

Reviving meta-personal charisma in Max Weber

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Abstract

More than a century after Max Weber's *Vocation Lectures*, the idea of charisma is still commonly associated with a leader's personal qualities. This personalistic and – as I argue – simplistic understanding of the Weberian theory of charisma was perpetuated, especially in leadership studies, during the 20th century by political scientists, social psychologists and sociologists. Generally overlooked is the fact that the Weberian notion of charisma comprises diverse and fundamental meta-personal meanings which transcend individual qualities and revolve, among other things, around a specific combination of public positions, temporal contexts, and collective expectations. After framing the ambivalence of the concept of charisma within more fundamental and fertile ambivalences of Max Weber's epistemological approach, this article demonstrates that meta-personal understandings of charisma actually prevailed in Weber's writings prior to his late – and pedagogical – *Vocation Lectures* and series of newspaper articles. In the final part, I deduce from Weber's writings a repertoire of meta-personal forms of charisma in politics, and I conclude that, when contemporary political leaders seek to activate such charismatic processes in order to pursue essentially charismatic forms of legitimation, important implications can arise regarding the unstable balance among liberal democracies, populisms and authoritarianisms.

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Introduction

More than a century after it was analyzed by Weber (1919, 1922), and despite the numerous authoritative comments and passionate discussions that followed, charisma continues to be both a stimulating concept and an intricate enigma for modern social sciences in general and, more in particular, for political theory.

While Max Weber saw the social world of modernity as dominated by processes of rationalization, bureaucratization, intellectualization, and disenchantment, he offered a secularized account of charisma as a residual element of irrationality and 'enchantment' that had characterized premodern societies. However, problems arise when the notion

of charisma, given its original religious meaning of ‘gift of grace’¹, is applied to an individual such as a prophet or a warlord, and – more blatantly – to a political leader. This both introduces the ‘sacred’ into the scientific explanation – as in the case of mysticism, which loses sense when it is transposed from “myth and fiction to [...] fact and reason” (Kantorowicz 1957, 3) and assumes some form of ‘innatism’, that is, the idea that extraordinary qualities are inborn in gifted individuals who are called upon to ‘make history’. More generally, such a conceptualization of charisma propounds a philosophy of history which strongly emphasizes the personal dimension in the explanation of political and historical events, to the detriment of the more processual and context-oriented approaches prevalent in contemporary social sciences.

It is this largely personalized and – as this article argues – seriously flawed (because it is partial and one-sided) understanding of the Weberian theory of charisma that was perpetuated during the 20th century, especially by scholars of political leadership, whether they were political scientists, social psychologists, or sociologists (e.g. Barber 1972, Sennett 1978; Blondel 1987; Lindholm 1990; Cavalli 1995; Greenstein 2000). According to this reductionist perspective, a charismatic leader is essentially defined by those personality traits and leadership skills which pertain to, typically, a President as an individual. A conceptual drift of this approach has led charisma ‘in the vernacular’ to first become a synonym for *popular* (Derman 2012), then, in the era of televised political communication, for *telegenic* (Barisione 2009) and, in the more recent digital age, for the status of *influencer* (Hong 2020). On the contrary, a much more relevant idea has been totally removed from this field of studies – namely, that charisma may be not only a *relation* of trust and devotion between followers and leaders, as it is at times better understood on the basis of Max Weber’s writings,² but also a property which may

¹ Because ‘grace’ is the etymological meaning of the Greek word χάρις, charisma was first used within the early Christian Church, namely by St. Paul, in the sense of ‘a gift of grace’ (Falco 2010).

² However, in relational accounts of charisma, the followers’ devotion is seen as directed precisely towards the leader’s personality. See, for instance, the examples provided by Raymond Aron (1967, 557): Lenin, Hitler, and De Gaulle, who were defined as charismatic leaders also on the grounds of “the devotion that men dedicate to this heroic and exemplary personality”.

transcend the individual leader. In this sense, charisma is a process which regards – among other things – a distinctive match among a social position, a public expectation, and a historical context: once it was, for instance, the charisma of a magician *activated* in times of drought and other manifestations of the wrath of demons, or the charisma of a warlord *activated* in case of enemy attack – as Max Weber himself pointed out; today it is the charisma of a certain type of ‘salvific’ or messianic leader in the face of grave economic recessions or other crises that spread insecurity among a population.

To be sure, Max Weber himself advocated the originally personal nature of ‘pure’ charisma; and, in fact, in his late *Vocation Lectures* (1919) he provided exclusively a personalistic view of charismatic leadership. However, the overall idea of charisma that he developed throughout his writings is much more complex, as well as being extremely rich in insights for analyses of contemporary political leaderships. A specific feature of this article will be its juxtaposition of Weber’s text passages which presented a personal vs. a ‘meta-personal’ reading of charisma,³ the latter being quasi-monopolistic in various parts of *Economy and Society* (*ES*, 1922), and especially in the entire section on the “Genesis and transformation of charismatic authority”.⁴

In these Weberian texts, it can be shown that charisma is implicitly seen as meta-personal both in its genesis (it is ‘activated’ by certain kinds of ‘context’) and in its locus, which resides not only in individual leaders, but also in institutions, investiture rituals, and role-types. A thorough analysis of the dialectic of personal and meta-personal charisma possibly contributes to the broader debate on Max Weber’s legacy by showing how his fundamental ambivalence concerning the genesis and nature of charisma is but one of the numerous instances of a more profound ambivalence in his theory. Using the theory of charisma to shed light on the fruitfully hybrid and syncretic nature of Weberian political sociology entails investigating the latter from a particular,

³ The prefix ‘meta’ had several meanings in ancient Greek. Here, I use it in the sense of ‘beyond’ (i.e. charisma above and beyond the merely personal dimension of an individual’s qualities).

