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Becoming a God: Max Weber and the social construction of charisma

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Abstract

This article seeks to demonstrate that implicit within Weber's writings on charisma are tools that can enable a processual, social constructionist understanding of charismatic formation. A corollary of this point is that Weber's writings represent an historically crucial turning point in the progression from a Carlylian idea of leaders as *inherently* powerful to a non-essentialist, sociological perspective, and that Weber's inspiration for this progression is best understood not through reference to his nineteenth-century forbearers in the social sciences, but rather in his contrast with the very few theological writers (namely Rudolph Sohm and the writers of the New Testament) who actually had employed charisma as a term prior to Weber's famous appropriation of it. A reinterpretation and retranslation of Weber's writings on charisma that gives priority to the social constructionist elements in his thought can provide tools for navigating through many of the interpretational controversies that have plagued charisma research.

The origins and character of charisma in modern scholarship

Preoccupations with "great men"[1] have figured heavily in the relatively short history of the social sciences. Auguste Comte, the man who sketched the disciplinary boundaries around a new field of study that he called "sociologie", also created – partly for religious reasons – a "Calendar of Great Men" (Sarton, 1952). Each of 13 months in the calendar was dedicated to a particular "god" (such as Homer, Shakespeare, Moses, etc.) and each week was governed by a lesser "hero" (St Augustine, Milton, and Muhammad, to name a few [Sarton, 1952: 329–333]). Thomas Carlyle's "great man theory of history"

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overshadowed much of nineteenth-century thought, before enduring scathing and famous criticism at the hands of Herbert Spencer (Carlyle, 1841 [1912]; Spencer, 1872: 162–167). Although a staunch utilitarian, John Stuart Mill nevertheless devoted considerable room in his thought to the special case of the genius – one who "stands outside the realm of ordinary people as a kind of magic beacon, a unique and inexplicable phenomenon" (Lindholm, 1990: 17). And finally, more brazen still was Nietzsche's (1886 [1992]) aristocratic ethic, centered around the thesis that, "[a] people is a detour of nature to get six or seven great men. – Yes, and then to get around them" (p. 277).[2]

But none of these writers spoke explicitly of "charisma" in their discussions. This silence makes it all the more remarkable that – largely in the course of a hundred years – the ancient Greek term has been reborn as a modern concept, not only in the social sciences, but also in the popular lexica of the European languages. Indeed, passing far more commonly through our lips than either "alienation" or "anomie," perhaps the only rival term is Freud's "ego" as far as translations from academic to popular discourses go (Kemple, 2008: 3; Turner, 2003: 6).

In my readings, I often was astonished to find commentators who trace the history of the "idea" of charisma to certain luminary social scientists from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while completely ignoring those who actually *used* the term prior to Weber. To give one example, Charles Lindholm's (1990) influential book *Charisma* contains insightful sections on Durkheim, Mesmer, Le Bon, Nietzsche, Hume and so on but does not mention St. Paul, whose writings contain the original usage of the term, or Rudolph Sohm (1841–1917), who – through an examination of Paul's writings and other New Testament sources – was the first to reintroduce the term in modern times. These omissions are all the more glaring when one considers that Weber himself felt it important to mention that "it is to Rudolph Sohm's credit that he worked out the sociological character of this kind of domination" (Weber, 1922 [1978]: 1112, see also p. 216).

The erasure of Sohmian priority is a trend in the history of sociology that has gone unnoticed by all but a few commentators. For example, Peter Haley points to an ironic contradiction: the 1934 edition of *The Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences*, though bereft of any mention of "charisma," contains a short biographical sketch on Rudolph Sohm. By contrast, the 1968 edition of that same tome omits the biography of Sohm, but contains Edward Shils' five-page article on "charisma" (Haley, 1980: 185). David Smith (1998) maintains that the Pauline and Sohmian influence on Weber is "*data incognita* for most sociologists" (p. 34), a state of affairs produced through a litany of erroneous attributions of the term by many authors, perhaps most influentially Talcott Parsons, who twice credited Weber with *coinage* (Parsons, 1920 [1958]: 281 n. 105; 1937 [1968]: 564 n. 5; cited in Smith, 1998: 34). This, again, took place all the while Weber (1922 [1978]) himself professed that charisma was "nothing new" (p. 216). To begin, then, a brief foray into the history of the word itself – already readily available in theological literature – is necessary before we examine Weber's ideas, and what about them was so influential.

