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Charisma

Social scientists use the term *charisma* to describe a special form of authority based on the belief that a person possesses extraordinary and perhaps divinely ordained powers. The concept is useful for understanding the relatively small, extraordinarily cohesive inner circles of sectarian communities and social movements that develop around revolutionary religious prophets, extremist political zealots, rebellious vanguard artists, radically creative entrepreneurs, and other nonconformist leaders who attract devoted, sometimes fanatical followers and disciples. In their pure form, charismatic movements, based on intense, shared experiences of rapport and rapture, are necessarily short-lived. They yield to what the German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) called the **routinization** of charisma and become reintegrated into the social structure, or they eventually disappear with the group's disenchantment with the leader or with the leader's death.

THE CONCEPT AND ITS ORIGINS

The term *charisma* (from the Greek *charisma*, favor or gift) was widely used in early Christian thought, and early twentieth-century German theologians used the word when explaining that early Christianity was transformed from an ecstatic prophetic (charismatic) sect into an institutionalized church. The term's meaning in social science was established by Max Weber, who noted that the phenomenon characterized the rise and transformation of various groups that believed that they and their leaders were charismatic and above dealing with matters of everyday life. Remarkably, until about 1950 charisma was a little known and mostly unused concept in Englishlanguage publications, while today seemingly countless articles and books in sociology, anthropology, history, political science, psychology, psychoanalysis, and economics consider charisma a powerful force.

Although each of the social sciences has adapted its own interpretation of charisma, Weber's conception is still valid: "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 1946, p. 329).

THE NATURE OF CHARISMA: DISTRESS, ENTHUSIASM, AND ANTINOMIANISM

The relationship between charismatic leaders and their followers leads to the formation of charismatic communities, which in their pure forms have been called *bunds* (communities) or *fusions*. In these groups, charismatics and their followers are bound together by mutually shared inspirational feelings and experiences. Charismatic movements and communities tend to arise during times that call for revolutionary or at least extraordinary behavior. Such movements generally form around "natural leaders in moments of distress— whether psychic, physical, economic, ethical, religious, or political" (Weber 1968a, p. 1112). Charismatic movements such as radical political parties, nonconforming religious sects, avant-garde artistic salons, or utopian communes always stand in opposition to the status quo. This inherently oppositional quality led Weber to see charisma, in its pure forms, as the most primal revolutionary force in social life.

Because of the revolutionary attitude associated with charismatic movements, outsiders often regard them with hostility, especially in the formative stages, when charismatic authority is purest. At these times, charismatic movements are most intense and, undiminished by **routinization**, most threatening to established social values. "The mere fact of recognizing the personal mission of a charismatic master establishes his power ... this recognition derives from the surrender of the faithful to the extraordinary and unheard-of, to what is alien to all regulation and tradition and therefore is viewed as divine—surrender which arises from distress or enthusiasm" (Weber 1968, p. 1115).

That charismatic religious movements arise in distressing times has been noted in the sociological literature, but Weber's assertion that such movements are often enthusiastic in origin has largely been ignored. Enthusiasts believe that they are seized and guided in an extraordinary manner by immediate, direct, divine inspiration and revelation. In its most extreme manifestations, enthusiasm—the claim to immediate direct revelations—has often led to antinomianism (a disregard for all established social institutions) and to rebellion against both ecclesiastical and civil authorities. "The commands of the world do not hold for the man who is assured in his obsession with God" (Weber 1946a, p. 348). Following Weber, contemporary sociologists, such as Daniel Bell, Edward Shils, and S. N. Eisenstadt, have also noted the connection between charismatic movements and antinomianism.

Underscoring this enthusiastically antinomian component of charisma, Weber said that in their most extreme form, a charismatic movement overturns reason, tradition, and "all notions of sanctity. Instead of reverence for customs that are ... sacred, it enforces the inner subjection to the unprecedented and absolutely unique and therefore Divine." In this sense "charisma is indeed the specifically creative revolutionary force of history" (Weber 1968a, p. 1117).

Antinomianism is strongest during the formative phases of charismatic movements. These early phases have been referred to as liminal, representing transitions between old and new identities for both leaders and disciples. Victor Turner, the anthropologist who first introduced the idea of liminality into the language of social theory, recognized that charismatic religious movements often arise outside normal ritual structures, and that "their liminality is not institutionalized." Instead, Turner wrote, this charismatic liminality is "spontaneously generated in a situation of radical structural change.... It is in this limbo of structure that religious movements, led by charismatic prophets, powerfully reassert the values of *communitas*, often in extreme and antinomian forms" (Turner 1974, p. 248). On the other hand, almost from the beginning, the revolutionary tide that accompanies the birth of charismatic movements begins to ebb and is routinized, transformed into an institution, such as a church, political party, or profession, with permanent structures and traditions.

DIFFUSION AND USE IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Social scientists do not try to evaluate whether charismatics are actually endowed with supernatural, superhuman powers of divine origin, but only whether the followers subjecting themselves to the charismatic's authority on that basis believe in the leader's powers. The charismatic bond between leaders and followers "finds its limits at the edges of these groups" (Weber 1968a, p. 1113). Many casual observers have attributed charisma to leaders with mass appeal, such as Adolph Hitler. In fact, such leaders often do have charisma, but only in relation to those in their inner circles. When the parties or social movements headed by these leaders are successful, it is because they have been transformed into mainstream rational or traditional institutions. If pure charismatic movements do not yield to **routinization**, they eventually fail.

Challenges to the established ways of doing things in ongoing communities—from community units as small as families to units as large as nations—are usually first met by resistance. Charismatic movements, driven by passion and enthusiasm, can be likened to firestorms of change, sweeping across the normative social landscape. Often they burn out or are put out by the communities that they threaten to change. Sometimes, however, their challenges prevail and the communities change because of them. It is in this sense that Weber saw charisma as the most revolutionary agent in history.

—Howard G. Schneiderman

Further Readings

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