⁴ But in the 1922 German edition, this section was entitled “Reorganization (*Umbildung*) of Charisma”). In general, the analysis of Weber’s texts will be based on English translations (see references) supplemented by my verifications of the original German editions.

and therefore relatively original, perspective, albeit one that is partially in line with the works of Eisenstadt (1968), Freund (1976)⁵, Elias (1998)⁶ and Kalyvas (2002, 2008)⁷. This investigation will thereby contribute to the enduring debate about the “changing picture” of Max Weber's theory (Swedberg 2003).

Without discarding the possible role played by the personal dimension even in more ‘macro’ political processes, and acknowledging that the personal and meta-personal dimensions can be profoundly intertwined in real social and political worlds, this article aims to highlight and develop the main meta-personal components of charisma that can be deduced from the original Weberian texts. For analytical purposes, it will then outline a sort of repertoire of the possible sources and manifestations of charisma, in the process of formation of a political charismatic leadership, that transcend the personal dimension. This entails identifying and underlining a number of possible meta-personal elements of charisma that extend beyond the ‘extraordinary personal qualities’ of the leader.

The resulting framework for a meta-personal analysis of charismatic political leadership may easily be applied, for example, by future studies attempting to grasp the emergence and success of contemporary populist leadership. Whilst populist leaders do not have a monopoly on charisma in current politics, the specific blend of historical conditions, popular expectations, and political messages that makes the fortune of populist forces has considerable common ground with those that characterize charismatic politics. I will return to this point in the conclusions.

⁵ In his article “*Le charisme selon Max Weber*” [Charisma according to Max Weber] (1976), Julien Freund started by acknowledging the notable semantic expansion of the concept of charisma in Weber's various writings.

⁶ In “*Group charisma and group disgrace*” (1998) Norbert Elias made a clear attempt to emancipate the concept of charisma from the personal dimension, in particular by extending it to relations among social groups (see also footnote 23).

⁷ In line with Eisenstadt's (1968, 20) observations on the importance of the “charismatic group” rather than that of a leader in Weber, Andreas Kalyvas develops a “collective model of charismatic politics” based on an analysis of Weber's sociology of religion founded on the role of social movements and “communities of solidarity” (2002, 75).

1. *The theory of charisma and its dialectic elements in Weberian thought*

Throughout the past century, several observers have noted numerous manifestations of a certain attitudinal ambivalence and conceptual tension that inhabited Max Weber's thought, and what could be termed his 'syncretist' theory. In this section, I will first try to provide some examples of this fundamental ambivalence, via both primary and secondary sources. Then I will suggest that the Weberian dialectic between personal and meta-personal understandings in his theory of charisma should be understood as a typical manifestation of this intellectual syncretism.

It can even be argued that part of Max Weber's greatness has its origins in the remarkable diversity – and even contradictoriness – of the cultural influences he incorporated from the intellectual field of his time, with Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche objectively playing an important role (Lowith 1932; Massimilla 2008; Bormuth 2018)⁸. While Weber's Nietzschean side is essentially manifest in the personalistic component of his theory of charisma (but also, for instance, in the famous image of the *daemon* that holds the threads of each person's life at the end of *Science as a Vocation*), reminiscences of the Marxian 'materialist' element⁹ are especially apparent in his sociology of religion.¹⁰

⁸ Matthias Bormuth (2018, 7) even reports a sentence that Max Weber allegedly said after a discussion with Spengler: "The world in which we ourselves exist spiritually is largely a world shaped by Marx and Nietzsche". Bormuth's own analysis of the affinities between Weber and Nietzsche, however, focuses excessively – at least for our purposes here – on their allegedly common psychopathological traits.

⁹ For instance, Pierre Bourdieu (1992, 115) mentioned, as on other occasions, Weber's "sound materialist principle" whereby "social agents obey a rule only insofar as their interest in following it outweighs their interest in overlooking it". He also attributed to Weber the use of "an economic model to uncover the specific interests of the great protagonists of the religious game, priests, prophets, and sorcerers" (ibid.); it is from this Weberian approach to the study of the 'religious field' that Bourdieu claimed to have drawn inspiration for his field theory.

¹⁰ His *Sociology of Religion* (1922, 1956) abounds not only with references to the religious and intellectual dispositions of various social classes and strata over the course of history, but also

However, neither of these elements ever becomes monopolistic in Weber's mode of thought; not even as regards specific subject areas (such as his theory of charisma), where these influences coexist and seem to fuel a constant conceptual tension. On the one hand, his Marxian influence was counteracted by his deep roots, although critically reconsidered, in German idealistic and historicist culture.¹¹ This combination enabled him not only to turn to elements of historical materialism in his analysis of ideas without succumbing to forms of economic reductionism, but also to highlight the role of ideas (e.g. the Protestant ethic) as potential drivers of historical and economic development (capitalism) (Weber 1905). On the other hand, for Weber, the historicist objective of knowing and understanding the historical phenomenon with all its peculiarities was undoubtedly not disjoint from theoretical and methodological attention to typological generalizations, which, unlike historical and ideographic approaches, reflect the logic itself of the social sciences (Weber 1904).¹² Seeking to combine interpretive description and causal explanation, the idiographic and the nomothetic, generalism and specialization, Max Weber can be seen as occupying a middle-ground position – or offering a dialectical synthesis (Petzke 2022) – between the 'Mandarins' and the 'Modernists' in the German field of social and political sciences of his time (Steinmetz 2009; Ringer 1969, 2004).

with 'materialist' analyses such as that of the prophet, who is distinguished by "an economic factor, i.e., that his prophecy is unremunerated" (47), or "class conflicts", i.e., the "economic conflict of class interests", among the ancient Jews (50), or the general affirmation that "The attitude of a religion can often be explained on grounds of economic interest" (218). His class-based analysis of Jesus's anti-intellectualism is also exemplary in this regard.

¹¹ Eich and Tooze (2017, 209) discern in Weber a tension between "a sociology that was fatalistic and a politics that was voluntarist – what Troeltsch (1922) called 'heroic positivism'".