Charisma as a Christian concept

As mentioned, we can credit the Lutheran jurist Rudolph Sohm with the first rechristening of the ancient term for modern scholarship (Adair-Toteff, 2005: 195; Bendix, 1960:

326n; Bensman and Givant, 1975; Haley, 1980; Smith, 1998; Weber, 1922 [1978]: 216, 1112), but any discussion of him must be prefaced by a consideration of the New Testament writers who served as his main source of inspiration. In the context of the *New Testament*, the charismata were "spiritual gifts"[3] – signs or miracles that indicated the presence of God among the leadership and even among the laity of the early Christian movement.

It is in Paul's letters to the emergent Christian churches – the oldest of the New Testament writings – that the concept of charisma received its most detailed elaboration. Indeed, of the 17 times the word appears, all but 1 (1 Peter 4:10) occur in Pauline texts (Conzelmann and Zimmerli, 1974: 403; Palma, 1979: 4). A near-ubiquitous theme in these letters is the appeal for ecclesiastical unity (Park, 2003), or, in Paul's words, "that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment" (1 Corinthians 1:10; see also Romans 2:14–16, 3:29–30, 10:11–13, 15:8–12; Ephesians[4] 2:11–22, 3:6; 1 Corinthians 1:22–24; Galatians 2:2–10). It comes as no surprise then, that this concern inflects the apostle's writings on charisma as well. His first letter to the Corinthians is particularly instructive:

> There are different kinds of gifts [χαρισματων],[5] but the same Spirit [πνευμα] … Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit [πνευματος] is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit [πνευματος] the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit [πνευμα], to another faith by the same Spirit [πνευματι], to another gifts [χαρισματα] of healing by that one Spirit [πνευματι], to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit [πνευμα], and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.
>
> (1 Corinthians 12: 4–11, see also Romans 12:1–8)

As well as providing a convenient (but non-exhaustive [Palma, 1979: 14–15]) inventory list[6] of the various charismata, this passage reflects Paul's struggle to consolidate the prolific range of religious activities that attended the rapid expansion of the early Christian movement. All gifts, argued Paul, though different, originate from the same Spirit, and no matter how heterogeneous the possessors of gifts may outwardly seem, together they comprise one "body of Christ." In a proto-functionalist metaphor, Paul further explained the importance of this intra-movement diversity, reasoning:

> if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired.
>
> (1 Corinthians 12: 14–19)

For Paul then, difference in terms of gifts implied an *interdependency* of parts, rather than a conflict of aims, and his radicalism vis-a-vis the original apostles of Jesus, the "pillars" of the Jerusalem and Antioch churches, was due to his inclusionary ethic.[7]

There can be no question that Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles,[8] was the one who set Christianity on the trajectory that led to its remarkable success in the coming centuries, and this attempt by Paul to unify disparate religious variations under the aegis of a single "Christianity" was the first among many strategies of schismatic containment[9] that the nascent church would eventually employ.

Rudolph Sohm's contribution

When Rudolph Sohm first introduced "charisma" to modern ears, his interests sounded far more conservative. The Christianity of Sohm's religious and scholarly devotion had evolved in the nearly two millennia since Paul, such that, no longer merely a burgeoning cult that pestered a pagan empire, it had become a powerful religion in its own right, with its own imperial past – perhaps unequaled in terms of world influence. Sohm was interested in preserving this power, and he made no secret of his Christian commitments in his work as a legal historian, writing,

> No other religion has had the power to guide the progress of our culture save Christianity alone. Therefore it has conquered. On its side were neither Roman legions nor ancient learning, but the power of divine truth which is mightier than all the powers of earthly life.

> By virtue of the spirit which is alive within her, the Christian Church in its slow upward growth had power to outlast the great Roman Empire, to join the ancient to the modern world, and to be the educator of the race of men that was to come.

> (Sohm, 1909: 5–6)

When he published *Outlines of Church History*, first in 1895, Sohm was intensely worried and preoccupied by the "gathering storm" of social and democratic reforms during the nineteenth century, and he looked to charisma as a force that could reinscribe and reinstitute authority based on Christian principles (Smith, 1998: 38–40). Thus, Sohm, *contra* Weber, had hopes for the antirevolutionary potential of charisma as a cultural impulse.

