarters and beyond.

**Keywords:** command; military organization; complexity; collective leadership

## Introduction

Anthony King is widely regarded as one of the most prominent scholars working in the fields of military sociology and war studies today. In *Command: The Twenty-First-Century General*, King (2019) makes an important contribution to the understanding of command practice in military organizations. His argumentation on the social constitution of command in the 21<sup>st</sup> century revolves around the idea that "a new and highly professionalized practice of command has begun to be institutionalized, which I have called 'collective command'" (Freedman, 2020, p. 107; King, 2019, p. 18). According to many, King's book is of pivotal importance for military academics and practitioners alike, with reviewers like Freedman (2020, p. 107) arguing that it "is the most substantial addition to the literature since" van Creveld's *Command in War* (1985) and Keegan's *The Mask of Command* (1987/2004).

In this article, we examine King's proposition of "collective" command. We summarize the organizational transformations that have spurred the change in command practice. The central argument in the book is that divisional command has changed from being an individualistic practice in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to a "collective" practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To illustrate this transformation, King divides the practice of command into two distinct historical regimes. For King (2019, p. 14), a "command regime refers to a broadly stable paradigm of leadership when a characteristic practice of decision making is widely institutionalized by the armed forces". We use this definition to engage in a discussion of the central ideas driving King's argumentation. First, in using the notion of *paradigm* to describe a regime change, King (2019) makes a strong claim that each command regime entails a paradigm shift, a substantially more radical affair than a mere evolution of command practice. Thus, for King, the practice of command has seen a profound shift in key characteristics and defining features. Second, as will become apparent below, King (2019) uses the notion of *complexity* to capture the existence of a broad range of environmental and organizational characteristics that have

spurred the historical change. Consequently, and related to this, there has been a shift in management and the execution of leadership, which is a central aspect of command practice. Seemingly, “the complexity of today’s world system requires a more subtle model of leadership ... command collectives, not individualists, may be needed” (King, 2019, pp. xv–xvi).

If interests in “collective” leadership and complexity have burgeoned in the social sciences, it has not happened simply for intellectual reasons, internal to the specific disciplines in question. An engagement with new forms of leadership and systems approaches to understanding organizations has become a fertile ground for new theorizing, and a turn to these issues in academic and practitioner journals responds to this interest. An increasing body of work at the intersection of complexity and leadership has been published over the last two decades (Cullen-Lester & Yammarino, 2016; Schneider & Somers, 2006; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009; White et al., 2016; Yammarino et al., 2012). In parallel, there is a significant take-up of complexity as a framework for informing organizational practices in the military domain. Former and contemporary commanders to a large degree draw on new theorizing, typically inspired by systems thinking, to cast organizations as a particular type of networked organization or a complex adaptive system, which then becomes the analytical unit to study and/or value leadership. As noted by Ospina (2016, p. 281), the interest in networked arrangements seemed to have “triggered a renewed concern for postheroic leadership models”. This is the case in the work of McChrystal et al. (2015), Zinni and Kolz (2009), and Klein (2017), among others, on which King builds his arguments. In this article, we demonstrate how relying on these ideas leads to analytical problematics. Foremost, we argue that this is due to a “surreptitious slide” (Bourdieu, 2005), evident in King’s work and the literature he mirrors, which blurs the distinction between, on the one hand, descriptive scientific analysis and, on the other hand, normative propositions. We argue that the former is a prerequisite for the latter and that a differentiation between the two is essential if we are to empirically assess military organization and how command practices change over time.

The article is structured in the following way. We commence with summarizing the essential aspects of command across the two historical regimes. Subsequently, we make a comparative description of command practice and the military organization in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, as viewed by King. We then describe how a “surreptitious slide” seems to have taken hold in the command text, and we argue that this has roots in contemporary leadership and management studies and military practitioners’ literature. Then we combine a discussion of King’s empirical analysis of “collective” or relational elements of leadership and increased complexity with a reading of literature on these subject matters, and discuss the wider implications of the insights for military scholars and practitioners. The article draws attention to a problematic tendency, namely that in bridging science and normativity, contemporary complexity management discourse and new forms of leadership studies offer some convenient narratives or claims for paradigmatic organizational change, even though the empirical evidence is doubtful. As an alternative way, we suggest that scholars and practitioners attend to the diversity of actions within timeframes, specific situations, and contextual settings rather than evoke wishful thinking and legitimize specific visions of future realities. Among other things, this would shed light on how concrete issues of power, conflict, and tensions co-exist in divisional headquarters and beyond.

## Command Practice Across Regimes: Command, Management, and Leadership

King (2019) argues that there are aspects of command practice that cut across 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century command regimes. Command, management, and leadership functions are all part of command practice. It is the change of these three elements and their relative importance to command practice, which occurs in response to changes in the operational environment and the divisional organization, which are constitutive for the two distinct command regimes.