¹² In Max Weber's words, "in spite of vast differences, 'ideas' have essentially the same psychological roots whether they are religious, artistic, ethical, scientific or whatever else" (1978, 1117). Similarly, Aron (1967, 563) described Weber's method of analysis as aimed at "developing a flexible systematization which allows at the same time to integrate the various phenomena in a single conceptual framework and not to eliminate what constitutes the singularity of each regime or each society".

But many more are the antinomies that have been highlighted over time. Georg Lukács (1954), who had been cited in *Politik als Beruf*, dedicated the oxymoron of “religious atheist” to Weber, who combined disenchantment of the world, rationalization, and secularization with the religious (Christian) genealogy of several concepts, from intellectual honesty to, of course, charisma. But this is not the only contradiction that Lukács saw in Weber and his sociology, of which he criticized the irrationalist consequences deriving from its rationalist conceptual consistency.¹³ While both Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers noted the difficulty of clearly separating fact and value judgments,¹⁴ which actually resulted in a continuing tension between these two key Weberian concepts, the latter (Jaspers 2018, 64), who had known Weber well, considered him as a profound representative of “intellectually torn modernity”.¹⁵ This would explain Weber’s contrasting attitudes – his fundamental *ambivalence* – also toward the ideas of progress and pluralism (ibid., 13, 16). And while one could take less seriously Ernst Robert Curtius’s paradox about Max Weber – “such a great personality in defense of a depersonalized science” (ibid., 119) – or Henrich’s portrait of Weber in terms of “the passion of reason” (Henrich 2018, 91), it was certainly Helmuth Plessner who best described this ambivalent Weberian intellectual disposition when he wrote that “the irreconcilable contrast (*der unversöhnliche Gegensatz*) was the element of his life” (Plessner 2018, 54).

But a possible source of serious contradiction should also be recognized when we consider other implications of Weber’s theory of charisma, above and beyond the personal/meta-personal dialectic. There is, admittedly, an element of truth in the well-known accusation that Mommsen (1989) directed at Weber regarding the potential proximity between his concept of ‘charismatic leadership’ and the subsequent use of ‘plebiscitary leadership’ by fascists, as well as in the observation that the Weberian theory of ‘democracy with a leader’ lent itself to simple authoritarian reinterpretations,

¹³ “This apparently scientific character and strict ‘value-freedom’ of sociology marked indeed the highest level of irrationalism hitherto reached” (Lukács 1954, 615).

¹⁴ Regarding Weber’s difficulty in “keeping sociology *Wertfrei*”, see also Runciman (2013).

¹⁵ For Owen (1998, 124), a clear expression of the “ambivalence of modernity” in Max Weber’s thought lies in the tension between modern individual autonomy and the modern discipline of rationality.

such as those by Carl Schmitt and Roberto Michels (both of whom were former students of Weber who ended up supporting national socialism and Italian fascism respectively: *ibid.*, 191). However, Weber's partial fascination with the irrational cult of personality, and his almost romantic bewilderment in the face of individuals succumbing to the forces of modernity, are combined not only with an objective belonging to the liberal-national political culture of a certain German bourgeoisie of the time¹⁶ but also with his explicit epistemological adhesion, as already noted, to the principle of rationality. It is at least equally certain that Weber in no way anticipated, let alone hoped for, an authoritarian institutional outcome to his emphasis on personal leadership, his analysis of which was clearly framed, at least after World War I, within German parliamentarianism (not by chance, he advised the committee that drafted the Weimar Constitution of 1919) and the American democracy of mass parties.¹⁷ One sees, by looking as carefully as I shall try to do in this article, that his theoretical reading of the genesis and nature of charisma was not restricted to the providential, extraordinary leader; rather, it identified the historical conditions under which a certain type of leadership can emerge and, possibly, may be appropriate for it to emerge in the ways that we will examine.¹⁸

¹⁶ On Max Weber's supposed 'neo-Kantian liberalism', see also Warren 1988. However, socially halfway between the educated citizen and the wealthy bourgeois (*Bildungsbürger*) (Steinmetz 2009: 172), he was inclined to combine moderate classical liberalism with a more conservative attachment to the German nation. More broadly, he has been aptly called "a disillusioned idealist" (Bormuth 2018, 10) who stood between realism and idealism, while opposing both political realism as a philosophy of *Machtpolitik*, on the one hand, and moral absolutism on the other (Cherniss 2016, 706).

¹⁷ Karl Löwith, the only commentator on Max Weber's thought to have attended both of his *Vocation Lectures*, had no doubts about how he would have reacted to the advent of National Socialism, starting with the fact that he would never "have tolerated the defamation of his Jewish colleagues" (Löwith 1939, 18).

¹⁸ A further apparent contradiction in the Weberian treatment of charisma was pointed out by Bendix (1969, 377), who noted that Weber believed, on the one hand, that the routinisation of charisma was a peculiar tendency of modernity, and on the other, that charisma was an unvarying phenomenon that had been replicated in very different historical contexts. In this regard, Bendix embraced an empirical position whereby this dual mechanism – a charismatic

2. *Personal Beruf and charisma in the 'pure' state*

The concept of charisma is cited in only a few passages of *Politik als Beruf* (Politics as a Vocation, *PV*, 1919), and always in association with the personal qualities of political leadership. Weber reminds us, in fact, that there is a form of legitimization of power alongside the traditional and rational-legal forms: this third charismatic form is based “on the extraordinary and *personal* ‘gift of grace’, or charisma, the absolutely *personal* devotion and the *personal* confidence, in revelation, heroism or other qualities of *individual* leadership” (*PV*, 34, my italics).¹⁹ He then refers to the fact that charismatic power is “exercised by the prophet or – in the field of politics – by the elected warlord, the plebiscitarian ruler, the great demagogue, or the political party leader” (*ibid.*, 35). Even in our modern mass politics, Weber warns his audience, a charismatic type of party leadership, defined “by virtue of the devotion to the purely personal ‘charisma’ of the ‘leader’ on the part of those who obey him” (*ibid.*, 34) is possible. And it is precisely here, says Weber, that we see “the root of the idea of a calling (*Beruf*) in its highest expression” (*ibid.*, 35). Finally, he evokes the specter of “a leaderless democracy”, or “the rule of the professional politicians who have no vocation and who lack the inner charismatic qualities that turn a man into a leader” (*PV*, 75).

