Reimagining Charisma

Anne Taylor
Yale University

I titled this talk ‘Reimagining Charisma’ because for years now I have been wrestling with the reality that, in studies of charisma in society that rely on the work of Max Weber, there is a striking focus on leaders and their followers. I say “wrestle” because my experiential introduction to charisma is dissonant with prominent colloquial and Weberian understandings of the word as either an innately-born personal magnetism, like celebrity, or an affective form of authority based on claims to the divine or exceptional, respectively. In the Pentecostal Christian church that I was raised in, it was said that charisma – or a God-given gift of talent, healing, vocational purpose, etc. – was available to everyone who had opened themselves up to receive. In this way, the potential for charisma existed within everyone, waiting to be catalyzed out of dormancy. Charisma was not a personal quality, but rather a happening, a product of relationality with the spiritual world. Though I am no longer a member of this church, the egalitarian propensity in this understanding of charisma, which closely aligns with the original definition, persists in my thinking as my own positionality or bias. I thought it a fruitful exercise to make this familiar concept strange, and to leverage this felt dissonance to explore charisma’s conceptual possibilities beyond the discrete realms of theology or Weberian theory.

Today, I am going to narrow this discussion to two concerns I have with charisma theory, and I will sketch out a potential solution for the concept. Before I explain the thesis of my talk,

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1 I would like to thank the participants at the Center for Media, Religion and Culture at the University of Colorado Boulder, where I am currently at Visiting Fellow, for introducing me to the work of Edouard Glissant, Anibal Quijano, and Anna Tsing, and for their thoughtful feedback on a draft of this presentation. Also, many thanks to Jeffrey C. Alexander, Nabil Echchaibi, Philip Gorski, Willie James Jennings, Drew Newitt, and Tisa Wenger for helping me think through these ideas over the last several years.
let me say a bit about what this presentation is not. First, there is not enough time for a thorough genealogy of the concept; for that, I’d direct anyone interested to John Potts’ (2009) word history. Similarly, there are a multitude of bibliographies on charisma in various subfields like culture (Shils 1965; Smith 2000; Reed 2013), organizations and management (Conger and Kanugo 1987; Steyrer 1998; Antonakis et al. 2016), social movements (Andreas 2007; Bligh and Kohles 2009; Hyde 2018), and religion (Berger 1963; Barnes 1978; Neitz 1987; Lainer-Vos and Parigi 2014; Joosse 2006, 2012, 2014, 2017) that I won’t scratch the surface of. And though I challenge Max Weber’s conception of the term in order to chart a path for charisma that can go beyond the leader-follower framework, I do not engage this longstanding debate because I want to paint, with the broad strokes a conference presentation can often amount to, the entirety of this body of work as invalid. Leaders and followers exist, as does authority and hierarchy, of course.

What I will focus on is what unites all of these discussions: Weber’s definition. And in particular, there are two problems within Weberian charisma that I think need to be addressed: supersessionism and coloniality. I argue that the concept of charisma that is primarily used in scholarship today is an extension of Christian supersessionism (Rieff 2007:7; Jennings 2010; Legaspi 2019), and reflects what Aníbal Quijano (2007) calls the “European modernity/rationality,” a colonial/modern product which presented a “universal paradigm of knowledge of the relations between humanity and the rest of the world” (171-2). In appropriating charisma from Christianity into a secular academic world, Weber elevated the individual as a closed unit of analysis, and the rational over the spiritual, which Quijano labels the “evolutionist and dualist” qualities of Eurocentric, modern intellectualism (2000:551-2). With this in mind, I argue that the use of Weberian charisma alone risks reflecting supersessionist, colonial/modern thinking, and can lead to scholarship that not only misses or undervalues charisma in colonized
people and contexts, but also more generally overemphasizes individuals and marginalizes the effects of communities they are in relation with, including both human actors and non-human actors (like animals, land, objects, and aesthetics), as well as other so-called irrational ways of defining the extraordinary. If we widen our conceptual understanding of charisma to something more relational and expansive, I believe studies will be more attuned to its varying instantiations and the multiplicity of definitions of the extraordinary in society, including those that exist outside of a leader-follower binary structure.

I will begin today by reviewing charisma theory, and will analyze these two problems – supersessionism and colonialism – in Weber’s understanding of charisma. I will then sketch out my recommendation for a solution, a reimagined theory of charisma, using a decolonial lens.