For King (2019, p. 58), commanders’ practice revolves around “the deployment and use of their forces in order to achieve their missions”. In particular, King centers his attention on decision-making. *Command* is fundamentally related to the task of deciding and thus defining the mission: “Command is an executive decision-making function. It involves one decisive and unique responsibility: mission definition” (King, 2019, p. 69). In order to understand the command function, King turns to management scholar Peter Drucker. According to Drucker (1988), the central decision for an executive is to decide what his or her business is or, in King’s terms, “to identify a mission” (King, 2019, p. 64). This decision sets the boundary conditions under which it remains valid and functions as a principle that guides all other decisions (King, 2019). However, King (2019, pp. 65–66) reminds us that:

Mission definition requires, then, a complex interpretation whereby the elements of the situation are causally interconnected to produce one coherent solution – a mission. Committing to such a

definition is clearly a decision; selection is involved. Nevertheless, mission definition is far more than an administrative decision about the allocation of resources; it is an existential act which defines the collective purpose of the force under command.

King continues to build on Drucker in his understanding of mission management and mission leadership. In effect, King views mission management as the specific activities and tasks which convert mission definition into actions.

For King (2019), *management* is also related to decision-making, although of the more mundane kind, related to definition, prioritization, and supervision of tasks. In relation to the third function, King argues that Drucker's understanding of *leadership* relates to ensuring that organizational members strive toward "collective" rather than "individual" ends. Here King (2019) also argues that leadership is more central in the military arena than in the civilian sphere due to the risks inherent in combat situations. So, for King, leadership is the function by which the commander ensures that his or her subordinates are motivated. Mission definition, mission management, and mission motivation are thus always part of command. However, the relative importance of each of the three functions may vary. Indeed, it is King's (2019, p. 70) understanding that "[t]his reconfiguration of the command trinity gives rise to distinctive historical regimes of command".

### Operational and Organizational Dimensions of Command

For King (2019), the changes in the practice of command are the result of changes in operational and organizational conditions. In other words, the command, management, and leadership functions are themselves a function of the external and internal environments in which they unfold.

King (2019) argues that the operations in which the divisions partake have changed, not least due to the fact that missions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century regime were mainly characterized by maneuver warfare. Operationally, these divisional missions were defined by field combat on small fronts with a large combined force against a massive enemy. In this environment, there was relatively little political interference and need for precision in the use of military strength (King, 2019). On the contrary, divisional missions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have been characterized by stabilization operations. These latter missions have been defined by urban warfare on larger fronts against insurgents with a comparatively smaller force. Joint operations have physically been located in urban environments. Politicization has increased, and in combination with technological developments, this has increased the need for precision and proportion in the use of force (King, 2019). In sum, where the central concern regarding operations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was one of scale, the operational challenge that faces the commander today is one of scope (King, 2019).

Based on these changes, and drawing on General Stanley McChrystal (USA, retired), King (2019, p. 318) argues that divisional operations have gone from complicated to "complex": "[I]t is evident from the previous chapters that operations today have become complex; they involve many elements over elongated timelines". The complexity of military operations is mirrored in divisional organizations, which have also become "complex" (King, 2019, p. 305). In other words, divisions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century "were large organizations. Yet, their missions and their fundamental workings were mechanical; they were limited and simple" (King, 2019, p. 121), whereas in the 21<sup>st</sup> century regime, divisions have become a "complex organizational system" (King, 2019, p. 438). Indeed, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the organization was characterized by homogeneity. King (2019, p. 441) argues that "[t]he division had clear and very limited vertical and horizontal boundaries; it was a bounded, homogenous force within a discrete military chain of command". In that regime, the division was a hierarchical tactical formation subordinate to corps and army commanders (King, 2019). Conversely, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the division has become increasingly heterogeneous. Hence, the commander in the division has had to shape "the integration of heterogeneous assets and actions" (King, 2019, p. 440). Now the commander is in the center of a "multiverse" rather than merely positioned at the upper echelon of a traditional military hierarchy (King, 2019, p. 438). As an effect of the division's engagement in political relations and civil development, which includes a vast array of specialized functions and different nationalities, the divisional headquarter has turned into a highly professionalized entity. Bluntly speaking, for King (2019, p. 305), "complex operations have required complex headquarters. There does not seem to be any other way to coordinate operations". In the following, we will take a closer look at King's argumentation concerning the transformation of command practice.