Well known is the context in which Weber gave his *Vocation Lectures* in Munich, on the invitation of the *Freie Studentenschaft* (Free Student Union), as part of a conference series in which he spoke in November 1917 (*Science as a Vocation*) and 1919 (*Politics as a Vocation*). It should be noted, incidentally, that the second conference neither achieved the same immediate success with the audience (as testified by Karl Löwith and

phenomenon can emerge in every historical situation, but then tends to become routinised – can serve as a guideline for historical research and case studies.

¹⁹ The three “Types of legitimate domination” are presented in more detail in *Economy and Society (ES)*, part I, chapter III. Also because of their placement in the posthumous volume, these pages, which present the pure and the routinised forms of charisma, are generally much better known than those about “Charisma and its transformations” (chapter 14, almost 1000 pages later).

by Weber himself) nor aroused the same debate in the following years – and decades – among the German intellectuals of the circle around Max Weber and his wife Marianne.²⁰ Also due to the sense of urgency imposed by the institutional and political transition in post-war Germany, in *Politik als Beruf* he adopted a tone which combined the postures of the ascetic professor, the pedagogue, and some features of the political tribune (Weber had participated in the election campaign for the Reichstag, which he led for the new German Democratic Party even after his candidacy had failed in circumstances that hurt him: Schluchter, 2004).

In this specific communicative situation, Weber renounced the complexity and ambivalence that characterize his treatment of charisma, and more generally his theoretical approach. As known, Weber pressed the students and colleagues in his audience to imagine a political function that was not distinguished by mediocrity, uniformity, and the mere specifics of professional party and parliamentary bureaucracies.²¹ On the contrary, political life should be undertaken by a person who is able to combine the ethics of conviction and of responsibility. In addition, space should be left open for the emergence of charismatic leaders who, just like religious prophets, hear the personal ‘call’, the innate vocation, and are able to win the recognition and devotion of masses of followers. In other words, the communicative ‘frame’ chosen by Weber for his lecture, the idea of *Beruf*, channels references to charisma towards a personalistic and innatist interpretation in an entirely selective manner: charisma is, first of all, a property of a person endowed with extraordinary qualities, presumably from birth. If Weber’s treatment of charisma had been limited to *Politics as a Vocation*, there would be no controversy about the meaning of this concept.

In reality, the importance, for Weber, of individual political leadership qualities, including charismatic qualifications, and the fact that these can be inborn emerges clearly from another political writing, namely *Parliament and government in Germany*

²⁰ The whole “German debate” reported by Bormuth, 2018 and Massimilla, 2008 revolves around *Science as a Vocation*.

²¹ The bureaucratic politician is – as acutely observed by Satkunanandan (2014) – one of the three exemplars of irresponsible political leadership, the other two being the morally absolutist politician and the power politician.

under a new political order (PA, 1918). This text was, however, conceived as a series of newspapers articles (published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* between April and June 1917) in which the social scientist, whose epistemology is hardly compatible with the journalistic logic, takes a step back in favor of the political columnist. In these articles personalistic references abound to “political temperaments and political talents”, as well as to politicians “with a strong instinct for political power” and “a personality endowed with leadership qualities” (PA, 168); to “natural leaders with political qualifications” (ibid., 171) and “talent for leadership” (172); and to the ideas that “born politicians do exist, but they are rare creatures”, and that “Caesarism [is] the governmental form of genius” (138), but “a political genius [...] can only be expected every few centuries” (162).

Finally, even in *Economy and Society* one can find a few but unequivocal personalistic passages about charisma being “as a rule, a highly individual quality (ES, 1113) and “a gift that inheres in an object or person simply by virtue of natural endowment”, while “charismatic powers can be developed only in people or objects in which the germ already existed” (ES, 400). As we shall see, however, these statements are absolutely marginal in the theoretically complex texts that make up this posthumous volume.

The fundamental point remains that this idea of charisma as an individual quality has virtually monopolized the reception of Max Weber’s theory for an entire century. With its one-sidedness, this interpretation has had strong implications in historical, political and sociological studies. For instance, by espousing such a partial view of the Weberian idea of charisma, the Weberian sociologist Luciano Cavalli (1981, 1995) placed the core of the socio-historical explanation in the role of great individuality, of leaders with personal charisma, an absolute belief in their historic mission and in their predestination, and an irresistible force of persuasion.

Further implications derive from understanding charisma as a personal property. Worth reporting in this regard are those addressed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who also relied on this common-sense narrative of the Weberian theory. Firstly, treating charisma as a personal gift may be seen as implicitly ‘ideological’. What Bourdieu (1984) termed the “ideology of charisma” consists in attributing the origin of a person’s merits, which are supposedly the fruit of a natural gift, to that same person. This stems

from the fact that charisma deceptively appears to be “a mysterious objective property of a person” (Bourdieu 1991, 205). Charisma thus becomes an instrument of the ‘sociodicy’ (or social theodicy) that gives social order a natural justification, with all its relationships of domination and its inequalities.

