

Lecture 5

Max Weber: Charisma & Institution

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Introduction

- Charismatic authority, unlike traditional authority, is a revolutionary and unstable form of authority. Weber borrows the religious term of charisma and extends its use to a secular meaning.
- In our course we attempt to apply it to the study of religion.

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Weber: Definition of 'Charisma'

"a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as 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. . . . What alone is important is how the individual is actually regarded by those subject to charismatic authority by his followers or disciples." (Weber 1947, 358–359)

Weber, M. (1947). *The theory of social and economic organization*. New York: Free.
Weber, M. (1952). *On charisma and institution building*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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'Charisma' and Irrationality

- Charisma exhibits a strangeness (unusual) and irrationality.
- Status quo, institutional authority, bureaucratic authority seems very rational – usual and regular.
- Charisma seems irregular and unsystematic.

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Legitimation of Charismatic Authority

- Depending on the exceptional personal qualities or the demonstration of extraordinary insight the charismatic person gathers followers. Thus s/he gathers a charismatic authority.
- As the followers increase the charismatic authority gets legitimized.

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Charismatic Authority And Revolution

- Often charismatic authority threatens the existing institution. It challenges the status quo. Hence it is also seen to be subversive – revolutionary.
- Bureaucratic leadership also could bring about change and revolution, but it attempts to bring about change "from without" – up downward, whereas charismatic revolution is brought about "from within" – down upward.

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Routinisation of Charismatic Authority

- One way the society resists revolution is by routinisation of charisma – taming the charisma: by selectively accepting the charisma without recognising its implications in full.
- Other times, enthusiastic followers also tend to routinise the charisma by institutionising it.

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Charismatic Succession

Charisma is passed on one leader to another by one of various means:

- Search: eg. Dalai Lama
- Revelation: individuals claim receiving oracles in identifying their charisma!
- Designation by original leader: eg. Elija to Elisha
- Designated by qualified team
- Hereditary charisma
- Office charisma

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Prophecy & Charismatic Authority

- Individuals with charisma are also referred to as prophets.
- They challenge the status quo.
- But often they get into conflict with priests and kings.

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Prophet, Priest & Wonderworker

- The decisive feature in a prophet is the personal calling. His authority is claimed as a consequence of a personal revelation (Charisma)
- The priest, who serves a holy tradition is legitimised by office. Rarely do prophets come from among priests.
- Wonderworker works miracles. The prophet focuses on revelation with content.

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