### Changes to Command Practice in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Regimes

In consequence of complex operations and complex headquarters, command practice has become "ever more complex" (King, 2019, p. 327). Fundamentally, King suggests that to deal with this complexity, the commander has, in contrast to the 20<sup>th</sup> century regime, been forced to delegate decision-making authority to key personnel. It is in that sense that command has become "collective":

Collective command has emerged as an institutional response to an organizational problem. It is a method of coordination of operations and sustaining organizational cohesion at a time when complexity threatens to overwhelm existing hierarchies and structures. (King, 2019, p. 440)

For King, this means that command was an individualistic practice in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In that regime, the commander relied on instinct and monopolized decision-making in a bureaucracy (King, 2019, pp. 20, 72, 127). However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the commander has “increasingly orchestrated a cohesive command team, devolving and distributing decision-making authority to empowered subordinates and to staff” (King, 2019, p. 460).

Mission definition is the defining aspect of command practice, and this too has become “complex” (King, 2019, p. 71). The commander’s intent as a tool for mission definition is both an example of increased authority on behalf of the commander and an example of how mission definition can be understood as a “collective” and iterative process:

Divisional commanders have typically had far greater latitude in defining the mission of their formations than in the twentieth century. Their authority in this domain has increased, though, interestingly, in order to define the mission they typically invoke a wide network of politico-military contacts who assist them in its formulation. (King, 2019, pp. 438–439)

Most notably, however, is the development in mission management. Due to the changes in the operational and organizational dimensions, and the commander’s role herein, mission management has changed drastically and “become extremely complex; the number and range of decisions which a commander has to make have multiplied. It has become impossible for any commander to fulfil his executive function alone” (King, 2019, p. 330). In order to address the problem of “complexity”, which in turn has affected the span of decision-making activities and coordination, new staff techniques have developed, including the *Decision Point* and the *Synchronization Matrix*. In effect, this allows the commander to share decision-making authority with subordinates and staff in a systematic way, and thus, “[m]anagement has become more collective” (King, 2019, p. 439).

This development has of course also affected mission leadership. In particular, King seems to underscore that the distributed nature of the divisions severely affects the potential for leadership. Indeed, leadership (defined as mission motivation) appears to hold a less prominent place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century division than in the 21<sup>st</sup> century division: “[I]ndividual leadership has been replaced by ‘collective’ expertise; the team has become paramount” (King, 2019, p. 443). Hence, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “[a] heroic leader was also an individualistic commander” (King, 2019, p. 181). According to King, the commander would in the 20<sup>th</sup> century regime stage himself as a superior father figure for the troops in order to motivate them. Conversely, King, drawing on the example of General James Mattis (USA, retired), argues that the collective now takes center stage. In the team consisting of deputies and staff, Mattis did not take the superior role of a farther figure, but rather as “*primus inter pares*” (King, 2019, p. 264). In other words, leadership has, as the third function of command practice, gone from focusing on the “heroic” aspects of the individual to centering on leadership as situated in a “collective” professional entity.

### **A Surreptitious Slide: From Descriptive Analysis to Performance**

In the following, the article problematizes the relation between normative statements and descriptive analysis in the work of King and the literature on which he bases his argumentation. Indeed, we argue that the notions of “collective command” and “complexity” entail what Bourdieu (2005, p. 224) has called “a surreptitious slide from the descriptive meaning of the concept ... to a normative one or, more exactly, performative one”. Bourdieu (2005) provides this description of a surreptitious slide in his discussion on globalization, where he argues that the notion of globalization has a double meaning. While globalization pertains to an analytical description of the world, it also refers to a particular economic policy (Bourdieu, 2005, pp. 224–225). Thereby, the notion of globalization “slides” from being a theoretically informed description of globalization as a phenomenon to something that is actively created and performed – from a depiction of what *is* to an enactment of what *ought to be*.

In a similar vein, we argue that “collective command” and “complexity” in the context of the military run the risk of not describing what actually *is*, but rather what *ought to be*. Our concern is that this slide decouples a (desired) future from a contextualized description of particular aspects of the past and the present. This is problematic because, in our view, any understanding of the future is structured by the present and

the past. Thus, if we are to engage in informed discussions of the future development of the military, we need to critically analyze the social constitution of the past and the present. Interestingly, however, the surreptitious slide appears in King's work not due to a lack of empirical analysis. Rather, he seems to make a too rigid dichotomization of the constitutive elements of the two command regimes. In the words of Grint (1997, p. 3), King deploys a "bi-polar shopping list approach" to the constitutive elements of command (see for example King, 2019, p. 292). King, and even more so the literature on which he builds his argumentation, tend to romanticize the ideas of, for instance, the "collective". Here Collinson et al. (2018, p. 1635) make an important contribution in arguing that collective accounts of leadership tend to be depicted in a "vague, even mystical" manner. Above all, "a key dimension in the romanticizing of collective leadership is the prioritization of consensus and harmony over power and conflict" (Collinson et al., 2018, p. 1635). Actually, as noted by Collinson (2014, p. 39), this "[d]ichotomization constrains analysis by over-simplifying the complex, inter-connected, and shifting relationships that characterize leadership dynamics." Hence, "it tends to narrow down the range of concepts ... [and] important issues, particularly around power, ambiguity, tension, paradox and contradiction tend to disappear from view". This might be an effect of the nature of dichotomization, where one distinction or pole builds on another and, in doing so, establishes this as an immutable, separate distinction. Herein lies our main critique of King's book on command, which, by its very nature, is also the most difficult to capture: We argue that King in his description of the two command regimes largely leaves out all the social tension and power issues entailed in a changing military organization. If one centered in on these issues, one might find that the shift from one regime to another is less radical and much less clear-cut than proposed by King.