In reality, charisma, that *‘je ne sais quoi’* which seems to lie at its foundation – the gift, the state of grace, the ‘mana’ of Australian-Polynesian tribes – is for Bourdieu the result of a sort of collective ‘misrecognition’ or, as one could say in less Marxian and more Durkheimian language, a collective belief that has its origins in the relationship of identification of a group with a wizard, a prophet, or a politician. It is the group itself, however, that has authorized them to represent it, and to be the bearer of a non-ordinary discourse on its behalf, in the light of the extraordinary nature of the crisis situation that has given rise to charisma. The generative mechanism of charisma as a form of ‘symbolic capital’ (prestige, social recognition, credence) therefore consists in the encounter between a certain kind of discourse that a group is willing to receive and a ‘prophet’ that the group is predisposed to believe and obey in a certain kind of situation.

A first theoretical consequence of these criticisms is that charisma should not be understood as a specific form of legitimization of power, but rather as an intrinsic dimension of all types of power (Bourdieu 1990, 141). Secondly, charisma should also be treated at the same level as magic, which, as Marcel Mauss (1902) argued, cannot be understood without the ‘magic group’: that is, without taking into account the collective belief that lies at the heart of a magician’s power. Despite his insightful (and hitherto largely unnoticed) remarks on the theoretical implications of charisma, however, Bourdieu’s reduction of Weberian charisma to a natural personal gift seriously undermines a full understanding of the complexity and ambivalence of Weber’s concept of charisma.

3. Max Weber’s (overlooked) emphasis on the context and ‘activation’ of charisma

Weber's writings accounted for the enormous meta-personal potential of the concept of charisma in a remarkable number of passages. In the first place, Weber states that the sociological genesis of charisma is associated with satisfying needs that transcend

everyday economic routine, and that are typically generated by extraordinary events. He adds, in fact, that these events liberate “charismatic forces” and “charismatic beliefs” in society (*ES*, 1121). While village chiefs or magicians are seen as having limited powers and weak social influence in normal times, “the charisma of the hero or the magician is *activated*²² whenever an extraordinary event occurs: a major hunting expedition, a drought or some other danger precipitated by the wrath of the demons, and especially a military threat” (*ibid.*).

We infer from this principle that a charismatic leader is not someone who is successful in affirming his/her charismatic *supply*, but a person who occupies the position (a function, a status, a type of leadership, or a type of message) that best matches *demand* – or public expectations of some salvific mission – generated by the *context* of crisis. Here, in other words, the independent variable is provided by the context, which is mediated by demand and is able to predict the values of the ‘dependent variable’ – that is, the charismatic qualification of a given leader – with a reasonable degree of accuracy.

In some passages, it seems that Weber is endorsing the idea that a prophet, a warlord, a magician, a sorcerer, or a shaman is a person endowed with extraordinary innate qualities; in reality, however, his claims should be read in light of his entire theory of charisma. As he clarifies at other points, the first objection to innatism is that charisma is simply a ‘belief’, a conviction, a perception that is generated in both the bearers of charisma and those who acknowledge them. The significant point is therefore the encounter between the subjective conviction of the bearer of charisma and the inter-subjective support for this conviction among his/her followers. In this sense, charisma is inherently relational. Weber’s personalistic concession lies in the affirmation that, with regard to Jesus, for example, “the entire basis of [his] legitimation was the magical charisma he felt within himself” (*ES*, 440). The prophet’s subjective belief in his own extraordinary, and even supernatural, gifts – adjectives, however, that for Weber have the entirely mundane meaning of ‘not accessible to all’ – therefore reinforces his *chances* of affirming public belief in his charisma, and therefore in his legitimacy.

²² My italics.

Nonetheless, as we have seen, the decisive point seems to be the idea that charisma is ‘activated’ by a context. When circumstances change, certain public figures find themselves invested with an unexpected ‘charismatic capital’, as we might call it, that may even be independent of their actions and their will. As we shall see, this laid the foundations for Weber’s subsequent move in the direction of the depersonalization of charisma: that is, the definition of ‘charisma of function’ (or office charisma), where charisma is not associated with a person, but with the objective responsibility that he/she carries (a village chief or magician, a doctor or judge, or even a president or minister).

Finally, and above all, Weber’s reference to the ‘charismatic forces’ that are released by these extraordinary situations lays the basis for the attribution of charismatic properties (and the adjective ‘charismatic’) to a broader spectrum of phenomena and concepts that are meta-personal, or at least not closely related to the bearer of charisma.

4. *Forms and implications of depersonalized charisma*

The portions of Weber’s text in which he analyses the entire impersonal dimension of charisma more explicitly begin with the section in *Economy and Society* entitled “The Depersonalization of Charisma” (or, more faithfully to the original German text than to the influential English translation, “The Objectivization (*Versachlichung*) of Charisma”). Here he explains how “charisma can change into a quality that is either (a) transferable or (b) personally acquirable or (c) attached to the incumbent of an office or to an institutional structure regardless of the persons involved” (ES, 1135). If it is still possible to speak of charisma in this objective, impersonal sense, Weber explains, it is because its “extraordinary character, which is not accessible to all” (ibid.) continues to be preserved, which enables charisma to perform its social function.

Charisma can then be transferred, and perpetuated beyond the genetic phase, when it is associated with lineage or ancestry (‘lineage charisma’).²³ Although the transfer

²³ By extension, in addition to lineage, impersonal charisma may describe a social group such as a caste (as Weber, 1978, himself indicated: see pp. 250 and 253), a status group or ethnic

typically occurs through blood ties, this is not always sufficient for the designation of a successor. For this purpose, primogeniture has often been identified as a generative principle of charisma. One alternative for the transfer of charisma in the absence of blood ties has historically been adoption, as was the practice with certain Roman emperors, who adopted their future successors.

