

## CHARISMA: A REASSESSMENT OF MAX WEBER'S THEORY

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**Abstract.** *According to the German sociologist Norbert Elias it was Max Weber who labeled a social phenomenon that had no name at that time. In his seminal study *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* Weber devised a theory of charismatic leadership, where charisma stands for out of the ordinary (*Ausseralltäglich*) qualities attributed to a person. Charisma exists as long as there are people to acknowledge it and believe in its magical power. The world we live in is in no way short of charismatic or would-be charismatic persons. And history has taught us that charisma has also a dark side to it. But what is it that makes us more inclined to surrender to someone's personal magnetism? Is it because we are social creatures who have evolved a prosocial behavior for our own good? Or maybe the answer lies in the nature of our "disenchanted" world? My paper attempts to show that there is no contradiction between the two while tackling both Max Weber's theory of charismatic leadership and the newest research in the field of social and evolutionary psychology.*

**Key words:** *Max Weber; charisma; disenchantment; leadership; evolutionary psychology.*

### 1. Introduction: Weber on charisma

One of the founding fathers of modern social science alongside Karl Marx and Émile Durkheim, Max Weber had a wide-ranging interest in many areas of knowledge: sociology – a field he helped establish, – political science, law, economics, and religion. Politically active during World War I, he was a liberal who opposed the German war politics and who fought for a constitutional reform in his country. At the same time, he was also a political realist who could not avoid seeing political reality in terms of domination.

In his seminal work *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Weber distinguishes between three ideal types of rule (*Herrschaft*): legal, traditional, and charismatic. Of course, ideal types do not correspond to reality as their function is purely methodological. They are analytical devices for understanding specific individual phenomena.

Legal rule establishes legitimacy in a rational manner by obeying the legal norms. Obedience is rendered to the laws, not to the person who happens to be in charge of upholding those laws. Bureaucracy is the purest form of legal rule, dependent on hierarchy, specialized offices, and paid employees.

Traditional rule derives its legitimacy from "the sanctity of long-established orders and ruling powers" (Weber, 2019: 354) that has existed since times immemorial. A traditional ruler's legitimacy rests upon norms and regulations that sprang from shared common social values. Reverence for the traditional way of life becomes the key factor. People submit to the ruler because he embodies the tradition.

By contrast, the charismatic rule is neither rational, nor traditionally bound. It rests on the "obligation on the part of those who have received the call to acknowledge their duty to provide personal proof. This 'acknowledgement' is, psychologically, a quite personal dedication, a belief born of enthusiasm, or of despair or hope" (Weber, 2019: 375). To Weber (2019: 376), the legal and traditional types are "everyday forms of rule" bound to specific norms (legal ones, rules of the past). In turn, charismatic leadership is bound to none of these and can sustain itself as long as it finds acquiescence among its

followers. It is “disconnected from the economy” (*wirtschaftsfremd*) and it rejects the utilization of its extraordinary qualities for economic gain.

“From the perspective of rational economic organization, charismatic rule is typically ‘uneconomic,’ repudiating any kind of involvement in everyday life. Given its complete inner indifference to this, it can merely ‘register’ irregular, causal employment” (Weber, 2019: 377).

True charisma rests on an out-of-this-world view and is confirmed through the recognition of some special, extraordinary powers interpreted as a “gift from God”, as in the case of prophets or exceptional military leaders. Because it rests upon recognition by others it is precarious. The leader who loses his charisma in the eyes of his followers is abandoned like “Jesus on the cross” (Weber, 2006: 1212). His sole source of legitimacy dwells on his personal magnetic qualities. Unlike bureaucratic rule, charismatic rule has no objective support and must provide a constant flow of miracles. The charismatic leader is compelled to do wonders if he is a prophet, or acts of courage, if he is a military leader. But most of all, he must improve the life of his followers. If not, he cannot be recognized as a God-send ruler (Weber, 2006: 1213).

Yet, in this original form, charismatic rule existed only in the beginning, when it first emerged. Over time it changed in ways that resembled other types of rule.

The three types of rule are ideal-types or methodological instruments employed by Weber to make use of a very complex cultural reality. Ideal-types are utopian compositions that emphasize certain aspects of reality (Cioară, c. Budac, 2011: 131). They are not to be understood separately from the world they refer to, nor completely independent from each other. Legal, traditional, and charismatic rule transition from one form to another.

