

Editorial
Charisma after Weber

Sam Whimster

Thomas Gottschalk, recalling a reception at the White House, described in glowing terms his meeting with President Barack Obama. Gottschalk's son had worked on the Obama election team and Obama sent his best regards 'and thereby gave the impression that at this moment he was only interested in you alone. The man has real charisma' (*Bild* 9 June 2011). Gisela Stuart, a Labour MP in the UK Parliament, in an opening address to the 'Charisma – After Weber' conference at the University of Birmingham in June 2011 (and organized by Dr. Gözim Alpion) noted that the successful modern politician had to be photogenic, have a likeable personality. This worked against Gordon Brown (the last Labour Prime Minister) since he was grumpy, did not smile and was tribal, but it did work for his predecessor Tony Blair who defined the relationship with his audience at each encounter. Blair had charisma, Brown did not and that disadvantaged Brown with the electorate. Stuart went on to point out that political ground rules still applied. The electorate could not be patronized or lied to.

A close reading of Weber's writings on charisma shows that he rarely applied the concept to modern political personalities. Charisma belonged to pre-modern, less rationalized societies, and it could apply to both religious and political personalities. The scope for irrational abandonment of a following to a charismatic leader is circumscribed in the modern world by rational based legitimacy (law, democracy, constitutionalism) and the deadening affects of routinization of all aspects of life.

Clearly, after Weber, there has been a decisive and irreversible semantic shift in the sense of the term. From the viewpoint of politics this has restricted our vocabulary, for where do we place the effective leader, the great leader or the demagogic leader? Weber used all these expressions and also the plebiscitary leader or 'caesarist'

leader without resorting to the charisma label, though as J.G. Green has pointed out plebiscitary leadership democracy (*Führerdemokratie*) does provide a training ground for the acquisition of charismatic qualities by politicians seeking popular support (*Max Weber Studies* 8.1: 190). But today any leader is liable to be portrayed 'charismatic'. Celebrity culture and its supporting media of Facebook, Twitter, tabloids, 'celeb' magazines, rolling news programmes and talk radio have transformed the field in which personalities are represented. Or perhaps we should say that these media have flattened the field, allowing minor celebrities and barely adequate political leaders to be served up as radiating 'charisma'.

There is a Weberian analysis of this flattening of the field. Modern civilization has created saturation levels of material and ideal 'goods' (*Heilsgüter*). There is a market place not only of material goods but also of ideal goods—religions, political parties, social movements. Weber only half glimpsed this re-enchantment of the world, seeing the industrialized and routinized world contemporary to him as disenchanted—no need for religious salvation in a materially secure existence and no unknown depths to be overcome by magical powers. There is no longer any profound psychic depth that binds charismatic leader and following together, and heroes become dangerous eccentricities in the modern world.

Hence, applying charisma to politicians under conditions of modernity is somewhat contrary to Weber's ideal type. Politics is meant to be normalized and as Karl Mannheim argued in *Ideology and Utopia* (1929) politics had become pragmatic, and utopias and world-views had been superseded. Mannheim's timing might have been better if he had published in 1959 (though his book did acquire a post-war relevance) for 1929 was the year of the international crisis of capitalism, the Great Crash, and the rise of fascism. The analysis of fascism by political scientists and sociologists has given rise to a serious engagement with charisma as a valid modern political concept. In the hands of Stefan Breuer and Ronald Glassman and others, major amendments have been introduced so that some features of charisma in part describe the rise of fascist movements. One is the introduction of violence in political clashes leading to an emotional bonding, a pathological form of the personalization of politics.

In addition, modern charisma is artificially produced through the mass media. To quote Stefan Breuer: 'This explains the rise of such figures as Mussolini or Hitler, whose biography prior to their entry into politics is rather pale and below average; it explains the narrow caliber

of their capabilities (profile), which allows one to recognize something extraordinary only in dimensions such as manic loquaciousness, the art of dissimulation, a tactical cunning, but hardly demonstrates genuine leadership qualities' (*Max Weber Studies* 8.1: 23). A community of experience is evoked through the mass media and the staging of rallies, and the charismatic leader, says Breuer, is able to dispense his grace but only within this constructed framework.

Charisma after Weber requires a reworking of the typology. One option is to distinguish between 'hard' charisma and 'soft' charisma. Hard charisma belongs to the totalitarian society where the place of affect has been seriously degraded through the suppression of civil society, and this then allows emotional outpourings to be stage-managed in political rallies and the omnipresent 'great leader'. Soft charisma comes out of an affect-saturated society, where low-level emotionalism, momentary aestheticism and narcissism provide the materials for the soft charismatic leader. Soft charisma does not belong to the classic Weber formulation. These leaders do not have a godly grace bestowed upon them, and their following is shifting and certainly would throw over a leader who asked for any real sacrifice. Hard charismatic leaders can, as we know, demand even the sacrifice of the nation. But in both cases the charisma is artificial and its effectiveness is dependent on the mass media and the arts of projection and presentation.

In this issue John Corso returns to Pierre Bourdieu's seminal essay on how interests and ideas are located within a field. This applies to charisma where the 'after Weber' examples each exist within a differently constituted field. The relationship between charismatic leader and follower is more than a transaction within a framework of social action but exists within negatively and positively advantaged groups and classes. Corso notes that this fails to explain the charismatic rupture with the traditional, and that the symbolic dimension has to be entered into. Benita Aleaz considers the legendary and long-serving Bengali Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu. This is a case of a strong and austere self-controlled leader evoking a nationwide and an above politics reverence in the electorate. Basu's charisma is compatible with the democracy of an emerging country since it conformed more to the charisma of reason and abstained from any personality cult.

Daniel Whisker addresses the current situation in American electoral politics where among Republicans the affect field is convulsed by millennial and apocalyptic hopes, as in the Tea Party. But also in the 'Birtherism' controversy President Obama is subject to 'anti-charisma'

and the suggestion that he is the 'anti-Christ'. This extreme political rhetoric is heavily mediatized. Are we then to conclude that the emotional dynamics of prophetic cults has leaked across into the political sphere? Whisker asserts that the ground-rules of politics hold good: the apocalypticism of the religious right will not disappear but it is unable to seize the machinery of power.

George Chryssides examines five founder-leaders of what Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch and Howard Becker would have termed 'cults'. The more value-free term for the Watch Tower organization, the Mormons and the Unification Church etc. is new religious movement. How these religions are established and the status of their 'charismatic' leaders is more open to study than the much more problematic issues of the historical Jesus or Buddha. Chryssides identifies the importance of group recognition of a leader by followers, so that the charismatic status of the leader is always mediated – here within the close community of the cult rather than the more extensive mediatized community of the political leader. This then gives rise how succession is managed, and this is dependent on leadership style – prophet, magus, guru, messiah and other forms.

Elsewhere in this issue Bärbel Meurer vigorously defends key theses of her Marianne Weber biography against her critics, Guenther Roth explores the phraseology of the *Knalljude*, and Hubert Treiber reviews the new translation by Hans Henrik Bruun of Weber's collected methodological writings. This has also been warmly welcomed by W.G. Runciman in the *Times Literary Supplement* (28 September 2012), where he notes that a complete translation could have been undertaken, in principle, at any point after 1922. A reasoned debate on Weber's methodology can now, at last, proceed on a reliable and open basis, and as Treiber shows, there are important issues to pursue.