Also clear is that an anti-bureaucratic theme informed and motivated Sohm's idealization of the "pneumatocracy" of the early Christian church. The early church fathers received power not from rational-legal authority structures, but rather via gifts of the spirit, something that had resonance with the Lutheran commitment to a reliance on grace and justification by faith alone. Sohm wrote (1909),

> It is by no means essential to the Church, to Christendom, that it should have a legal constitution, with Pope and Bishops, Superior Ecclesiastical Council, and Superintendents, after the fashion of the State … [I]f Christ alone is the head of the Church which is Christ's body, then no man may presume to make himself the head of the Church … God, that is Christ, rules and binds together all the members of Christendom solely through the gifts of grace (χαρίσματα) given by him.

> (pp. 32–33)

In this way, Sohm presages Weber's description of the charismatically organized social group, with "no established administrative organs" (Weber, 1922 [1978]: 243). Where Sohm wrote that under the auspices of charismatic authority "every form of legal constitution is excluded" (Sohm, 1909: 32), we find Weber's later recognition that "there is no system of formal rules, of abstract legal principles" (Weber, 1922 [1978]: 243).

Sohm viewed with disappointment the "rationalization" or "routinization" of charisma that occurred in the Christian movement as the common era progressed, in that he envisioned and idealized the early church fathers as living in a way that put them more immediately in touch with a God who directed their lives. The rational Canon law that the church developed after this first-century period represented for Sohm a "fall" into "small faith" – a lack of trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to lead (Adams, 1958: xii–xiii). Thus, the concept of charisma was central to Sohm's cultural battles which occurred primarily on two fronts: against secular humanism and its attendant social reforms, and against the worldly and overbearing bureaucratic tendencies of the Roman Catholic church.

Sohm's work as an historian has been challenged on many fronts,[10] but more important for our purposes is that he, like Paul before him, was adamantly committed to an understanding of the charismata as gifts that were *unique* to Christianity, and therefore not generalizable to non-Christian contexts. In other words, inherent within Sohm's theoretical orientation are supernatural and culturally exclusive assumptions – assumptions that obviate the possibility of a relational or trans-cultural conception of charisma. Max Weber (1922 [1978]), who twice acknowledged his debt to Sohm for reviving the term (pp. 216, 1112), soon realized this limitation, stating,

> since [Sohm] developed this category [charismatic authority] with regard to one historically important case – the rise of ecclesiastic authority of the early Christian church –, his treatment was bound to be one-sided from the viewpoint of historical diversity.

> (p. 1112)

Thus, the stage was set for Weber to use his encyclopedic knowledge of social history to elaborate and expand the category, leading to his profound contributions to the study of charisma.

Weber's charisma

In the third chapter of the second draft of *Economy and Society*, Weber gave his oft-cited definition:

> The term "charisma" will be applied to a certain quality of 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 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, 1922 [1978]: 241)[11]

Two important implications flow from Weber's novel formulation. The first major innovation, already alluded to, was that charisma was no longer an essentially Christian concept, but rather an analytic category that could be relevant to any religious group, as well as to authority in political, military and other cultural contexts. In *Economy and Society*, Weber presented Christianity as one tradition among many that displays charismatic qualities, and Jesus is one among many charismatic leaders whom Weber employed to illustrate the sociology of charisma. One almost senses that Weber relished the audacity of juxtaposing, say, the charismatic pirate with Francis of Assisi – an ability he claimed derived from his methodological commitment to creating ideal types that were "value-free" (Weber, 1922 [1978]: 1113; see also Honigsheim, 1968: 128–130; Lewis, 1975).

Understandably, those accustomed to Christian exceptionalism have felt some consternation at this "common treatment." In a somewhat lamenting tone, Haley noted that "Weber emptied the idea, gift of grace, first of its Christian meaning, finally of all religious content…. Implicit in Weberian theory … is a reduction of Jesus' stature, rightly shocking to anyone viewing Jesus through the eye of faith" (Haley, 1980: 196; see also Rieff, 2007). Thus, while Weber, in his comment on Sohm (p. xxxx), would have us believe that their differences were purely methodological (in that Sohm performed a "case study" and he a more general survey), their differences actually belie profoundly different politico-religious commitments. At the meetings of the German Evangelical-Social Congress, the conservative Sohm found an adversary in the relatively liberal Weber (Smith, 1998: 41; see also Ward, 1979: 96), and while Sohm was a Lutheran of "vigorous piety" (Adams, 1958: ix), Weber evinced many of the characteristics of a wholly modern "post-Christian"; one who – though heavily indebted to Sohm – nevertheless repudiated many of the historian's central concerns.