These methods for transferring charisma are a prelude to Weber's treatment of 'office charisma', the form of charisma that is associated with a position or function (*Amtscharisma*). This type of charisma is based on a "belief in the specific state of grace of a social institution as such" (ES, 1140) and, Weber adds, "under modern conditions, too, it finds politically relevant expression in the internal relations [translated in the English version as "attitudes"] of the subjects to the State" (ibid.). This is certainly not charisma in its pure form, which is only legitimized through "heroism and revelation" (ibid., 1146). It is instead a routinised charisma that "remains a very important element of the social structure", especially because it accounts for "interests" and "the needs of privileged strata to legitimize their social and economic conditions" (ibid.). This legitimization of the social order requires the transformation of a stock of real power relations into "a cosmos of acquired rights", and it can be effectively *consecrated* by the charismatic power of individuals who symbolically represent the State, even though they do not exercise governing power. Just as a caliph, a sultan or a shah performed a charismatic role in the Orient despite the fact that governmental decisions were delegated to the Grand Vizier, so a parliamentary monarch, notwithstanding the fact that he fundamentally lacks actual power, "is retained above all because he guarantees the legitimacy of the existing social and property order", which he does "through his charisma", "in his name", and "by his mere existence" (ES, 1148, 649). An elected president, Weber notes *en passant*, can perform similar functions. And this – I would add – concerns not only presidential systems, where charisma is conferred by direct popular suffrage, but also parliamentary republics, where the president's power is less

group. This is Norbert Elias's (1998) idea of 'group charisma': members of groups with superior power (aristocrats, Brahmins, whites, and the more powerful states) consider themselves to be "endowed with a specific virtue shared by all the members of the group and lacked by others".

substantial and more symbolic, and the incumbent of the presidential office is therefore more inclined to fulfil functions of charismatic legitimization.

Charisma can therefore be transformed into an impersonal quality; it is, however, one that can be transmitted by charismatic means, which implies the retention of belief in some ‘magical’ element implicit in how it is transmitted (from blood ties to investiture rituals). As soon as charisma ceases to be a purely personal gift that can only be tested, but instead becomes a transmittable quality, it is a capacity that “in principle can be taught and learned” (*ES*, 1143) at its subsequent stage of generalization.

Once again, the pure form of charismatic education consists in the simple activation of innate but latent charismatic abilities, such as those attributed in antiquity to healers, exorcists and witches through social isolation, exclusive immersion within a charismatic community, personal transformation, spiritual retreats, extreme physical tests, or a final ceremony of consecration. While the bureaucratic education that is typical of professional training is an example of the opposite of this charismatic education, an intermediate route consists in a more generalized form of charismatic education that Weber terms ‘cultivation’ (*Kultivierung*). Although it only retains “remnants of the original irrational means of charismatic education”, this, too, comes to reshape the attitudes and conduct of those who are subjected to it; but its area of application is undoubtedly far broader and ranges from the training of warriors to that of priests.

In the age of mass politics and mass political communication, one might posit that political leaders may undergo a process of acquisition – or “activation”, if one wishes to retain the a-sociological assumption of the need for a certain natural gift – of the specific means of charismatic communication, that capacity which enables them to effectively manage and respond to the emotions of public opinion.

5. And more: the charisma of investiture and the charisma of rhetoric

Also ‘charismatic’ can be the method, or principle, by which a successor in an originally charismatic organization is designated (*ES*, 1124): the acclamation – by the assembled army – of a successor designated by a Roman magistrate was a ceremony that itself had

charismatic properties. In these cases, charismatic acclamation is a typical solution to the problem of designating a successor because it enables the charismatic community to ensure its continuity. A solution of this kind, which leads directly to the routinization of charisma, implies that the emphasis on an individual's charismatic properties is shifted to the investiture ceremony.²⁴ The 'election' – the inverted commas are essential here – of a bishop, which historically served as the model for the election of German kings, called for designation by 'grand electors' who were part of the community's elite, and subsequent popular acclamation. As was the case with the Napoleonic plebiscites of 1805²⁵ and 1870²⁶, this is not really an election, because it does not offer a real choice of candidates, but just a simple recognition, through charismatic means, of the charismatic qualification of a pretender to a position that in turn is invested with charisma. Plebiscitary acclamation is therefore a typically charismatic method of designation in the form of the recognition and confirmation of a single candidate.

In the emerging context of mass democracies, Weber also attributed charismatic properties to 'rhetoric', which we would call *political communication* today. The "charisma of rhetoric" (*ES*, 1129) manifests itself most evidently during election periods, when the (rationally controllable) content of political rhetoric gives way to purely emotional effects. On the one hand, "all emotional mass appeals have certain charismatic features", while on the other, their meaning is entirely symbolic, as in the case of "street parades and festivals", and consists in convincing "the masses [...] of the leader's charismatic qualification" (*ibid.*). A classical precedent is provided by Pericles'

²⁴ Eisenstadt (1968, 27) noted that the ritual occasions associated with individual or collective rites of passage – birth, initiation, marriage, death, and various collective ceremonies – are those that have the highest concentration of 'charismatic symbols', as the anthropological literature also highlights.

²⁵ The referendum that created the French Empire, with Napoleon Bonaparte as its Emperor, was approved by three and a half million voters, with only two thousand five hundred votes against.

²⁶ This was the plebiscite by which Napoleon III, who instituted the Second French Empire in 1852, obtained the support of seven and a half million voters (with one and a half million voting against).

Athens, where the *demagogue* imposed his domination through “the charisma of the spirit and the tongue” (ES, 1126).

Here, too, different forms of ambivalence clearly emerge in Weber’s theory of charisma. Charisma is an individual property, but – as argued here – it is not simply such: it can also be a designation method whose charismatic nature is based on an appeal to the collective, emotional, and almost religious force of acclamation ceremonies. It can also apply to a form of communication, or rhetoric, centered around collective symbols (a clearly Durkheimian feature not explicitly acknowledged by Weber) that are once again profoundly charged with emotions for the mass electorate.

