

CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP AND SOCIAL CHANGE: A WEBERIAN PRESPECTIVE

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Abstract

The term "charismatic leader" has recently attained widespread and almost debased currency. In the past, it was occasionally applied to leaders like Gandhi, Roosevelt, Hitler and Lenin. Now nearly every leader with marked popular appeal, especially those of new states, is indiscriminately tagged as charismatic. To avoid such indiscriminate and therefore meaningless use of the term, we should know what is or should be included in the category of charismatic leadership to distinguish it from other forms of leadership. In the present study an attempt is made to see how Weber dealt with sociological components of charisma and bring together all that Weber himself wrote on the subject and systemize that material with the help of writings of modern Sociologists in order to develop the theory of Charismatic Leadership into a more workable tool for understanding Charisma as crucial to Weber's system of analysis as the basis for the explanation of social change.

Keywords: Charisma, Charismatic Leadership, Social Change, Max Weber, Ideal Types.



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Introduction

The enormous interest of sociologists in the work of Max Weber (1864-1920), one of the Founders of Sociology, was born in Erfurt, Germany, is indicated by the popularity of his books and by the many articles dealing with Weber in recent times. What has probably been most significant in Weber's work has been his typology of authority. Authority (*herrschaft*) was defined as "the probability that certain specific commands (or all commands) from a given source will be obeyed by a given group of persons". Weber's major concern focuses upon legitimate authority or the relationship characterized by the attribution of a degree of legitimacy to the authority. According to Max Weber there are three pure types of legitimate authority. The validity of their claims to legitimacy may be based on:

- i. **Rational grounds:-** resting on a belief in the legality of patterns of normative rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands (legal authority),
- ii. **Traditional grounds:-** resting on established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of the status of those exercising authority under them (traditional authority), and finally
- iii. **Charismatic grounds:-** resting on devotion to the specific and exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of normative patterns or Order revealed or ordained by him (charismatic authority) (Weber, 1964, p.324).

Charismatic leadership has its roots in the writings of Max Weber. The word charisma is derived from the Greek word, *charismata*, meaning “the gift of grace,” or “gifts presented by the gods”. The term charisma and its derivatives, introduced into sociology by Max Weber, in his original formulation “*Economy and Society*” in the beginning of 20th century, has lately been utilized by political scientists, psychologists, organizational theorists etc., tamed the original conception of charisma advanced by Weber and, in the process, diluted its richness and distinctiveness. That is why many sociologists argue for a return to Weber’s original concept of charisma (Beyer, 1999, p.307).

Concept of Charisma

Weber defines "charisma" as

“a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader (Weber, 1964, p.358).”

Weber uses "charisma" in a value-neutral manner. Sociologically we must abstain from value judgments, treat all leaders on the same level as the men who, according to conventional judgments, are the greatest heroes, prophets and saviors. As individuals, we can commend the motives of those who wish to distinguish on moral or esthetic grounds between men whose mission leads to Heaven and men whose mission leads to Hell. But as social scientists we must recognize that the empirical or earthly manifestation of inspired and inspiring leadership is one and the same whether in the service of good or evil (Willner & Willner, 1965, p.79).

We therefore can redefine charisma without departing from Weber's intrinsic intention as “a leader's capacity to elicit from a following *deference, devotion, and awe* toward himself as the source of authority. A leader who can have this effect upon a group is charismatic for that group.” An analysis of how leaders achieve such an effect, of the means by which and the conditions under which this kind of loyalty is generated and maintained, might give us a better intellectual grasp of charismatic leadership.

Weber used charisma in at least three senses:

- i. In the classic Weberian sense of the supernatural endowment of the leader. The leader has a divine gift which he demonstrates to his followers by miracles, signs or proofs. The obedience of the disciples is contingent upon their belief in the powers of the leader and the latter may lose his 'gift', and with it his following.
- ii. Charisma is used by Weber and others to refer to a sacred or awe-filled property of groups, roles or objects.
- iii. Charisma is used in the popular (and secular) sense to refer to the personal qualities of a leader. The leader is a 'charismatic personality' who attracts a following on the basis of his personal attributes, as opposed to a divine gift. Weber himself uses charisma in this sense in describing charismatic party leaders. In this modern usage charisma is thus secularized as the extraordinary, but not supernatural, talents of the 'magnetic' political personality.

The Principle Characteristics of Charismatic Leadership

- It is recognition on the part of those subject to authority which is decisive for the validity of charisma. This is freely given and guaranteed by what is held to be a "sign" or proof, originally always a miracle, and consists in devotion to the corresponding revelation, hero worship, or absolute trust in the leader.
- If proof of his charismatic qualification fails him for long, the leader endowed with charisma tends to think his god or his magical or heroic powers have deserted him. If he is for long unsuccessful, above all if his leadership fails to benefit his followers, it is likely that his charismatic authority will disappear. This is the genuine charismatic meaning of the phrase "by the grace of God".
- The corporate group which is subjected to charismatic authority is based on emotional form of communal relationship (*Gemeinde*). The administrative staff of a charismatic leader does not consists of 'officials'; at least its members are not technically trained. It is

not chosen on the basis of social privilege nor from the point of view of domestic or personal dependency. It is rather chosen in terms of the charismatic qualities of its members. The prophet has his disciples; the warlord his selected henchmen; the leader, generally, his followers. There is no such thing as 'appointment' or 'dismissal', no career, no promotion. There is no hierarchy; there is no such thing as a definite sphere of authority and of competence, and no appropriation of official powers on the basis of social privileges.