The second implication of Weber's definition is that, in a Feuerbachian turn, he conceived of the "gift" of charisma not as heaven-sent, but rather as something that followers ascribe to leaders through the *imputation* of special powers. Thus, the actual personal qualities that trigger these imputations were clearly of secondary importance to Weber (1922 [1978]), who maintained that "[w]hat alone is important is how the individual is actually regarded by those subject to charismatic authority, by his 'followers' or 'disciples'" (p. 242).[12] In other words, Weber's vantage point is unmistakably sociological: of sole importance for the exertion of charismatic authority was that special or extraordinary powers *were* attributed, "regardless of whether this quality is actual, alleged, or presumed" (Weber, 1922 [1978]: 295).

Here we see another fundamental break with Sohm's (and Paul's) formulation, in that, through simple yet profoundly consequential phrases such as "are considered" and "is treated,"[13] charisma becomes a relational, attributable, and at last a properly sociological[14] concept. Although of lesser significance, this formulation also marked a stark departure from the secular "great men" theories alluded to above, in that it refused to attribute historical transformations to exceptional powers that are inherent in lonely geniuses. For Weber, the locus of power is in the led, who actively (if perhaps unconsciously) invest their leaders with social authority. Weber (1922 [1978]) later clearly reconfirmed his intention to represent charisma as a product of such "social construction," asserting,

> If those to whom he feels sent do not recognize him, his claim collapses; if they recognize it, he is their master as long as he "proves" himself. However, he does not derive his claims from the will of his followers, in the manner of an election; rather, it is their duty to recognize his charisma.

> (pp. 1112–1113)

And further,

> this very serious meaning of genuine charisma is radically different from the convenient pretensions of the present "divine right of kings" … The very opposite is true of the genuinely charismatic ruler, who is responsible to the ruled.

> (Weber, 1922 [1978]: 1114)

It is clear that what Weber is not saying here is that charismatic leaders necessarily receive their power through democratic means (although this route certainly is a possibility [Bendix, 1960: 398]). Nevertheless, between charismatic followers and their leaders, a "social contract" is at work, to wit, "above all if his leadership fails to benefit his followers, it is likely that his charismatic authority will disappear" (Weber, 1922 [1978]: 242). With the cultural relativity implicit in this formulation, and with this different understanding of the locus from which the power of charisma flows, Weber had dispatched with what we might call the "inherency fallacy" – a common misunderstanding of charismatic leadership, especially in popular discourses.[15]

Issues of interpretation

Some commentators, however, have been nonplussed by the trajectory of charisma research since Weber, finding that misunderstandings of Weber's intentions have run rampant. Others have noted its patently awkward entrance into the social sciences (Turner, 2003). These critics often note that Weber's style of writing is itself partly to blame for these digressions. For example, while many studies belie a tendency to conceive charisma as something that is wholly bound up with the personality traits of leaders[16] – clearly not what Weber had in mind –, Meredith McGuire (1983), during a presidential address to the Association for the Sociology of Religion, blamed Weber's phrase, "a quality of individual personality" for sending "generations of sociologists off on a non-sociological tack" looking for "some oblique psychological factor such as special personality'" (p. 6). William Friedland (1964) similarly maintained that Weber's discussions of charisma are

> not completely clear. On the one hand, he appears to be proposing a "great man" theory of history in which macro-change is produced by the appearance of unique persons with "gifts." … On the other hand, Weber clearly indicates that it is not just "great men" who make history. If the charisma of unique people is not socially validated, it is insignificant.

> (p. 20)

Luciano Cavalli (1987) could not help but read Weber as being principally concerned with extraordinary personality qualities that Weber "seems to consider innate," and as a consequence, he argued that

> [t]he basic definition of charisma seems also to contain a *non sequitur*. It is hard to see why the possession of a given quality may induce those who consider it extraordinary, and those who therefore link its bearer to the dimension of the extraordinary, to acclaim this same man as their leader.

