Weber as an Analyst of Charisma


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Despite the fact that Max Weber is the original and sole source of the social science concept of charisma (as distinct from the religious concept), and the fact that his discussion of charisma is highly precise, detailed, and widely applicable (Adair-Toteff, 2005; Turner 1993, 2003; Baehr, 2008, for discussions), the literature on charisma rarely uses the details of his ideal-type of charismatic authority, and is largely limited to ritual citation. In what follows I will briefly explain the core ideas that figure into his account of charismatic leadership, and illustrate them with a few well-known public figures. Examples are so plentiful in recent world politics that any of a long list could be chosen. Understanding charisma in the corporate world takes a bit more effort, but Weber himself discussed business charisma, and the examples he gave shed some light on business charisma today.

The Core Model: Beating Expectations

Weber gives a short list of model charismatic leaders: religious leaders, such as Bhagwans, who must perform miracles, the Herzog, or elected military leader, who must succeed on the field of
battle, and a secondary variety, law prophets, who arise in a crisis to lay down law. The key to the two main types is that they must prove themselves—publically, continuously, and through extraordinary acts or successes ([1922] 1978, 1114). In these model cases, the results are hard to manipulate or fake. Winning a battle is objective, as are miracles.

What are the modern variants of these types? Politicians, religious leaders, moral leaders, revolutionaries, stock market “gurus,” etc. etc. Each of them is faced with the same kind of problem. They must “prove” their charisma to their followers and potential followers. The thing they must prove is that they are exceptional, and exceptional in a way that justifies their claims on the obedience and commitment of their followers. Weber has a phrase for this quality—kind of exceptional quality, “un-everyday-ness” ([1922] 1978, 297), which suggests the uncanny. But mere exceptionality—such as the possession of remarkable talents with card tricks—cannot explain why someone can command a following.

So there must be something more going on here, implicit in Weber’s account, and illustrated by his examples. What might it be? One basic element of the model of charisma for Weber is the idea that the charismatic leader believes that he or she has an exceptional, extraordinary mission given by God or in some sense sacred or part of fate. The fact that they have been chosen for this mission is part of what makes them extraordinary. Indeed, the two notions go together: to be given a mission is extraordinary, but it also implies the presence of special powers to fulfill this mission or fate ([1922] 1978, 1114).

People who believe in themselves are, of course, a dime a dozen, not to say a blight on the landscape. So this conviction is not, in itself, enough to qualify a person as charismatic. And this is where proof comes in. There must be evidence of the pair of elements: of the calling to an
extraordinary mission and of the extraordinary powers required to fulfill this mission. One must not only imagine oneself to be Joan of Arc, one must do something that validates the idea.

Validation of one’s special powers and validation of the mission mutually support one another through a process of feedback and amplification. Consider the case of Osama Bin-Laden. His Islamist ideas about the restoration of the Caliphate and the restoration of the status of Islam in the world were, both before his successful series of terrorist actions and afterwards, minor political ideas, and would not have commanded even a tiny fraction of a vote in an election or in an opinion poll. Nor do the details of his ideas matter even now. His is not an ideological movement, but a charismatic one.

How did it succeed? The key is expectations. Various attacks on Arab regimes, on Western interests, and on tourists have been made over the years by anti-Western Islamist leaders. They succeeded, in the sense that they were carried out successfully, and in some countries brought the movement close to political power. But in these cases for the most part the successes were within the range of ordinary expectation. Attacking tourists is easy to do. Bombing a well-guarded Embassy in a non-Muslim country and killing hundreds, however, is not easy to do. And this is the kind of achievement that Bin-Laden’s movement began to succeed at.

Validating the Mission

One may reasonably ask what the military point to these bombings was. They did not drive away the Americans, or win friends in the countries in which they were carried out, or gain political
power or control of land. They are the paradigm of “senseless violence.” They are, nevertheless, extraordinary. But are they extraordinary merely in the sense of card tricks? The answer is clearly that they do something more: they serve an important role in the creation of the charismatic leader and the validation of his mission, and more importantly his personal mission, the mission embodied in him.

How does this work? The ideas of the movement are marginal ideas, the ideas of cranks. The man on the street would dismiss them as such, especially because the goals that are espoused, which might be mildly desirable, appear to be impossible to achieve. This impossibility is a matter of expectations, however. And expectations can be made to change. They may be made to change, specifically, by the successes of leaders. These successes both make them credible as speakers, but more importantly they change our expectations about what is possible.