For Weber, monarchy explains this transition. Monarchy is an institution historically legitimized by political charisma. A king used to be a charismatic military leader who founded a dynasty. His predecessors usually were patriarchs, hunting leaders in tribal societies or even shamans. Even more peaceful communities, in which war was not a daily enterprise, needed their priests or shamans in times of hardship (drought, epidemics, natural catastrophes). The issue of hereditary charisma emerged when the former ruler died. His successor was not freely elected. He was acknowledged as inheritor of his predecessor’s charismatic qualities. Thus, personal charisma was no longer involved in the process because legitimacy relied on the hereditary principle. Treated as a quality that could be created, charisma became objectified, “the charisma of office” as Weber called it (Weber, 2019: 382).

This is also the way in which charisma becomes routinized (*Veralltäglicung des Charisma*), rationalized and can take the form of either patrimonial or bureaucratized rule. It is in the nature of charisma to recede in front of the advancement of established institutions (Weber, 2006: 1236), as in the case of hereditary charisma.

In its original form, but also in its worldlier forms, the legitimacy of charisma rests on its recognition by others. Either it is acknowledged directly by followers (as in tribal societies), or by a charismatic community, as in the case of the coronation of kings or bishops by the clergy. Either way it involves obedience.

## **2. Charisma and obedience from the perspective of evolutionary and social psychology**

But what makes people yield to charismatic rulers? In *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Weber gives more attention to the ruler and to the social process by which he is acknowledged. We should also take a glance at the ruler’s followers. The German sociologist speaks of the exceptional qualities the leader is endowed with and mentions

that those qualities depend upon the needs of its public. The attributes asked from a bishop are different from the ones a military leader is supposed to have. Yet, both convey obedience. Why?

According to Stephen Turner (1993), Weber intuitively recognized a connection between the extraordinarily traits of the ruler and the obedience he is receiving. (Turner: 245) Yet, he does not explain it. Turner approaches this issue from the perspective of risk cognition studies. A charismatic leader must improve the life of his people and he must be successful in doing so. He must give in to this practical principle and constantly accept new risks. His charisma relies on his willingness to accept new challenges. "The cycle of the strengthening or maintenance of charisma depends on the successful performance of the charismatic leader, whose willingness to thrust him or herself into the breach provides ground for the follower's acceptance of new risks, and whose successes continue to validate their choice to submit" (Turner: 250). As long as he can push the boundaries of risk-taking, people will recognize him as a successful, charismatic person. When he fails, his charisma also vanishes.

Turner offers an utilitarian account for the relationship between the leader and his followers.

Psychiatrist Jerrold M. Post (1986) analyzes the relationship between the charismatic leader and his followers from a psychological point of view, drawing on clinical studies of narcissistic personality disorders. The bond is described in terms of the psychological consequences of injured selves, or "narcissistically wounded individuals" (Post, 1986: 676). In a rather Freudian manner, the injured self is the result of a damaged image of the self during the critical childhood period, a damage usually attributed to the mother (a cold and unloving mother will rear an emotionally hungry, attention-seeking child). This way the "mirror-hungry" personality type emerges in individuals who will constantly seek an audience to satisfy their emotional voracity and to appease their lack of self-esteem. This is the charismatic leader personality type.

The second type of personality refers to the public and is called the "ideal-hungry personality" (Post, 1986: 679). It experiences the same emotional hunger and lack of self-esteem, but needs to relate to outspoken charismatic individuals for a sense of its own worthiness. They are on a constant search for idealized figures to admire. A leader who displays a grandiose show of omnipotence and determination will be particularly attractive to those harassed by doubt. "There is a quality of mutual intoxication in the leader's reassuring his followers who in turn reassure him. One is reminded of the relationship between hypnotist and subject. Manifesting total confidence, the hypnotist instructs his subject to yield control to him and to suspend volition and judgement" (Post, 1986: 682)

A charismatic leader needs a particular kind of public in order for the special charismatic relationship to occur. Some "ideal-hungry personalities" enter this relationship temporarily, due to a certain context. Others center their own lives around charismatic relationships. According to Post, for many Germans, Hitler took such heroic proportions. Relieved, they suspended individual judgement and identified with his success and strength. His failure must have sent the latter type of "ideal-hungry personalities" to look for a new idealized leader figure.

Post's analysis draws heavily on the psychoanalytic theory and is susceptible to critique by more up to date perspectives about human behavior. Such perspectives emphasize the role of socialization and groupness in the formation of personality. Childhood experiences at home and mother-child relationships illuminate only one side of our very complex personalities.