> (p. 318)

Pierre Bourdieu echoed the sentiment that there are ambiguities in Weber's writing itself. Although he credited Weber with knowing better, Bourdieu (1987) accused him of "occasionally succumbing to the näive representation of charisma as a mysterious quality inherent in a person or as a gift of nature" and called for researchers to "dispose once and for all of the notion of charisma as a property attaching to the nature of a single individual" (pp. 129–131). Thus, these authors agree with Talcott Parsons that there are elements within Weber's thought that, if read a certain way, can lead to a "trait atomism" in approaches to analyses of charisma (Parsons, 1963: lxxiii).

Less Weber's fault, but still indicative of a fundamental misunderstanding, are those who have suggested that his formulation of charisma reflects the entry of a religious mysticism into his thought (Adair-Toteff, 2002: 348; Swatos and Kivisto, 1991: 352), as though when composing the passages on charisma, he was less "unmusical" than during the rest of his work (Max Weber quoted in Marianne Weber, 1926 [1975]: 324[17]). Georg Lukács (1962 [1980]) condemned Weber for the "internal inconsistency" (p. 631) displayed in the postulation of his "partly abstract, partly mystical and irrational pseudo-concept of 'charisma'" saying that it is a manifestation of his "irrationalist existentialism" (as quoted in Smith, 1998: 35).[18] Downton (1973), in a section of his book entitled *Weber's Perspective on Charisma* wrote that

> the charismatic leader's legitimacy to act is not derived from the follower's consent, not from custom or law, but from a *transcendental realm*, which Weber describes only vaguely … The leader lays claim to the loyalty of his following through his *personal magnetism* rather than articulating an ideology that offers a concrete program of action.

> (p. 210, emphases added)

The statement should clarify that only when one is looking *from the perspective of one who has appropriated the belief system* does the legitimacy actually seem to come from the "transcendental realm" (in which case any "description" of such realm would need to point to specific empirical cases, the selection of which would be entirely arbitrary). Similarly, *only then* does it *seem* to involve a "personal magnetism." Without carefully qualifying his statements in this way, Downton, intentionally or not, will give his readers the wrong impression about Weber – an impression that completely elides the social constructionist elements in his thought. In another example, Bensman and Givant (1975) insightfully criticize Shils' (1965) oft-cited attempt to extend Weber's work, noting that,

for Shils, charisma "refers to a general quality, and inherent element … a free-floating attribute that can attach itself to anything, including individuals. It is, so far as we can see, a metaphysical entity" (p. 584). Thus, from these examples, we can see that the history of charisma research and commentary displays that, in some cases at least, Weber's intermittent lack of clarity on the subject proliferates in, and is amplified by, the work of later scholars whom he inspired.

But the criticisms from Lukács (1962 [1980]) and Downton (1973) begin to look like straw men, and the theoretical extension of Shils (1965) seems misguided when one reads Weber's discussions of charisma in their entirety. Indeed, far from seeing charisma as a mystical force, it seems as though he was much more likely to lean in the other direction – skeptically suggesting that charismatic imputation involves the *misattribution*[19] of supernatural or extraordinary powers to individuals who were prone to "epileptoid seizures" (Weber, 1922 [1978]: 242), to those who simply worked themselves into a "bloodthirsty frenzy," or to those who could cunningly pull of a "rank swindle" (p. 1112). His epistemological prudence prevents him from making such claims in a definitive tone, but his skeptical leanings are nevertheless clear. Even when speaking about those "who are the 'greatest' heroes, prophets, and saviors," Weber (1922 [1978]) was careful to note that they are only such "*according to conventional judgments"* (p. 242, emphasis added). Thus, while – partly due to his practical social circumstances[20] – Weber always was careful to remain respectful towards religion, he was certainly not a "true believer" in any conventional sense. The body of evidence about Weber's religiosity is scant and far from conclusive, and one should expect to be confounded when surmising about the inner world of an incredibly complex thinker. Indeed, we should distrust immediately any argument concerning the issue that would make categorical claims. Suffice it to say, however, that Weber, in direct contrast with Sohm, never displayed a credulity towards religious explanations for the course of historical development, and that a good case (see note 17) can be made *against* those like Swatos and Kivisto (1991) and Adair-Toteff (2002) who, on the basis of conjectural reasoning, would position Weber respectively as either a "Christian sociologist" or a "mystic."[21]