To make our argument in the following, we will exemplify these problematics by referring to the collective and complexity leadership studies. Thereby, we indicate that the problematics found in King's work on command reflect a broader and more obvious problematic in the literature.

### Collaboration in "Collective Command"

The central argument in King's (2019) book on command concerns the interrelation between command, management, and leadership. In effect, "collective command" pertains to the delegation of decision-making authority from the commander to subordinates. This has mainly occurred through a series of managerial innovations in response to different operational and organizational changes. Here there is a strong emphasis on the "collective" aspects of 21<sup>st</sup> century divisional command, as opposed to an "individualistic" 20<sup>th</sup> century command.

In reading the book, King (2019) makes a relatively sharp dichotomization between the "individualistic" and "collective" regimes. Yet, as King (2019) notes, command has always (thus, also in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) been "collective": "All command is collective. No general can command alone since any military operation necessarily involves the cooperation of others" (p. 437). In a similar vein, it also seems that there is still, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, an understanding among military practitioners that command is an individualistic endeavor. Take this quote by General David Petraeus (USA, retired): "I disagree if you are trying to do decision-making in boards. The enemy will dance around you. There is one commander. He is the guy. Everyone else is in support of him" (Petraeus in King, 2019, p. 21). Thus, one can argue that command in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is both "individualistic" and "collective". King (2019) could have downplayed this idea of a grand shift and simply argued, in line with his regime definition, that changes have occurred in the staff organization's decision-making processes.

Yet, it seems that King is bent toward making the case that command has radically changed. On the one hand, King acknowledges that General Petraeus and others have "a point. Since generals are still the primary decision-makers and divisional tactics have remained recognizably similar, there are undeniable constants. So there are evident empirical objections to a theory of collective command" (King, 2019, p. 22). On the other hand, while acknowledging the historical continuities across regimes, King (2019) also argues for the existence of different command regimes. In overemphasizing the latter, he tends to deemphasize the practitioner viewpoints, which does not fit well with the regime dichotomization. This is problematic in a study with a proclaimed interest in "thick descriptions" and "representing the 'lifeworld' of divisional headquarters" (King, 2019, p. 215). Only the part of practitioners' "lifeworld" that underscores King's idea of "collective command" as a unique 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomenon seems to be explored.

The "surreptitious slide" from the descriptive to the normative is not only mirrored in King's lack of engagement with the empirical data, which could counter his assumption of a distinct 21<sup>st</sup> century type of command, it also guides the manner in which he engages with the included data. Thus, King argues that increased professionalization has meant that 21<sup>st</sup> century soldiers are motivated by a vocational calling

rather than by a heroic farther figure, which characterized the 20<sup>th</sup> century (see King, 2019, p. 440). However, the shift from what could be labeled 'individualistic heroic leadership' to 'collective post-heroic leadership' is less obvious in the empirical data on which King builds his argument. Take this quote from a major in the 21<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division:

Staff here are motivated by the fear of failure. The span of command is so large that the commander relies on his subordinates. We have the responsibility for any failure. 3/3 [Current Operations Cell]: we're responsible; we don't want to fail. So the fear of failure is motivating. It is fear. It is like mum and dad looking at you and saying: "I'm disappointed". With the leaders, it is fear of letting them down. They put all their trust in you. It goes into realm of personal relations. It is a familial organization. (King, 2019, p. 352)

Here it is clear from the data presented that not much has changed. Leadership is still very much embedded in an individualistic regime. After all, "mum" and "dad" are never first among equals, and a "familial organization" is all but a professional organization. So albeit King has a point in arguing that the commander, due to the distribution of troops over more space and time, has less opportunity to act physically like a farther figure in front of lower-level personnel in the division, this does not mean that he or she is not regarded as such by the subordinates with whom he or she interacts. Indeed, in King's (2019, p. 411) description of the meeting, which in the 21<sup>st</sup> century division has become a central location for leadership, the nature of the commander's "emotional significance is also collectively generated by the staff who communally invest character traits with a special, sacred status". Again, it seems that the shift from "individualistic" to "collective" leadership is less obvious. Rather, it might be, in line with the argument put forth by Collinson (2014), that the split between 'individualistic heroic leadership' and 'collective post-heroic leadership' makes King emphasize the latter over the former, at least leadership-wise, even though the empirical data is less categorical about a clear distinction between the two. The dichotomization thus seems to limit the analysis rather than allow for an analytical exploration of the data.