Social psychologists who study group behavior noticed that people tend to conform and obey to satisfy their need of belonging and self-esteem. The longing to socialize is pervasive across the human species and people will do almost anything to prevent being excluded from a group they identify with. Some people will even fail to behave morally if this might get them excluded. (Williams and Nida, 2011: 71) Extensive studies on ostracism have shown that even 3 minutes of insignificant rejection by others (the "Cyberball paradigm") lead to strong feelings of anger and sadness. RMI scans revealed that the brain region activated by physical pain is also activated by ostracism (Williams and Nida, 2011: 72). The strategy also makes sense in terms of our evolutionary biology, as the authors noted, because being able to identify the possibility of rejection by the group, increased one's chances of survival in prehistoric communities.

In groups, people behave differently to the way they behave in a one-to-one relationship. Sometimes they behave completely different as can be shown when family members are completely perplexed by the behavior of their adolescents. They sport a different personality outside the home.

There is empirical evidence that we are driven by a need to belong and to form relationships, even imperfect ones (Baumeister and Leary, 1995) "Belongingness can be almost as compelling a need as food and human culture is significantly conditioned by the pressure to provide belongingness" (Baumeister and Leary: 498). We are naturally driven to form social relationships and are negatively influenced by the loss of any of our connections, surprisingly even when some of these bonds were not rewarding. Some people form close relationships even with former rivals. And some will attach to any group in order to get recognition, to boost self-esteem and to avoid being ostracized. Even ostracized groups will offer in-group support and social connectivity.

Charismatic leadership relies heavily on social recognition as this is its only source of legitimacy. There is no charisma if there are no people around to recognize it as such. Even though reverence of personal features makes it vulnerable and unstable, as long as the charismatic relationship exists, it is real for both the leader and her/his followers. On what do the followers ground this reality?

For Grabo and Van Vugt (2016: 2): "charismatic leaders are uniquely effective at increasing prosocial behaviors within a group because they employ verbal and nonverbal tactics which actively signal their ability – and willingness – to resolve group challenges." The authors explain the social function of a charismatic leader in terms of evolutionary advantages, as an evolved strategy of early humans to face different challenges. They learned to harmonize their actions and to follow a specific, trusted person in order to be able to survive. There are several ways in which a leader can promote cooperation. "Individualized consideration" has been shown to influence prosocial economic behavior and "emotional contagion" positively influences emotions. A leader who punishes free-riders increases cooperation among the members of the group. Ultimately, the leader will create a sense of shared identity that can be used either to bring people together or to break them apart.

Yet, even if the propensity to accept the leadership of charismatic individuals has proved advantageous in terms of our evolution as specie, we must also account for what it is that makes us trust or admire such individuals. In *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* Weber wrote only about the personal, out of these world qualities of the charismatic leader, without giving specific clues as to what these might be. Grabo and Van Vugt list some features that have been proven to influence perceptions among the followers: height or physical attractiveness, verbal cues, gender (women are preferred during

times of peace), age (older leaders are thought to be wiser and more experienced and are favored in times of steadiness). No doubt, these things contribute to the way people think and feel towards a specific individual.

### 3. Charisma in a disenchanting world

All these studies are illuminating and explain in great detail our biological and social motivations for action. Therefore, none of the above mentioned aspects should be overlooked when explaining charismatic relationships. One cannot help but acknowledge that Max Weber already understood these challenges. His reasoning on what drives people to surrender to a charismatic leader can be found rather in his *Vocation Lectures* (Weber, 2020), not in *Economy and Society*.

In *Wissenschaft als Beruf*, translated in English as *Science as Vocation*, or, in D. Searls' translation, *The Scholar's Work* (Weber, 2020), Weber emphasizes the progress of knowledge marked by an increasing rationalization and intellectualization. (Weber, 2020: 37) This does not mean that we understand our world better; it only means that we are confident in our abilities to master it.

We master it by intellectualization and rationalization, not by praying to mysterious forces and gods, as our ancestors did. We moved away from our ancestor's faith in religion and metaphysical truth. To us, these are superstitions unsuitable for the modern, rational human. We gained more knowledge about the world we live in and more control over our decisions. We can even calculate the various outcomes of our decisions.

The increased rationalization of life sprang from the spirit of the protestant ethic which rooted all daily activities around the idea of vocation, self-control, and self-discipline. We are unaware now of these religious origins of our modern way of life.

According to the German sociologist, this is our modern, disenchanting world, devoid of meaning and ultimate purposes. We have no more use for magical thinking because we can master the environment with the help of technology and scientific thinking. Weber identified this need in his students who always looked for "a guide and leader," when in fact they should be looking for a teacher. "Remember that a person's worth is totally independent of whether or not he has leadership qualities, and in any case the qualities that make someone an excellent scholar and teacher are *not* the ones that make him a leader in the realm of choosing a life goal or, specifically, in politics." (Weber, 2020: 49) Our disenchanting world demands a new way of life, where magic has retreated from the public sphere. Some people cannot cope with this without paying a tribute in unhappiness and disorientation. Whatever the burden of modernity, Weber is certain that no prophets and saviors will be able to alleviate our anxieties because these anxieties are entwined in our modern human way of life.