Towards a social constructionist reinterpretation

But merely asserting Weber's non-mystical and non-religious tendencies does not solve the problem of interpretation highlighted by McGuire (1983), Friedland (1964), and Bourdieu (1987), and evidenced by writers such as Lukács (1962 [1980]), Cavalli (1987), and Downton (1973) above. After all, though it is inarguable that Weber *generally* represented charisma as a social product, he did write in a seemingly contradictory fashion at times. Particularly, his phrase "a certain quality of individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary" is frustratingly ambiguous, in that it prioritizes the "trait" and corresponding "perception of the trait" equally. What justification can there be for marginalizing the emphasis on the former in our interpretations of Weber?

Considerations of the history of ideas are often prone to a certain form of myopia that tends to confuse or conflate newly iterated formulations with their antecedents. This tendency is even more likely when the onlooker's perspective is itself situated further along the line in the progression of ideas that is under scrutiny. To use a heuristic device

for illustrative purposes (which in no way should be taken to convey an understanding of history that is linear, teleological, or morally progressive), we can see that someone looking from the position "D" will tend to underestimate the extent to which "B's" position is repudiative of "A," in that the further one is along the alphabetical progression, the more *similar* to one another the earliest letters may seem. In a concrete example, nearly every set of program notes that appends to Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* strives apologetically to remind us that, though the play sounds to our ears to be unpardonably anti-Semitic, for the time in which it was written, it may have represented a fairly radical repudiation of anti-Semitism.

Weber seems an unusually likely candidate for this fallacious trend, in that it is hard to argue against the fact that all contemporary sociologists are "Weberian" to some degree. I therefore submit that such dynamics are at work in contemporary understandings of Weber's writings on charisma, in that, though he does write at times in a way that would lead to interpretations along essentialist or romantic lines, his *direction of movement* vis-a-vis the intellectual milieu in which he worked – both immediately, in terms of the work of Sohm, but also more peripherally, considering "great man" hero-worship prevalent in nineteenth century intellectual culture – clearly reveals a trajectory of repudiation of these orientations. Perhaps the most influential statement that evinces the tack that Weber was the latest in a long line of hero-worshipers came from Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills (1946 [1958]) in their introduction to the compilation, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, first released in 1946. Here, they argue that,

> In spite of the careful nominalism of his method, Weber's conception of the charismatic leader is a continuation of a "philosophy of history" that, after Carlyle's *Heroes and Hero Worship*, influenced a great deal of nineteenth-century history writing.

(p. 53)

Indeed, to say that it is a "continuation" is of course in certain ways undeniable, and our ability to perceive this influence becomes easier the further we as onlookers are distanced from the mood of the nineteenth century.[22]

Be that as it may, while conceding this point, we might also do well to borrow an insight from Kenneth Burke (1935), who maintained that "a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing" (p. 70). That is to say, against the backdrop of the nineteenth century, the *confluences* between Weber and his forebearers in the arts and social sciences are in some respects least interesting – rather, it is the *departures* that are most revealing in terms of his idiosyncratic and intentional theoretical directions as a scholar. This "careful nominalism" is therefore not something to *look past* when seeking to understand the "spirit" of Weber, as Gerth and Mills seem to suggest – it is in fact the very thing that should draw our focus. Consequently, I would argue that in cases such as the definitional passage, where Weber seems to write about charisma as both a socially generated phenomenon *and* a heroic "personality trait," we should give priority to interpretations that favor the former understanding.

From another angle, David Smith (1998) underscored the need for this type of prioritization, rejecting characterizations of Weber which see him as being credulous to the

idea that charisma is some kind of mystical force, intrinsic to its possessor: "Sohm's language of grace – filtered through Weber's skeptical but elliptical paraphrase – has prompted the belief that Weber, too, saw charisma as a divine 'given'" (p. 35). In other words, it would seem that at times Weber relied on the theological language of his (largely unknown) predecessors to such an extent that his position often has been confused or conflated with a theological orientation. As I have shown, however, because Weber generalized charisma and made it applicable to non-Christian contexts, and because of the Feuerbachian inversion evident in his thought, his use of Sohmian and Pauline language is best read as being *subversive* in relation to, and *repudiative* of, their ontological understandings of charisma. Thus, two factors – an overestimation of the influence of nineteenth century romanticism, and a general ignorance of the relationship between Weber and the Sohmian-Pauline positions – have skewed the interpretational lens through which modern scholarship views Weber's interest in charisma.