### King, Klein, and the Dualism of Leadership Studies

It seems that King falls prey to a larger tendency within leadership studies, namely to make a strong polarization between individualistic and collaborative endeavors. As such:

Fairhurst (2001) highlights the "primary dualism" in leadership research as that between the individual and the collective, arguing that studies typically concentrate either on leaders, in ways that overlook the dynamics of the collective, or on the latter, thereby neglecting the former's basis for action. By contrast, she advocates dialectical approaches to leadership which explore the dynamic tension and interplay between seemingly oppositional binaries. (Collinson, 2011, p. 184)

However, there are some issues related to taking a collective approach to leadership. One of these is the tendency to downplay issues of power and tension, relative to a more harmonious account of leadership (Collinson et al., 2018). This certainly holds for King's description of leadership, and perhaps even more so for his description of management. The management of missions becomes, in the hands of King, a frictionless and harmonious process, despite the fact that the "collective" is located in an increasingly politicized and heterogenic environment.

This romanticizing of the collective over the individual in the work of King potentially springs from the literature on which he bases his argumentation. Of particular interest here is the work of military practitioner Gary Klein (2017). The following quote and discussion exemplifies how King (2019, p. 13), in a problematic manner, uses normative practitioner literature to make a descriptive case:

Whether it is deliberate or not, the Army's current leadership paradigm and doctrine encourage Soldiers to view leadership through a leader-centric, hierarchical lens. Leaders issue orders to their subordinates and subordinates must express "loyalty, subordination, [and] respect for superiors." *Army Leadership* describes leadership using the leader-centric Army leadership requirements model.

What Klein suggests here is not the existence of a new regime, at least not in terms of leadership. Actually, what Klein argues is that a more individualistic type of leadership, which King associated with the 20<sup>th</sup>

century, is prevalent in the Army, here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Yet, King (2019, p. 14) states that “[t]he work of Zinni, McChrystal and Klein suggest that military command is moving rapidly away from ‘heroic’ individualism typical of the twentieth century, towards a more professionalized, collective practice’. However, this is not what Klein suggests. He suggests that military leadership *should* move in that direction and, thus, represents the type of command, based on the principles of collaborative and shared leadership, that *ought to be* performed. This is a type of leadership that is significantly different from what is currently being practiced. Klein (2017, p. 2) calls normatively for a particular kind of “leadership in complex systems,” in which “leaders *must be* [emphasis added] comfortable operating beyond the realm of best practices and subject matters experts”. Klein (2017) argues that the role of leadership ought to move from the complicated to the complex domain. Therefore, the present-day role must also become radically different from previous times’ more simplistic and homogeneous leadership roles, which matched ‘only’ complicated environments. In his argumentation, Klein (2017) draws on the practitioner insight that followers tend to be biased in the relative importance of leadership (see also Wong & Gerras, 2017). However, this idea builds on the social constructionist-inspired notion of “romance of leadership” (Klein, 2017; Meindl, 1995; Wong & Gerras, 2017). It is an insight that comes with a set of assumptions. The approach “emphasizes followers and their context for defining leadership” (Meindl, 1995, p. 330), and more pertinently, it construes “hierarchical power differences” as independent from “leadership emergence”. In a military organization, this is a relatively radical view, since it in effect (as noted above) circumvents the issue of power in relation to leadership. Therefore, the lack of critical engagement with the literature on which King builds his argumentation makes it so that power falls out of sight. This means, for example, that issues of responsibility and tasks are neglected, such as how staff officers and commanders influence and negotiate elements of decision-making processes, and how superiors and subordinates deal with situations when decision failure occurs. Indeed, it not only limits the analysis and, thus, our understanding of the military organization. It also fits oddly with King’s (2019, p. 25) aim with the book, which in fact is to address power issues:

In order [to] understand changing power structures, it seeks to plot the precise reform of the practice through the close observation of one lifeworld. Nevertheless, it is self-consciously trying to address the wider debates about globalization and the transformation of power.

In the following section, we discuss some of the theoretical foundations underpinning King’s analysis of different aspects of command in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We will discuss how complexity ideas uphold significant functions in the texts by military practitioners Klein (2017), Zinni and Kolz (2009), and McChrystal et al. (2015) on which King builds his argumentation. In particular, we will focus on how central ideas from these authors, also reflected in contemporary modes of organizational theorizing, may have influenced King’s analytical findings.

### **Command Practice and Complexity Management**

As previously described, and as illustrated by the work of Klein (2017), collective and collaborative leadership is perceived as a way to address increased complexity. One of Klein’s central arguments was that “complex environments require different leadership and decision-making techniques,” and “experimentation and collaboration are keys to success in complex domains” (Klein, 2017 in King, 2019, p. 13). In line with this, King (2019) argues that the emergence of complex, multifaceted, and globally interconnected military organizations situated in complex, unstable environments requires a new kind of command. The aim of this type of command is to establish networks and to empower subordinates to act within this new context. Indeed, King (2019, p. xv) calls for a different leadership model: “The complexity of today’s world system may require a more subtle model of leadership, especially if democracy is to be preserved”.