- Pure charisma is specifically foreign to economic considerations. Whenever it appears it constitutes a 'call' in most emphatic sense of the world, a 'mission' or a 'spiritual duty'. In the pure type it disdains and repudiates economic exploitation of gift of grace as a source of income, though, to be sure, this often remains more an ideal than a fact.
- In traditionally stereotyped periods, charisma is the greatest revolutionary force. The equally revolutionary force of 'reason' works from without by altering the situations of action, and hence its problem finally in this way changing men's attitudes towards them; or it intellectualizes the individual. Charisma, on the other hand may involve a subjective or internal reorientation born out of sufferings, conflicts or enthusiasm. It may then result in a radical alteration of the central system of attitudes and directions of action with a completely new orientation of all attitudes toward the different problems and structures of the 'world'.

Emergence or Rise of Charismatic Leaders

Max Weber gave little attention to the conditions under which charismatic leadership can emerge, merely mentioning times of psychic, physical, economic, ethical, religious, or political distress. However, there are scholars like Karl Lowenstein who contends that the world of religion remains the fundamental locus for emergence of charisma. He feels that today "charisma" in the proper sense is likely to be found in those areas of the world, in which a popular belief in supernatural powers is still widespread, as in some parts of Africa and Asia, that have not yet broken away from the 'magico-religious' ambience. Similarly Carl J. Friedrich insists that charisma can properly appear only in the setting of a belief in a divine being ("God or gods").

Erik H. Erikson has suggested that there are certain historical conditions, such as the waning of religion, in which people in large numbers become "charisma-hungry." Pursuing the point further, he distinguished three forms of distress to which a charismatic leader may minister:

"fear," "anxiety," and "existential dread," or the distress that people experience under conditions in which rituals of their existence have broken down. Correspondingly, a charismatic leader is one who offers people salvation in the form of safety, or identity, or rituals, or some combination of these, saying to them in effect: "I will make you safe," or "I will give you an identity," or "I will give you rituals."

W. H. Friedlan mentions three reasons for the emergence of charismatic leadership:

- i. the leaders were expressing sentiments which had been inchoate in the society but which had been brought to consciousness only recently by a handful of people;
- ii. in expressing these sentiments, leaders were engaging in activities defined as hazardous by most people; finally,
- iii. recognized evidence of "success" in the activities of the leaders.

Philip Smith says that the images of 'evil' must be present in the forest of symbols surrounding each charismatic leader. There must be something for them to fight against, something from which their followers can be saved. In many cases this evil is an abstraction such as poverty, capitalism, heresy or injustice. In yet other cases, this evil finds its embodiment in another individual actor, a threatening person who can be taken as embodying a powerful 'negative charisma'. T. K. Oommen speaks of following conditions for the emergence of charisma:

- a) Eruption of crisis;
- b) Submerged discontent;
- c) Failure of the measures hitherto taken to combat an existing evil;
- d) Patronage given by vested interest forces, including those in authority.

The existence of one or more of these conditions may be viewed as a pre-requisite for the emergence of charismatic leadership.

However there is no uniform set of reasons that can be attributed to emergence of charismatic leadership and that the nature of social situation is a decisive factor in the process. "If genuine charisma is to be understood, analysis must be directed toward the social situation within which the charismatic figure operates and the character of his message".

Role of Charismatic Leaders

Given the conditions necessary for the rise of charismatic leaders, let us take an account on the roles played by the charismatic leaders.

T. K. Oommen suggests following roles for the charismatic leaders:

- i. Creating awareness among the people of the social problems and unfolding the possibilities of problem resolution, thereby championing the "felt need";
- ii. Evolving a new approach (means) to solve the problem at hand;
- iii. Voicing commitment to a pursuance of a goal (end) widely acclaimed by the people at a given point of time;
- iv. Expressing the message in such a manner as to appeal to a substantial portion of the population under reference

Willner and Willner suggests that the role of charismatic leader is twofold, incorporating two distinct, although somewhat overlapping stages. The first is the destruction of the old order; the second, which might be termed "political development," is the building of the promised new and better order. According to Carl. J. Friedrich, there appear to be three primary roles of charismatic leadership, namely initiating, maintaining and protecting leadership to which correspond characteristic behaviors of the followership: imitating, obeying and acclaiming. The initiator or innovator who may be conqueror, entrepreneur or lawgiver, to mention only the most generally recognized forms of initiating leadership, strikes out along novel lines of political action which "inspire" those following him into imitating his action, associating themselves with him. Maintaining leadership upholds the established order of things. The conservator reinforces old lines of political action which are familiar to all those following him. They obey his commands, and thereby associate themselves with the existing government and its traditional ways of "getting things done." This kind of leadership is more specifically based on "authority," if authority is taken to mean the capacity for reasoned elaboration based upon the recognized beliefs, values and interests of the community. Protecting leadership provides security for the following, more particularly security against bodily, physical destruction, but also security for a particular way of life, a culture and its values, beliefs and interests. Protecting leadership elicits acclaim in the following who willingly grant, as a result of their delight at being protected, whatever is required to have the leader continue those activities which provide the desired security.