As he himself points out, teachers are not prophets, and scholarship is specialized work defined by integrity and clarity of scope and methods. Those who feel compelled to use a lecture hall as a stage for their passionate convictions and ideologies betray the scope of this enterprise. "Clearly it is an inescapable fact in our current historical circumstance that scholarship is specialized work, done by professional experts in the service of both self-understanding and increased knowledge of objective facts – it is not a gift of grace with seers and prophets dispensing holy objects and revelations, nor a part of sages' and philosophers' meditations on the meaning of life. If we want to remain true to ourselves, we cannot avoid this fact" (Weber, 2020: 52).

We must reckon that in a disenchanting world there are no prophets, no saviors. In order to have them, one needs to reinvent the whole paradigm of an enchanted world, full of magical thinking and a genuine sense of wonder. To us, it is a lost

paradigm and “obscuring this basic fact – that our destiny is to live in an age without prophets, far from God – with surrogates at the academic podium will never serve the personal interests of anyone who truly hears the “music” of religion” (Weber, 2020: 53).

Raymond Aron (1969) objected to this pessimistic view on modernity by pointing out the benefits of scientific progress and increased productivity. Although Weber was opposed to socialism, Aron stresses a similarity with the Marxist gloomy perspective of the enslaved humanity in the Weberian depiction of the disenchanting world. “In Weber, a philosophy of struggle and power of Marxist and Nietzschean inspiration is combined with a vision of universal history leading to a disenchanting world and an enslaved humanity stripped of its highest virtues. For himself and perhaps for others, Max Weber placed above all else not so much success and power as a certain nobility, the courage to face the human condition as it appears to someone who denies himself any illusion, those of religion and those of political ideology” (Aron: 257).

One cannot help but wonder if our propensity for magical thinking and our propensity towards mythical figures really went away in the process of disenchantment. It is in our human nature to wonder about the meaning and value of life and these kind of interrogations cannot be resolved by science or technology. We feel compelled to fill the void.

The spirit of capitalism thrived on, in a secular, rationalized framework, long after the religious ethic that enabled its genesis faded away. Wouldn't it be possible for charisma to be a remnant of such magical thinking? People long for new prophets even in a highly technologized, science-dependent world like ours. Of course, they themselves do not have to rationalize this longing and might even be unaware of its source. In a disenchanting world, this might be a little piece of evidence about the way our mind works.

#### 4. Conclusions

Both evolutionary psychology and social psychology provide important information about our attitudes, emotions and the choices we make. Some of the authors in both fields find Weber's description of charismatic leadership unsatisfying, deploring the fact that he mentions ancient forms of charismatic relationships only (Turner, 1993; Post, 1986). This is true if we look solely at the account given by Weber in *Economy and Society*.

However, when reading *Wissenschaft als Beruf* the impression changes. By looking for charismatic leaders, people might be trying, although unconsciously, to re-enchant their world, to gain a lost feeling of security and confidence. To the German sociologist these are the misfits, those who cannot carry the burden of modern life. It is a form of re-enchanting the modern way of life by finding a purpose. Weber does not write so explicitly. However, this is the corollary of his reasoning.

This suggestion makes sense even in terms of our evolution: we have evolved a defensive strategy against a world we perceive as dangerous and will turn to almost anyone who seems capable enough to secure our interests.

These two approaches are not necessarily incompatible. Weber identified a profound crisis of modern life: modern science replaced a value-driven view of the world, values became fragmented and polarized into incompatible value spheres, the moral compass has been lost and so was freedom. But above all, a certain type of personality has been lost as well. “This archetypal modern self drew its strength solely from within in the sense that one's principle of action was determined by its own

psychological need to gain self-affirmation. Also, the way in which this deeply introspective subjectivity was practiced, that is, in self-mastery, entailed a highly rational and radically methodical attitude towards one's inner self and the outer, objective world." (Kim:2020) This kind of personality turns up in Weber's work under the name of *Berufsmensch* ("person of vocation") or as the charismatic leader.

In their quest for a charismatic leader, people betray the need to reenchant the world, to gain a long-lost sense of purpose and morality. At the same time, they disclose their profound social nature, for that sense of purpose and morality can only be attained as part of a larger community.

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