The changes are not mysterious. We operate with very vague and poorly grounded expectations, rooted in fear, about what is possible politically, in business, and so forth. New events readily shatter these expectations. They are not the kind of ordinary expectations we have about the natural world or about human relations with those we know and are close to. They are expectations about what are, for us, rare events. But they are changed by the experience and evidence of the acts of the leader. For Weber this change is absolutely central: “charisma, if it has any specific effects at all, manifests its revolutionary power from within, from a central metanoia [change] of the follower’s attitudes” ([1922] 1978, 1117). And it is the exemplary actions of the leaders that produce this change, which is fundamentally a change in expectations about what is possible. The actions of the leader, by exceeding ordinary expectations, change
them. But this change is not the normal revision of expectations. The changes are large, and are experienced as, and result from, the “anxiety and enthusiasm of an extraordinary situation” ([1922] 1978, 1117).

But here we get into the realm of illusion--very large illusions as well as small ones. There are many players in the game of setting expectations. The government of the United States seeks to project the expectation that resistance or attack will be met with massive force--that it is better not even to try. And indeed, this expectation is basic to American power. If every dictator or national leader thought that he or she could ignore or defy the threat of the use of American power, and if this power would have to be deployed every time it was challenged, the number of wars would be endless and the power itself would soon disappear, consumed by dozens of minor conflicts. The sparing, occasional, use of power serves to maintain the expectation that the United States can and will act, and this expectation is the real source of influence over the actions of others. This creates an opportunity for challengers--as it did in the time of Jesus and the Roman Empire.

The charismatic leader also plays a game of expectations, in which the dominant powers or adversaries that are often the charismatic leader’s enemies play an important role. One can see the same pattern repeatedly in the newspapers. The errant leader does something the dominant power prefers he would not do. The dominant power tries diplomacy. A parade of dignitaries is send to persuade him to relent. This is done which much publicity, especially on the side of the leader, who is eager to show the great power of the world deferring to and begging him to act their way. For him, the expectation that terrible things might happen if he did not agree, which is also the impression that the representatives of power wish to present, is equally important,
because the leader is going to very publically, and repeatedly, “stand up” to power and reject the demands, in the name of the nation, its mission, its sovereignty, and so forth.

The ordinary leader would treat these as bargaining situations in which something might be gained by resistance, but in which the ultimate goal is to seal the best possible bargain. Diplomacy is merely haggling over the price. The charismatic leader treats these situations differently. For him and his audience, each act of resistance in which one survives or succeeds is one in which the ordinary expectations of being crushed by the superior power are surpassed. The very fact that both sides are eager to produce the expectation that he will be forced to give in and if he does not that he will be crushed makes any outcome better than being crushed or giving in into a victory--into a surpassing of expectations. This can become routinized. Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez repeatedly announce the threat of imminent invasion by the United States. When it does not occur, they prove themselves again as having defeated the all-powerful adversary, and thus prove themselves to be special. And this proof of course validates their personal mission as well.

This is why militarily meaningless actions and senseless violence do make sense. They are proofs of the special powers of the leader. But they are more than this. They serve to make the vision of the leader more credible--what the actions say is this: what is possible with me is different, and much grander, than what is possible with ordinary leaders. Follow me in my mission, in my vision of what is possible, and what seemed impossible will happen.

The Leader as the Path
Weber repeatedly used the example of Jesus, who said such things as “I am the way, and the truth and the life,” which is to say both the source of the vision and the instrument of realizing it, that through me things are possible that are not possible otherwise, and especially, as Weber quoted, “it has been written . . ., but I say unto you” ([1922] 1978, 1115). The key to charisma is precisely the ability to present oneself as the way, as the instrument, and to rise above what is written, in this case the law, and command on the basis of one’s personal authority.

But what about the content of the mission? And of the expectations that are changed? Here things get a bit more complicated. One complication comes from the process of raising and altering expectations themselves. As I write this, the ruler of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, a charismatic national liberation politician, is clinging to power at gunpoint as the world watches in horror. His campaign posters cheerily read “All Good Things are Possible,” which is the essential idea the charismatic leader trades on—with the implied qualification that it is only through the leaders, so it means “[Only Through Me] All Good Things are Possible.” But raising expectations in this way creates debts to the future: a requirement that eventually these good things must arrive.