The possibility that the emotional element (and therefore a *modus operandi* that by definition is ‘short-term’ and ‘disorganized’) may predominate is considered by Weber to be the first “political danger of mass democracy” (ES, 1559). However, in this case, too, he comes to terms with the “Caesarist tendency of mass democracy” that induces parties to submit themselves to individuals who know how to win the loyalty of the masses. Here, Weber expressly claims that well-organized parties that aspire to the exercise of state power “must” submit themselves to these “Caesarist trustees of the masses”, provided that they have effective leadership qualities (which here are not defined as either ‘extraordinary’ or ‘charismatic’), and have not been selected “purely emotionally, that is, merely based on ‘demagogic’ qualities in the negative sense of the word”. Besides having been socialized by a solid party organization, these political leaders must also have been trained through participation in the work of parliamentary committees, so that their inclination to respect procedures and institutional conventions is ensured.

Emotions in politics are seen as potentially dangerous by Weber, therefore, but it is because of them that leaders manage to win the loyalty of the masses. At the same time, parliament itself, which Weber just previously identified as a place of “pure intrigue” (with particular reference to the French case), is seen as the principal guarantor of the institutional loyalty of political leaders. In these cases, too, there seems to be no trace of either an epistemologically simplistic or normatively Manichean inclination in Weber’s political sociological thought. Rather, other instances of ambivalence clearly emerge from these cases.

6. *A repertoire of the meta-personal sources and manifestations of charisma*

Besides acknowledgment of the complexity of Weber's thought on charisma, there is a significant practical implication relating to the matter, which now reveals all its theoretical innocence. It concerns which twentieth-century or contemporary leaders should be classified as 'charismatic', and which ones should not. This question assumes that charismatic leadership must essentially, if not exclusively, be ascribed to leaders' personal qualities (which are extraordinary, and are acknowledged as such): this is the position taken by the more psychological/political science movement in the classic literature on political leadership (Barber 1972; Kavanagh 1974; Willner 1984; Blondel 1987; Greenstein 2000). While certain of these authors have acknowledged the importance of facilitating contexts and the relational dimension of charismatic leadership, they are united by their emphasis on the leadership attributes, styles, or skills that are traits of an individual President or, in parliamentary systems, a Prime Minister.

On the contrary, the key question is not – in the light of the theory propounded in this article – what political leaders throughout the last century were charismatic, but what charismatic processes involving political leaders were activated. Seen through this lens, only a limited number of cases possibly exhibit the properties of charismatic politics. Among the most famous, one could probably suggest the cases of Mussolini, Hitler, Roosevelt, Stalin, De Gaulle, Fidel Castro, Perón, Mao Tse Tung, Berlusconi, Chavez, Trump. Contrary to conventional wisdom, however, these leaders have been charismatic not so much because of their personalities as because of the (meta-personal) properties of the process in which they have been involved, and which they actively contributed to triggering.²⁷ In fact, from a more complete reading of Weber's treatment of leadership and charisma, one may outline a repertoire of *meta-personal* forms of charisma that draws on all the theoretical implications. However, a prime condition is that the

²⁷ Even in relation to these cases there is no lack of strongly, and sometimes even excessively, depersonalizing readings, such as that by Traverso (2002, 21), according to whom Hitler was, per se, "a sinister character whose popularity, outside of such a context, would never have gone beyond some Munich beer hall".

presumed quality of an ‘innate’ gift of personal charisma be removed. This strategy for identifying charismatic legitimacy should consider several, if not all, of the elements in the following repertoire:

(a) the typical *contexts* and crisis situations (or ‘*charismatic situations*’) that in modern mass democracies, (b) because of a state of collective insecurity, disorder or effervescence, generate a widespread expectation or *demand* for (c) a certain type of political and charismatic-salvific *discourse* or message (d) matching a certain type of public representation or *image* of political leadership (e) which the leader has defined as the result of a process of “charismatic *education*” (f) that includes the acquisition of the capacity to manage *political communication* techniques (g) and the emergence of the leader within ‘charismatic’ *communities* or pre-existing groups (h) up to the point where the leader becomes an active driver of mass charismatic *mobilization* (i) and receives charismatic *investiture* through some institutionalized or symbolic form of popular acclamation (l) during a phase that coincides with the apex of the *statu nascendi* of the charismatic *movement*, and (m) with the process of formation of a new collective identity (a charismatic “*us*”) ²⁸ (n) in accordance with a *relationship* based on the recognition of the mass of followers in the leader’s protective authority and salvific mission.

This list of suggestions on how to interpret charisma as meta-personal (over and above the “extraordinary qualities of a leader”) can be selectively applied to cases on different scales, both national and local, in past or recent history. Exploratory applications may focus on the rise (and fall) of recent populist charismatic leaderships – from Donald Trump in the United States to Matteo Salvini in Italy since the 2010s – and hypothesize that there is nothing specifically charismatic in these leaders as individuals; instead, ‘charismatic’ have been the overall processes leading to the establishment of their political leaderships.

²⁸ In a charismatic process, a shared ‘sense of us’ can be defined *ex novo*, and therefore as a new collective identity based on some sense of solidarity and belonging. This is precisely the ultimate goal of some social movements, including charismatic ones, according to Alessandro Pizzorno (1978) and Alberto Melucci (1996) – who gave rise to a sort of ‘University of Milan school of collective identities’ – as well as to Sidney Tarrow (2011).

For instance, one might posit that Matteo Salvini's charismatic leadership²⁹ has not resided in the – absolutely ordinary – qualities of the person. Rather, it has done so in the intentional political mobilization (h) that he has been able to achieve by providing an image-type of a 'strong leader' (d) and a political discourse centered on national and societal security (c), which has best matched the popular expectations (b) raised by the context of crisis of Italy in the aftermath of the economic recession and of the European 'migrant crisis' (a). Salvini's charismatic movement (l) was initiated through symbolic investitures (such as the ritual ceremonies at *Pontida*)³⁰ (i) where he was acclaimed by the pre-existing community of the Northern League's members (g). This movement was also enabled by the mastery of communication techniques that he could deploy in public meetings (whether in city squares or on social media platforms) (f) resulting from a specific training (and including the support of a personally chosen social media 'war room') (e). This led both to the establishment of a profoundly fideistic attitude among his followers (n) and the definition of a new collective identity for the Italian right (m).