WEBERIAN PITFALLS

First, a brief review of charisma theory. The word charisma was first used by the Apostle Paul around AD 50-62 to mean a God-given gift of grace, like miraculous healings or the ability to speak in foreign tongues (Potts 2009). It then appeared in social science when Max Weber incorporated German theologian Rudolph Sohm’s understanding of charisma into his study of historical authority structures. Sohm, however, was more committed to its Christian origins and Lutheran applications than Weber (Joosse 2014), who thought charisma served sociology best as a secular metaphor describing an attribution given to an individual deemed to be “endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities” (Weber [1922] 2013:241). These attributed qualities worthy of such a status are believed to be accessible only to a chosen few, and they cannot be taught or learned. Weber incorporated the term as “charismatic authority,” the third ideal type in his theory of legitimate domination.
Charisma studies since Weber have taken divergent paths, in large part shaped by an ongoing debate over whether or not he was too fixated on individual leaders. For instance, are leaders charismatic because of an actual innate quality, or do their followers endow them with a special authority? And if followers do attribute authority, why do they do so? Is it because the leader has an alluring magnetism that draws people into their vision for society? And round and round the debate goes. There are an abundant number of leader-centered studies (like Bendix 1960; Friedrich 1961; Tucker 1968; Greenfeld 1985; Conger and Kanunquo 1987; Smith 2000; Turner 2003; Reed 2013), as well as scholarship that is more sensitive to the work of followers (including Wallis 1982; Couch 1989; Finlay 2002; Bourdieu 1987; Joosse 2017, 2018). Follower studies, in particular, and the effort to include how they contribute to the construction and cultivation of charisma, are in my opinion truer to the original Weberian sense of charismatic attribution. Despite our fixation on celebrity or the psychology of leaders, Weber himself placed followers at the center of his theory: “it is recognition on the part of those subject to authority which is decisive for the validity of charisma,” he wrote (Weber [1922] 2013:242; Joosse 2018). Follower studies flesh out the meat of this recognition and how it validates leaders, and they comprise a promising path – which inspired this analysis – to push charisma studies to a more inclusive future (Reed 2013; Joosse and Willey 2020; Taylor 2021).

Why push beyond the limits of the leader-follower framework, then? Because it is possible that charisma can flow outside of the confines of power relations that Weber’s concept relies on. His ideal types assume that power is structured via the legitimation of either tradition, legal-rationalism, or charismatic attribution. But not all instantiations of charisma fit into this logic. Vincent W. Lloyd’s (2018) update to Weber’s understanding of charisma makes this clearly marked model murky; by separating charisma into authoritarian charisma, which
"confirms social hierarchies and reinforces the powers that be” and a democratic charisma that contagiously “challenges the powers that be” and calls audiences “to become charismatic themselves” (5-6), Lloyd shows that charisma can uphold authority that is traditional and rational just as much as it can transgress it. Lloyd insists that charisma only describes humans, with authoritarian charisma glossing over the inwardness of humanity into “an appealing shine” while democratic charisma reveals it to be a false image (7). However, I am not so convinced that charisma is limited to the human being alone; meditative, relational experiences of nature, the stars, music, and art also reveal the expansive, inward depths of humanity.

And to go further, following Quijano’s (2007) ideas of colonial/modernity, it is worth questioning if Weber’s theory is inflected with, and to this day props up, colonial logics. Quijano writes that colonial/modernity projects a total, closed, hierarchical vision of society as a system with varying orders and parts that rationally fit together. “Not surprisingly then,” he writes,

history was conceived as an evolutionary continuum from the primitive to the civilized; from the traditional to the modern; from the savage to the rational; from proto-capitalism to capitalism, etc. And Europe thought of itself as the mirror of the future of all the other societies and cultures… (176)

It is easy to see how the Protestant ethic developing into the spirit of capitalism, or the routinization of charismatic authority, are inflected with this evolutionary continuum. Making sense of history in a colonial/modern way is rooted in Christian supersessionism, a theological tradition that argues that Judaism precedes Christianity on a redemptive continuum, and that Christianity is God’s fully realized vision for the world. Theologian Willie James Jennings (2010) explains that European supersessionism “constituted an ecclesiastical logic applicable to the evaluation of all peoples” and that this evaluation eventually “reconfigured the body of the [white] European [as] the compass marking divine election” (32-33). Supersessionism complimented and powered European colonialism as it evaluated and subjugated people, and it
colors the Enlightenment intellectualism it preceded. As with the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, even when the impulse to deduce divine election was removed, evaluative concepts of “spatialized time” remained (Fabian 2002 [1983], as quoted in Jennings 2010:45).