In order to explore the types of managerial challenges facing the commander in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that is “the complex apparatus of management” (King, 2019, p. 26), King draws foremost on the former military practitioners, General Tony Zinni (USA, retired) and General Stanley McChrystal (USA, retired). Based on their experiences and substantial practical knowhow, the two generals have in recent publications discussed contemporary operations and command structures (McChrystal et al., 2015; Zinni & Kolz, 2009). Here they have used the notion of *complexity* as a way to understand the current environment in which business and military organizations operate. Essentially, the arguments of Zinni and Kolz (2009) and McChrystal et al. (2015) (as well as Klein, 2017) are that established worldviews on leadership, management, and organization are based on linear, simplistic, mechanistic science (here Newton and Taylor are strawmen), which can no longer be applied to organizational practices and life. As McChrystal et al. (2015, p. 211) emphasize, a radical change

of mentality in organizations – from “reductionist, machine like thinking” to “holistic gardening” – has proved useful and had very real, enduring impact across domains, “from nursing in China to five-star hotels in Turkey”. The aim of the work of Zinni and Kolz (2009) and McChrystal et al. (2015) has been to address the failure of current management theory and organizational practice to discuss the central issue of complexity. For example, based on McChrystal's experiences of leading the Joint Special Operations Task Force in the Second Iraq War, McChrystal et al. (2015, p. 20) argue that in order to overcome the issue of what McChrystal refers to as military forces ill-adapted to complex operations, “we had to tear down familiar organizational structures and rebuild them along completely different lines, swapping our architecture for organic fluidity”.

The external and internal environments thus require taking new theoretical paths and developing improved mental models to be able to understand what is happening in our contemporary social world: “[L]eaders ... have realized that our fast changing world requires new approaches and thinking” (Zinni & Kolz, 2009, p. 132). In line with this, McChrystal et al. (2015, p. 74) emphasize:

Complexity means that the world has become vastly less predictable. This predictability is fundamentally incompatible with reductionist managerial models based around planning and prediction. The new environment demands a new approach.

This argumentation resembles the manner in which complexity leadership theorists establish their research motivation: “We're in a knowledge economy, but our managerial and governance systems are stuck in the Industrial Era. It's time for a whole new model” (Manville and Ober in Uhl-Bien et al., 2007, p. 298). The notion of complexity is driven by a prevailing idea of a rapidly changing world and an overarching concern with changes in socio-economic and/or geo-political contexts, which leads to skeptical questioning of established organizational forms and theoretical models. As argued by Ospina (2016, p. 275), “both public and private sector organizations confront new contexts and turbulent environments that challenge the dominance of leader-centred conceptualizations”. Indeed, this ‘complexity vista’, in which leaders' inability to address complexity is made the primary explanatory factor for current management flaws, is mirrored in an increasing body of work positioned at the intersection of complexity and leadership published over the last two decades (Cullen-Lester & Yammarino, 2016; Schneider & Somers, 2006; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009; White et al., 2016; Yammarino et al., 2012). Here it is argued that “leaders must possess new kinds of knowledge and skills to understand and deal with such complex phenomena” (Kangas et al., 2019, p. 7). Hence, this literature both addresses the changes in the external environment and the subsequent changes that need to be implemented in the internal organizational environment to address and ‘fix’ the external challenges.

This way of understanding organizations and their environments also counts for descriptions of military organizations and the challenges they have faced over the last two decades. While the battleground of 20<sup>th</sup> century industrial warfare was complicated, the operational environment of 21<sup>st</sup> century warfare has become complex (see for example King, 2019). Thus, aligning the situation of military organizations with transformations of public and private organizations in general,<sup>1</sup> King refers to organizational studies which have in common that they attempt to couple the observation of paradigmatic shifts in organizations' external environments (such as increased market competition, network alliances and partnerships, technological innovations, and so on) with insistent demands for change in the organization. For example, King refers to Hammer and Champy, who have plotted the transformation of corporate hierarchies and now demand that companies reorganize into flatter, more flexible, and responsible organizations: “[T]he old ways of doing business ... simply don't work anymore” (Hammer & Champy, 1995, in King, 2019, pp. 23–24).

In sum, King relies on military practitioners who, along with more recent academic work, argue for the complex constitution of the external environment, and that organization ought to reflect this changing world order. Next, we will discuss and problematize central aspects of King's analysis informed by this perspective.