While this example is not the result of an empirical case study, it may suffice to suggest the possible heuristic usefulness of such a framework for the analysis of charismatic leaderships and movements. Even if applied only in part, or in a few of its constituent elements, this repertoire may perhaps help shift intellectual attention from a purely personal to a broader meta-personal understanding of charisma.

Conclusions

²⁹ An empirical indicator of the impact that Matteo Salvini's leadership has had on his party, the former Northern League, is the growth of votes from 4% in the 2013 general elections (before his appointment) to 17% in 2018, up to 34% in the 2019 European Parliament elections, at the height of the charismatic process favored by his position as interior minister, which he deftly exploited to generate 'symbolic capital' and convert it into national mass followership.

³⁰ Where the annual political gathering of the militants of the Northern League takes place, to celebrate the medieval Pontida Oath which, according to tradition, led to the birth of the Lombard League against Frederick I Barbarossa.

As this article has perhaps demonstrated, a study of charismatic politics founded upon Max Weber's insights is entirely possible without, however, affirming as an independent variable the presumed role of the great figures who are 'predestined' to carry out their historic mission. In a theoretically more satisfactory approach, charisma should primarily be appraised as a process in which agency is enacted by a political entrepreneur able to activate an issue politically – in particular, an issue made *salient* by a crisis situation – and therefore to mobilize masses of followers by using a certain kind of discourse and, perhaps, a certain 'leader image' (or type of charisma) that matches the public expectations generated by the context. This point – the best correspondence, the *matching*, of charismatic *supply* and political *demand* in a given *context* – captures three fundamental components of the overall process, with their close interdependence and causal recursiveness. As a form of 'symbolic capital', charisma owes its fortunes to a major collective expectation generated by the context, and to the ensuing collective recognition of a political discourse and type of leadership that are particularly congruent with it. Max Weber's theory of charisma clearly encompasses these points.

The interpretation proposed here certainly highlights the strategic advantage of those who hold positions in the public space that can be invested with charisma in a given context (for example, the leaders of some specific parties). It also emphasizes the importance of the 'objective' conditions of possibility – again dictated by the specific properties of the context – whereby a charismatic process can be activated. In this, the idea of 'charismatic situation' is conceptually homologous to what Karl Polanyi (1944) meant by a 'fascist situation': that specific combination of social, economic, political and ideological factors that constituted "the typical opportunity for easy and complete fascist victories" (*ibid.*, 239). However, these elements of a 'structural' nature are combined, in the meta-personal interpretation of charisma that I proposed in the previous section, with full recognition of elements that are more 'relational' (the communicative and symbolic nature of the charismatic relationship between leaders and followers); or that pertain to individual agency (the importance of the work of activation, politicization, mobilization played by the political entrepreneur).

Conversely, interpreting historical processes and political events – such as the emergence and affirmation of contemporary populist forces – essentially in light of the personal actions of 'pure' charismatic leaders reflects an over-simplistic approach to

the study of these phenomena. Contemporary populism, in particular, has often been associated with charismatic leadership.³¹ The most typical question in this regard is whether “all populist leaders are at the same time charismatic” (Pappas 2012, 382). For Mudde and Kaltwasser (2014, 382), “an elective affinity between populism and a strong leader seems to exist. However, the former can exist without the latter”. But a more precise question would probably ask whether a *charismatic bond* between leader and follower is, indeed, “absolutely central to populist parties”, as Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008, 7) argued. Because charisma is more a social process than a psychological trait, the Weberian idea of *recognition* by the community of believers certainly remains of paramount importance.

However, a more general approach should probably investigate the type of legitimacy that populist leaders are fundamentally pursuing, and it could do so on the basis of the repertoire outlined at the end of the previous section. In fact, once again, the crucial point is not that populist leaders are *personally* charismatic. Rather, it is that they seek to activate a charismatic process of legitimation especially through communication means and the construction of a public image evoking, for instance, the ‘hero’ or the savior who, as Max Weber argued, emerges and rules at times of deep crisis.

Indeed, a purely legal-rational legitimacy is seen by populist *ideologues* as a typical property of those liberal democracies founded on the principle of representative government against which all populisms tend to define themselves and fight, to some extent, or which they aim to transform (Manin 1997; Taggart 2002; Pappas 2019; Urbinati 2019).³² Therefore inherent in the populist logic of charismatic legitimation is

³¹ For instance, Canovan (1999, 5) argued that “a vision of ‘the people’ as a united body [...] can encourage support for strong leadership where a charismatic individual is available...”; Mény and Surel (2002, 17) pointed out that populism “relies on seduction by a charismatic leader”, while Weyland (2001) saw it essentially as a strategy implemented by “a personalistic leader” to exercise government power.

³² The aspiration to achieve a charismatic legitimacy through a self-representation as a strong leader with emphasized ‘masculine’ properties, as in the case of Vladimir Putin, has also been seen as a factor that makes a political leader more prone to engage in international armed conflicts (Devin 2018). In fact, the field of studies on international relations would benefit from

the tendency to denounce, to emphasize or, when in office, to sustain or even generate a state of permanent crisis or emergency, be it in relation to the malfunctioning of the political system or to the presence of domestic or external ‘enemies’ threatening the national community. But when, among populists in power, the balance between legal-rational and charismatic legitimacy shifts too much toward the latter, the path opens for a possible transition from constitutional democracy to authoritarianism. Accordingly, the theoretical link between populism and charisma, when the latter is emancipated from the mere personal dimension, can illuminate future studies on the unstable relationships between contemporary democracies and authoritarianisms.

introducing the type of legitimacy pursued by national leaders among the domestic factors potentially more influential on the dynamics of the international system.

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