Issues of grammar and translation

Of all the complaints that various writers have levied against the definitional passage – that it contains a *non sequitur* (Cavalli, 1987: 318), that it is "elliptical" (Smith, 1998: 35), that it is "not completely clear" (Friedland, 1964: 20), or that it may be "näıve" (Bourdieu, 1987: 129) – none have zeroed in on a small but significant grammatical issue that I believe greatly exacerbates the controversies of interpretation outlined above: Weber's use of passive voice. As Weber wrote, the leader "*is considered* extraordinary," he or she is "*treated* as endowed with … powers," which "*are regarded* as of divine origin" (Weber, 1922 [1978]: 241, emphases added).[23] As with all instances of passive voice, such phrasing obfuscates the presence of the subjects who carry out such crucial actions – namely, charismatic followers – leading to what Willner and Willner (1965) complained was "[t]he somewhat misleading search for the source of charisma in the personalities of … leaders" (p. 79). Similarly, because this most-read and most-quoted passage does not mention followers explicitly, readers are more likely to presume that Weber was leaving the question of charisma's "source" unanswered – an omission that would indeed seem mysterious – perhaps even mystical – given the usually thorough nature of his sociological analyses.

In addition to this issue of passive voice, the verbs that Parsons chooses for his English translation are particularly passive in their connotation. For example, Weber's "*soll … heißen*," which Parsons renders as "is considered," also has the meanings "to name," "to call," and, even, "to command." A secondary definition is "to hoist" as in "to hoist the flag!" – an act that clearly implicates flag-bearer to a greater degree than the flag itself (Messinger, 1973: 270). Weber's "*gewertet wird*," which Parsons translates as "treated as," could just as well have been rendered, "valued *as if*" – a phrase which would have made more explicit the "sociological distance" inherent in Weber's perspective.[24] Thus, through the unfortunate use of passive voice in Weber's original text, and through the *passivity* of the verbs that Parsons chose in his translation efforts, we see an expunction of the presence and activities of intimate followers, who often play a crucial, if not central, role in the relationality of the charismatization process.

This article has sought to provide a stronger basis for and encouragement of those few studies – still very much in the minority – which have already picked up on the social constructionist tendencies in Weber's work on charisma (Berger, 1963; Blasi, 1991; Couch, 1989; Dawson 2006; DuPertuis, 1986; Finlay, 2002; Joosse, 2006, 2012; Wallis, 1982; Wasielewski, 1985; Willner and Willner, 1965). I achieve this through a description of the broader extra-social science milieu that informed Weber's perspective and which shows that contrary to what is now conventional wisdom, Weber's understanding of charisma was much more intimately (if antagonistically) connected to the religious writers who preceded him. Specifically, I argue that an overestimation of the influence on Weber of the legacy of nineteenth-century social scientific hero-worship, combined with an *underestimation* of Weber's reliance on (and ultimate repudiation of) the work of Rudolph Sohm and the authors of the New Testament, has produced a situation in which Weber is prone to be cast as ascribing to the view that charisma is an intrinsic personality trait. A reinterpretation and retranslation of Weber's writings on charisma that gives priority to the social constructionist elements in his thought can provide tools for navigating through many of the interpretational controversies that have plagued the history of charisma research.

My intent in this essay has been modest, in that it simply seeks to offset some erroneous interpretational trajectories that have found their way into the history of charisma scholarship. In pointing to the social constructionist orientation of Weber's thinking, in no way is it my hope that a social constructionist approach will supplant psychological, anthropological, or emotional approaches, or suggest that these approaches are without value (Greenfeld, 1985; Lindholm, 1990, 1992; Wasielewski, 1985). Indeed, I have no doubt that social constructionism is – by itself – too anemic to explain the emotional fervor of charismatic relationships. I also have no doubt that the future of charisma scholarship will be filled with robust accounts of charismatic authority which deepen our understanding of its many facets – and in so doing go beyond the sketchings of even the master himself.