## **The Problem of a “Complex” Military Organization and Demands for New Theorizing**

In conjunction with the changes in the external environment, the internal environment for the practice of command, the organization is becoming too complex for traditional command measures (here understood as simplistic, individualistic 20<sup>th</sup> century style command) and coordination mechanisms. Therefore:

<sup>1</sup> King (2019) notes that the “the book speaks to the wider questions of social organization” (p. 23).

Collective command has emerged as an institutional response to an organizational problem. It is a method of coordinating operations and sustaining organizational cohesion *at a time when complexity threatens to overwhelm existing hierarchies and structures* [emphasis added]. (King, 2019, p. 440)

The handling of complexity in the internal environment through “collective command” has, if we take the findings of King as a fact value, mainly been taking place through professionalization of (staff) officers, here understood as increased specialization and standardization through, for instance, the development and implementation of decision-making tools in staff procedures and analysis. Interestingly, some of these tools, such as check lists, the synchronization matrix, and formal meetings (briefs, video teleconferences, working group meetings, and so on), are also traditional bureaucratic devices that attempt to standardize and coordinate peoples’ work in and beyond division headquarters. And actually, this does not appear to be particularly complex. Indeed, some of King’s important findings point to a different conclusion than the ones Zinni and Kolz (2009), McChrystal et al. (2015), and Klein (2017) bring forward, namely that the answer to flaws and frailties in management theory and organizational practice is not “chaotic mess solutions” (McChrystal et al., 2015, p. 248), but more bureaucratic or formalized organizing and planning. However, King (2019) himself disclaims this reading and argues that “it would seriously misrepresent the new divisional headquarter if the decision-making process were reduced to automated, bureaucratic procedure,” because, as he argues, “[as] a complex system, the division of the twenty-first century can be coordinated only if commanders, deputies and the staff are unified as a cohesive team” (p. 435). In line with this he also states that “[c]omplex operations have required complex headquarters. There does not seem to be any other way to coordinate operations” (King, 2019, p. 305). Here it seems that King “slides” from analytical descriptions and instead takes a normative stance, which actually runs counter to the empirical data on which he seeks to build his argumentation.

In a similar vein, it is easy to misread the new role of the commander in the divisional headquarter – if we understand misreading as a reading which is not intended by the author. Thus, an important issue in complexity leadership theory, which, as previously described, casts organizations as networked systems or adaptive complex systems (see for example Uhl-Bien et al., 2007), is the reconceptualization of the role of formal leaders. This idea is clearly described in the following statement by Zinni and Kolz (2009, in King, 2019, p. 9):

We no longer build a leadership hierarchy in a cutting edge modern organization. Instead, we build leadership *networks* that make the business of leading institutionalized and multidirectional. Leadership is no longer only vertical, working from the top down. It is distributed, pervasive, invited from all members, and instilled in the culture of successful enterprises.

Similarly, McChrystal, in an interview to Forbes Magazine (Manville, 2016), explains this interdependence of complex, networked structures with complex, networked leadership: “[L]eaders are not going to disappear. They just have to change how they lead, in step with all the changes of how networks themselves are evolving”.

Here King (2019) imitates this particular worldview by bluntly claiming in the conclusive parts of the book that “[t]he commander is no longer located at the pinnacle of a military hierarchy but at the gravitational centre of a multiverse” (p. 438). However, at the same time, King (2019) reclaims the traditional role of the commander in his or her executive function in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by arguing that “because the division has become such a complex organizational system, it requires a definite and ultimate point of reference only a commander can provide” (p. 438). It is difficult not to read this statement as an identification of the individual catalyst leader rather than a new collective leadership role taking form. Indeed, the devices developed in the professionalized staff organization only seem to further strengthen this traditional role:

The formal meeting is vital to the generation of close vertical integration at the headquarters. Especially with the commander as the charismatic centre of the division ... Formal meetings unite the headquarters morally and cognitively around the commander and the Commander’s intent. (King, 2019, p. 435)

Again it seems that King, due to his bi-polar approach, struggles with the fact that what he labels “individualist” and “collective” are not binary and mutually excluding social processes within the organization (see also Freedman, 2020). In consequence, what arises is a series of confusions concerning the character and change of command practices and the role of the commander, which lead to a variety of unanswered ques-

tions in King's text. Besides being larger than previous, more professionalized, and highly specialized, how do the staff systems at international headquarters play a greater role in actual command practices today? If the change from the conditions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the conditions of the 21<sup>st</sup> is truly significant, how do we see this transition, for instance, as shared decision-making authority and distributed responsibility? Here King points to how "the staff has silently appropriated elements of command agency to itself," and he highlights this as an example of the larger claim that "management has become more collective" (King, 2019, p. 439). However, as implicit actions, these elements of agency provide limited empirical evidence for the broader claim of "collective command".