Charismatic Leadership and Social Change

Charisma is crucial to Weber's system of analysis as the basis for the explanation of social change. Weber's other types of authority (rational-legal and traditional) are stable systems within which it is conceivable that change will take place only at the micro level. The problem for Weber was to account for large-scale (macro level) social change and the

concept of charisma provided what Bendix calls "a sociology of innovation." Though a sociology of change was necessary for Weber, it would appear that he was not at ease with it. Not only are two of his three patterns of domination concerned with stable systems but even his discussion of charisma is heavily oriented toward its stabilization and routinization. Despite this orientation it is obvious from a reading of his work that the problem of change continually concerned Weber. Yet the difficulties in working with his approach to the study of social change become apparent when one examines his writings on charisma in some detail.

Weber stresses in his treatment of charisma is its innovative and even revolutionary character. Charisma, he says, is alien to the world of everyday routine; it calls for new ways of life and thought. Whatever the particular social setting (religion, politics, and so forth), charismatic leadership rejects old rules and issues a demand for change. It preaches or creates new obligations. It addresses itself to followers or potential followers in the spirit of the saying: "It is written..., but I say unto you..." In contrast and opposition to bureaucratic authority, which respects rational rules, and to traditional authority, which is bound to precedents handed down from the past, charismatic authority, within the sphere of its claims, "repudiates the past, and is in this sense a specifically revolutionary force."

We now have substantial evidence that charismatic leaders behave differently than non-charismatic leaders. Further, we know that due to their unique relationship with followers, charismatic leaders can be powerful agents of social change. This emphasis fails to uncover why and how the charismatic leader-follower interaction can generate social change.

A team of social scientist, C. Mariene Fiol, Drew Harris and Robert House presents a model that begins to explain why and how the charismatic leader-follower interaction can generate social change. According to this model charismatic leaders tend to use specific communication strategies to inspire followers and implement social change. These social scientists suggest that charismatic leaders affect social change by employing specific rhetorical strategies targeted at changing followers' personal and social values. These strategies are theorized to follow a temporal sequence whereby leaders manipulate different aspects of followers' personal motivations (desires and fears) and social values (convention and innovation), social identity, during separate and temporally distinct stages.

Phase I: Frame Breaking: In the first phase, charismatic leaders employ frame-breaking strategies by attempting to reduce the value people place on the current social convention.

Specifically, these leaders derogate social convention by either: negating people's desire to maintain the status quo; or, negating their fear of change or innovation. During frame-breaking, leaders break ties to the current group identity by: increasing leader identification with followers and stressing group identity by emphasizing their similarity to followers, employing self-references, and inclusive language; and creating a sense of dissatisfaction with the current status quo by reinterpreting the group's past and present, expressing and arousing emotional dissatisfaction, and relaying a sense of urgency or crisis.

Phase II: Frame Moving: In the second phase, charismatic leaders engage in frame-moving strategies by attempting to move people's neutral state of either non-support for convention or non-fear of change to support for change. They accomplish this by either: encouraging people's desire for non-convention; or, encouraging people to fear not changing the old convention. During frame-moving, leaders alter the group's identity by: negating components of group identity and values that supported the convention with high levels of negation; and relaying a new hierarchy of values and defining an alternate identity that is in line with the leader's vision of change.

Phase III: Frame Realignment: In the final phase, charismatic leaders use frame-realigning to convince followers to support their new vision by either: substituting a desire for non-convention to a desire for change or innovation; or, substituting the fear of not changing the old convention to a desire for innovation. It is during this final phase that charismatic leaders mobilize their support from followers and encourage them towards action. During Frame-realigning leaders solidify the group's altered identity and channeling motivations set up in frame-moving into follower commitment and action. To achieve this end, charismatic leaders may: positively affirm the group's altered identity; and use language to foster commitment and encourage followers towards action.

The study suggests that charismatic leaders employ a predictable, consistent set of linguistic techniques to break down, move, and re-align certain beliefs of their followers. To explain why these techniques are effective and how they operate, it is necessary to discuss them within the larger context of social interaction. It is not possible to separate the role of language from its social context. The power of language resides in its potential to both reflect and shape social norms and attitudes. We must locate them within the broader context of leaders' strategic communications and follower responses to such communications.

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