The moment of reckoning can be put off indefinitely, but not permanently. This is why Weber says that charisma begins to die at the moment of its birth ([1922]1978, 1120). Eventually the leader must deliver the goods. And what typically occurs in politics as in business contexts is that the leader does two things—delivers some goods, especially to the highest ranking and most loyal followers, but also continues to surpass expectations, especially by beating expectations, usually by manufacturing fake expectations to surpass, and changing expectations by raising them, something that is made plausible by the continued beating of expectations.
In the case of Mugabe, all the ills of Zimbabwe and the failures of the regime to feed the people or bring them wealth are blamed on the powerful British and White interests that are conspiring to take Zimbabwe back, back from the people of Zimbabwe to whom Mugabe delivered it by expelling White rule and then the White landowners and producers themselves. The threats are amped up every time the leader needs a victory against the odds—and predictably the leader succeeds, because the threat is not real. Castro and Chavez, similarly, regularly announced threats of US invasions. Castro advertised these threats on signs in the countryside. And every time the resolute actions of the great leader overcame these terrible threats by the powerful enemy.

This sort of thing can go on for decades. Once the basic image of the world propounded by the leader has been accepted, and the mission of resistance has been identified with the ruler as the only one capable of carrying it out, both leaders and followers are trapped in the logic of charismatic success, in which the overcoming of obstacles reinforces the leader’s mission and claim to the mission. But the mission nevertheless has content, and the content is an eventual payoff. For religious leaders, the payoff can be in the next world, so the message can be kept alive longer. But for the political and especially for the business leader, there need to be payoffs sooner.

This need for payoff spells the death of charisma, because the mechanisms for bringing about rewards are mundane—people need to be paid. Things cost money. Goods need to be secured or produced. In the classical world of Roman generals and raiders like Genghis Khan or Attila, and even in the time of early modernity, this securing of goods could take the form of looting or extracting tribute. Distributing it fulfilled the promises. In the modern world, however,
fulfilling promises means bureaucratic organization and all this implies--rules, offices, schemes by which people are appointed because they can do the jobs, continuity, rationality, predictability--in a word, accountants. And this is the antithesis of the high-flux, ever changing world of charisma, where inner qualities and a spark of the divine count for everything, and where missions are made by breaking with the predictable and rejecting normal expectations.

Small Charisma: The Problem of Leader Selection

Weber, in his writings on politics, was also concerned with small charisma, not the large world-reshaping charisma of a Jesus or Napoleon, but the kind of charisma that allowed a leader to gain a following that would back him and whose backing would give him freedom of action on the world stage. The support which enabled the leader to act was of course not enough--the leader needed the inner capacity to act, the energy, the ability to size up and seize opportunities, to see that what people thought was a risk was not a risk, and so forth. So Weber focused on the leader selection process in modern democratic mass societies. He was especially concerned that the usual selection processes selected out or against this kind of leader, and gave little training or experience in taking risks and gaining a following ([1922]1978, 1441-1462). Parties that were highly organized, such as the main German Socialist party of his time, were highly bureaucratized, and to rise to the top in it one needed to be a good organization man: bad training and selection for world leaders who were faced with international threats and opportunities.

Weber had similar points to make about business. He analyzed one example of an American financier, Henry Villard, who raised a vast amount of money from investors for a
purpose that he kept secret even from the investors, a “blind pool, on the basis of the investors’ belief in his individual power to make money for them ([1922]1978, 1118). This is the charismatic model. It is the opposite mentality of the accountant, who is for business what the bureaucrat is for government: a slave to rules, to expectations rooted in the past, and to conventional thinking. Business, Weber thought, both required and rewarded (though usually punished) the few businessmen who could rise above the mass of book-keepers and see opportunities that others could not, or create them.

As one can readily see, the same issues of selection apply: one needs experiences of an entrepreneurial, risk-taking kind in order to become a credible leader. But one is not likely to get these experiences climbing up the corporate ladder. Indeed, the corporate ladder is the place where potential leaders are killed off by the demands of conformity and endless rounds of group-think producing meetings. So the person who has the most experience of a large enterprise and its business is likely to be the person least capable, on a personal level, of leading it. And this is what motivates the desperate searches for genuine leaders in corporate life.

References