Furthermore, King describes the relationship between collective command and the commander using the following network lingua: "the gravitational centre of a multiverse" (King, 2019, pp. 435, 438). Yet, it is unclear what the interrelationship between these broader regime changes, which apparently transpire the military organization, and the "centre", that is, the commander, actually is. When do they interact, and when are they potentially at odds with one another? How can we tell the difference between them in particular situations, or perhaps more important, when and how is it important to distinguish the commander from collective command? King never properly answers these questions. Instead, the complexity leadership reported throughout the book is backed up by limited empirical evidence, and much of the complexity leadership research reported in the literature is revealed as rather abstract and untested (Rosenhaed, 1998; Rosenhead et al., 2019). Here King would have made a stronger contribution if he had stayed closer to his empirical examples. What we really advocate for here is a strong contextual approach rather than an overarching, generalizing complexity argument about change and transformation of command practices and the role of the commander. That would bring to light, for instance, how decision-making processes in the staff organization, including the use of decision-making tools, such as the synchronization matrix, in addition to having a coordinating and standardizing function across professional staff functions and people, also take place in a hierarchical military authority structure. Hence, as du Gay and Vikkelso (2018, p. 173) argue, "authority is not some by-product that can be removed at will to produce more innovative, flexible, faster and freer organizing". Indeed, as observed by Freedman (2020, p. 110), it is not clear in the work of King why the delegation of authority is "collective" rather than "individual", since "[c]ommand often takes the form of ordering people to give orders to others".

### **Concluding Remarks on the Surreptitious Slide in Relation to Understanding and Theorizing Military Operational Leadership Practice**

Much of King's theorizing on command seems very sensible, but a nagging question remains. Is it reasonable to talk about a radical shift in command regimes from the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup>? One thing is worth noting from the outset: The military practitioners on whom King relies in his descriptions of the operational environment all tend to adhere to McChrystal et al.'s (2015, p. 20) catchy diagnostic of our age, namely that "the twenty-first century is a different game with different rules". The authors tend to describe the world in a relatively categorical and binary manner, quickly followed by a series of normative leadership prescriptions fitted for this radically changed world. King's work on command is, as we have argued, to some extent influenced by this approach. This is visible in his tendency to "slide" from a more thorough empirical analysis, notable in his descriptions of 20<sup>th</sup> century command, to more normative statements about the constitution of command in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Indeed, we have in this article problematized the normative aspects of 'collective post-heroic leadership' and management complexity in a military context. This is because the concepts are prone to being both analytical tools and performative statements. For example, collaboration, which King (2019) uses in his description of "collective command", can be used to describe and explain changes in the operational environment and the military organization, and in a similar vein be imposed on individuals in the military context as a performative demand. Thus, scientists as well as practitioners can legitimize a specific vision of reality, while at the same time prescribing a series of leadership actions, which fit this worldview. A problematic aspect of this is that authors within this tradition tend to downplay contradictions and diversity of attributes and experiences given within a social grouping in order to pitch the collective leadership argument or the flat organization claim. So not only does King's theoretical compass direct him effectively away from important organizational phenomena such as hierarchy and authority, he also shies away from analyzing issues of power, conflict, and tensions in the divisional headquarters. This is not to say that ideas of "collaboration" and "complexity" cannot hold value in our understanding of leadership or the organization in which they unfold. However, studies of new forms of leadership, organizing, and organization tend to be most empirically plausible and most consistent with social pluralism, when they, contrary to the stance taken

by King, avoid projecting homogeneity of action and intent onto large numbers of people and across contexts and instead attend to the diversity of impulses within timeframes, specific situations, and contextual settings.

Finally, it is important to recognize that there is nothing new in sentiments concerning paradigmatic shifts. Every generation seems to understand itself as something unique and as part of or living in a period of rapid social and political change. Thus, organizational scholars claim that new organizational phenomena (co-working, collaboration, freelancing, networks, sharing economy, and so on and so forth) require new theoretical, methodological, and practical perspectives to be understood. For instance, within strategy studies, authors claim that the lack of development in strategic thought is caused by disruptive societal changes that signal the crumbling of old, rule-based orders in world politics as well as business (Iansiti & Lakhani, 2020). Thus, the argument goes, these changing circumstances necessitate a fundamental rethinking of the 'what' and 'how' of strategy. The problem is that in many cases there is a noticeable tendency to celebrate conceptual novelty at the expense of thorough reflection on the differences and continuities with previous practice and theory (Betz, 2019; Freedman, 2017). Hence, a (desired) future is effectively decoupled from contextualized aspects of past and present, in contrast to utilizing these significant aspects to point toward more pragmatic ways of taking the future into account.

Whatever utility the take-up of "complexity" may have as a framework for understanding new forms of leadership and organization, as a key motivator for prescribing paradigmatic change in the military organization and command practices it comes at a price. Sometimes that price is worth paying; however, for future studies it does not come free of consequences and new, perhaps even more limiting attachments.

## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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