Philip Rieff (2007) also calls out Weber’s supersessionist, “evolutionist bias” as the root of his misunderstanding of charisma (7, 8-9; Legaspi 2019). Rieff scholar Michael C. Legaspi (2019) explains that this bias led Weber to characterize Judaism as a religion that overcame so-called primitive belief to become an important early force in the development of western civilization, but that still required Christianity, and Protestantism in particular, to facilitate modern capitalism (Rieff 2007:7; Legaspi 2019:159-160, 162). To Weber, traditions were lesser-evolved “pattern[s] of automatic behavior,” and Jewish tradition had held on to laws and restrictions that Christian religion, and Enlightenment thought after it, had shed as it barreled down a linear path towards progress (Legaspi 2019:161). Rieff took the opposite view, and followed his teacher Edward Shils in thinking of tradition as the cultural center that orders life. Shils (1965) thought that there was “an attenuated, mediated, institutionalized charismatic propensity…present in the routine functioning of society” (200). Rieff envisioned tradition, or a sacred culture, to be such a charismatic ordering force. In this way, the constraints or prohibitions of a culture were actually the sacred boundaries that gave it meaning and energy, that gave it a charisma propensity. This is the basis for Weber’s misunderstanding of culture and charisma, Rieff says. Where Weber saw charisma as a transgressive break from a sacred order lead by a seemingly-extraordinary individual who resists tradition (and rational bureaucracy), and which dies when the leader dies, Rieff saw charisma like a covenant: as a faithful expression of the sacred (Rieff 220). In this way, charisma expresses the ordinary, the ordering, just as it expresses the extraordinary.
If Weber’s theory is based on colonial/modern, supersessionist thinking, and if he misses how charisma represents the ordinary and the extraordinary, my questions are: will we reproduce in our research the value commitments that go along with it? Will we mistakenly devalue logics of the ordinary as we construct charisma only as an extraordinary rupture to a linear cultural order? And what about charisma that is not embodied, but rather attributed to the non-human in relationship without hierarchy? These are just some the risks I see in limiting charisma studies to a leader-follower framework.

A POSSIBLE PATH FORWARD

As a solution, I suggest that charisma should be conceived as, what Anna Tsing (2015) calls, polyphonic assemblages, or “open-ended gatherings [that] allow us to ask about communal effects without assuming them [and] show us potential histories in the making” and which ask the social observer to “separate, simultaneous melodies and to listen for the moments of harmony and dissonance they created together” (22-24). This would allow charisma to initially widen beyond the leader-follower binary, and would welcome in the possibility for charismatic propensities, or happenings, of varying magnitudes. Open-ended assemblages do away with linear time and closed constructs, and account for charisma in unexpected places – books, for example. It asks, how and why could a book be charismatic? Who makes it so? What cultural beliefs came together over time, and will likely shift again, so that a non-human object could be considered a magnetic and affective experience of the sacred. These are the kinds of questions that polyphonic assemblages afford the concept of charisma. And to clarify, I use sacred in the neo-Durkheimian fashion to account for both the religious and religious-like beliefs of the good, the moral, the most actualized.
This kind of study can be accomplished through what Édouard Glissant (1997) calls a poetics of relationality. Glissant illustrates the varying, unexpected, flowing cultural being that resulted from the various historical intersections of power, slavery, empire, resistance, ecology, etc… in the Antilles, and draws on it as an example of the relationality of life that one cannot express through classification but only through poetics. And though colonial interaction existed and exists, being Antillean is not a sum of foreign influences – of roots in foreign places. Relation is comprised of shared knowledge and, drawing on Deleuze and Guatarri, of rhizomes “in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other” (11). Relationality resists genealogies of thought, which he roots in “chain[s] of Christian filiation” that seek transparency in order to classify and control (49). Relationality embraces a “science of Chaos [that]

renounces linearity’s potent grip and, in this expanse/extension, conceives of indeterminacy as a fact that can be analyzed and accident as measurable. By rediscovering the abysses of art or the interplay of various aesthetics, scientific knowledge thus develops one of the ways poetics is expressed, reconnecting with poetry’s earlier ambition to establish itself as knowledge (137-138).

Relationality, then, allows for expansive understandings of the social, of indeterminacy. Social science tries to make the social transparent through description and evaluation. But Glissant says that people have a “right to opacity,” to things that are not fully known. This is not insurmountable for the student of the social, he says, as we only have to consider “the texture of the weave” rather than focusing singularly “on the nature of its components” (190). This texture includes the varying strands, or, to switch metaphors, the rhizomes. These are strands that go and go and go, relating to beliefs and cultures and identities, and becoming more than the sum of their parts. Relationality is flexible. It’s divested from colonial/modernity and supersessionism.
How does this map on to charisma? Let me give it a try. Thinking with these decolonial ideas, charisma can be loosely understood as an affective attribution granted to something – the human and/or the non-human – considered to be a gift-like or extraordinary expression of what the dutifully devoted consider to be sacred. This affective attribution can be – as we are used to in the Weberian sense – an intense, highly emotional, and dutiful bond, but this does not always mean loud, bombastic, tearful, or ascetic. This leaves room for the ordinary, the mundane, the quiet. It includes non-human animals, art, books, experiences, and nature as candidates for charismatic attribution. The point is not to summarize charisma perfectly, but rather to leave room for opacity.

And what of opacity? How do you understand opaque charisma? You can’t answer that, you cannot define it. Glissant allows us to see a way of thinking of charisma, not in toxic way that seeks to approximate so as to appropriate but as an organic relationality between people, and between people and other things in the world. Opacity resists the colonial desire for neat definitions. Stuart Hall (1968) calls this “the solace of closure” – there is always a multiplicity of interpretations (49-50); there is no neat construct to seek out and measure. The opacity of charisma resists understanding. Take, for example, Pentecostal charismatic gifts like speaking in tongues or ecstatic experience. There is no way to say to someone “it did not happen” or “you are mistaken.” It will always be opaque, and unrepresentable. Understanding, or concluding, should not be the condition for accepting it. There will be attributions of the charismatic that we cannot know.

This solution I am suggesting – which is an outline of a theory, and is far from completion, I admit – is in part an attempt to make sense of charisma in my current ethnographic study of a transnational podcast community that reads Harry Potter as a sacred text. Before I
wrap up, I will quickly illustrate this reimagined definition of charisma using it as an example. This is a case of charisma that has no clear authority structure, but exemplifies varying attributions of affective, magnetic sacred expression in reading practices, religion, ritual, and community. Started in 2016, the podcast “Harry Potter and the Sacred Text” (HPST), cohosted by Harvard Divinity School affiliates Vanessa Zoltan, Casper ter Kuile, and Professor Matt Potts, teaches listeners how to use traditional religious devotional practices, like Christianity’s “lectio divina” or Jewish “havruta,” to read the popular children’s book, Harry Potter. They argue that sacred reading practices such as these can help people – even atheist or spiritual-but-not-religious folks – find meaning and community. Ritual itself is the foundational, sacred collective representation upon which the podcast is built, and they perform it by taking these rituals out of their traditional religious locations and adapting them to secular reading.

It isn’t that Charlotte Brontë or JK Rowling had access to some special knowledge, or that only Zoltan, ter Kuile, and Potts, as trained – and charismatic - religious experts, can instruct people on how to interpret it. And both books, though they are much loved, aren’t sacred in themselves. Rather, they maintain that the texts are made sacred via ritual, and that this can be done by anyone. ter Kuile says the same is true for religion:

What makes a text sacred is not that it was given to us 'by God' or that it has some extra layer of authority … it's the fact that people have come around this text in community over centuries, over millennia, and have mined it for meaning, and invented beautiful, imaginative practices that help us dig into that juiciness (Hynes 2017).

Seen in this way, anything can be made sacred. “If we brought rigour and discipline and did it in community with a milk carton,” ter Kuile said on CBC Radio in 2017, “I think we could treat a milk carton as sacred!” (Hynes 2017).
In addition to recording the podcast each week, Zoltan and ter Kuile perform at live shows in North America and Europe, and have lead events at fan conventions and the *Harry Potter* theme park at Universal Studios in Florida. They also lead a J.K. Rowling pilgrimage in Sussex, England for listeners. Both of the hosts have written books about ritual: ter Kuile’s *The Power of Ritual* was released in the summer of 2020, and Zoltan’s book, *Praying with Jane Eyre*, was released in July of 2021. And during the global pandemic, Zoltan and ter Kuile took their public podcast events on to Zoom, and hosted a multi-week book study called “Together in Quarantine” and a week-long “HPST Summer Camp.” The two podcast hosts perform directly to *Potter* audiences at each of these events, and have garnered a massive following. They invite their listeners to participate in the podcast by creating a reading community of their own. There are currently 91 HPST local groups around the world, including the US, Canada, Sweden, Latvia, Denmark, New Zealand, Australia, Austria, and Germany, practicing sacred reading rituals together – for *Harry Potter*, but also for the TV-shows ‘Gilmore Girls’ and ‘The West Wing,’ as well as the words of Ruth Bader Ginsberg.

The *Harry Potter* fandom is not new to sacred inflection. Beyond the charges that author J.K. Rowling wove Christian themes throughout the book, my favorite example is fans of the band “Harry and the Potters” describing the concerts: “We call it church. This is our church” (Schonfeld 2019). HPST has created a religious-like community founded on no particular religion and an icon of pop culture. This community has a shared faith in an order they’ve found and made sacred. Where is the locus of charisma here? Harry Potter? J.K Rowling? Zoltan? ter Kuile? There is no clear authority structure here that will devolve, via routinization, into legal-rationalism. There is no existing tradition that it is, as Rieff describes, reifying in an ultimate way. Is this religion or is it secular? Yes! This is belief that at once breaks out of boundaries of
the sacred (especially religious authority and marginalization) and embraces the boundaries of
the sacred (via shared ritual) to make meaningful faith real. This is shared faith without roots,
and with rhizome. A poetics of relation that identifies charisma in the fusion of ritual,
pilgrimage, prayer, chaplaincy, and Harry Potter as a shared language – an explosion of
charismatic energy with no real sense of going to and from.

What I am suggesting here is an epistemological decolonial lens for the study and
theorization of charisma. Though this specific case study is not centered in a colonized state,
with colonized subjects, the book was written and published in Britain, a former colonial power
that still is infused with colonial cultural logics. The book is also read, and the podcast listened
to, by people from formerly colonized countries of varying backgrounds. But beyond specific
connections to colonialism, what theories we use to analyze anything in social science must be
questioned for their colonial affinities and commitments. Decoloniality is not a metaphor (Tuck
and Yang 2012) but it is also an epistemological project (Bhambra CITE). Thus, to reimagine
charisma is to reimagine studies of the extraordinary that are divested from colonialism.

The reimagination of charisma I am suggesting is discomforting to the sociologist who
was trained to categorize, correlate, and maintain construct validity. Many will undoubtedly ask,
given the idea of open-ended assemblages: where does charisma end and the sacred begin? What
is the difference between charisma and religious experience, or mediation? These are valid
questions given our disciplinary expectations, and Tsing’s idea of polyphony in assemblages
helps: charisma often comes with religious experience, it instantiates and mediates the sacred, it
is interwoven with enchantment. The charismatic is a coming together of the social in a way that
troubles clear categories.
To upset colonial/modern and supersessionist logics in Weberian charisma, we must break out of the confines of envisioning charisma only through authority structures and leader-follower binaries. We also don’t want to return to the purely Christian theological understanding of the word as a God-given gift of grace, so what do we do? Similarly, if we want to drop universalizing modes of thinking about the world, is it even worthwhile to redevelop a term like charisma, with its Greek, Jewish, and Christian origins, and its modern, secularist renewal, into something useful for broad study? Perhaps a community has their own word to describe the seemingly extraordinary. This is the tension of a sociology seeking decoloniality. Can we continue to classify? A poetics of relation that breaks down the colonial/modern dualism in Weber also makes the construct validity of charisma wobble in a balance of abstraction, but I think it’s worth a try. Charisma is both disorderly and ordering. Rupture to one is reification to another. When we draw circles of belonging or the sacred, no matter how wide we try to reach our pen, someone is always on the outside. Through accepting opacity and rhizomic relationality, I believe we can continue to study charisma and its instantiations without reproducing Weber’s flaws. I look forward to discussing these ideas with you. Thank you.

References


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