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Notes

1. The language is sexist insofar as it reflects the sexism of the time period under examination.
2. There is reason to think that Nietzsche's fascination with "the philosophers, artists, and saints" (Nietzsche, 1876 [1983]: bk. 3, section 5) was itself charismatic in flavor, experienced

viscerally in his worshipful-then-contemptuous comportment towards Richard Wagner (Nietzsche, 1872 [1992]: 31–32, section 16–25, pp. 99–144; 1888 [1992]), and perhaps no less passionately in the many philosophical and polemical treatments of Schopenhauer, Socrates, Napoleon, and Goethe, among others, throughout his work.

3. The Greek word χάρισμα (kharisma) literally means "gift" or "divine favour."

4. Ephesians may be a pseudepigraphic epistle (Nineham, 1956), but in terms of the theme of inclusivity, it conforms to the genuine Pauline epistles.

5. The brackets of Greek script in this passage contain various conjugations of *pneuma*, which has meanings including "animating spirit" or "breath in the nostrils" and *charisma*, which as defined above means "divine favor" or "gift of grace." The two terms bear a special relation in Paul's thought and, according to Hans Conzelmann (1975),

> the word [χαρισμα] is suited from the very start to be an equivalent to πνευματικα, since of course χαρισ also has in Hellenistic Greek the sense of a supernatural power or force, and is thus akin to πνευμα. … [I]t is through grace that the pneumatic is what he is.
>
> (p. 208)

In one instance, Weber (1922 [1978]) himself hyphenated the terms, referring to the "pneumatic-charismatic manner of the earliest Christian communities" (p. 805 n. 29). Palma (1979: 6–7) agreed about the nearly interchangeable relationship between *pneuma* and *charisma*, but he also included within this class derivatives of the word *didomi* – the most basic or general expression of the verb "to give" in biblical Greek (as found, for example, in Ephesians 4: 7–11).

6. This list contrasts starkly with Weber's own much more sociological catalogue of the various forms of charisma, which lists, in addition to "pure" charisma (Weber, 1922 [1978]: 244), "hereditary charisma" (Weber, 1922 [1978]: 248), and "charisma of office" (Weber, 1922 [1978]: 248).

7. This theme in Paul's teachings flows directly from his own personal history. He knew well the various dangers to which religious conflict could lead, being a former Pharisee and persecutor of the Christian movement himself (1 Corintians 15:9; Galatians 1:13–14). According to Luke, who was an avid apologist for Paul and who cannot be expected to have highlighted Paul's faults (Blasi, 1991), he was even an instigator in the stoning of the first Christian martyr, Stephen (Acts 7:57–8:3, 26:9–11). Often Jesus had preached against Pharasaic rigidity regarding Torah law, and Paul's conversion to the Jesus movement was thus a remarkable about-face. Even *more* astonishing, however, is that a former Pharisee would preach that Jewish customs (such as circumcision, dietary restrictions, and the prohibition against Jews and gentiles sharing a meal) need not be strictly enforced among gentile converts to the movement – something that rankled Peter, James, and John and some other Pharisees who had been converted to the movement, leading to conflicts during Paul's visits to Jerusalem (Acts 15: 1–19; Galatians 2).

8. By the time in which Justin Martyr was writing (AD 100–165), the process that resulted in the division between Christianity and Judaism, which Paul never intended but which he nevertheless unwittingly started, had acquired a sense of finality. This division is borne out in Justin's writings, which include one of the last uses of the term "charisma" by the church fathers of antiquity (Conzelmann and Zimmerli, 1974: 406). In his *Dialogue with Trypho* (Trypho being a learned Jew that he was trying to convert over the course of the dialogue), Justin argued for the legitimacy of Christianity and against that of Judaism by claiming that "the prophetical gifts remain with us, even to the present time. And hence you ought to understand that [the gifts] formerly among your nation have been transferred to us" (Dialogue Ch. 82, [available at: http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/01286.htm], cited in Conzelmann and Zimmerli, 1974: 406).

9. The various ecumenical councils, such as the Councils of Nicea and Constantinople, represent other examples. It is true that these councils delineated many heresies, but the creeds and pronouncements produced therein still were concerned with remaining tactfully open to a wide range of interpretations that served to foster a sense of belonging among quite disparate groups (Placher, 1983). For an illustration in greater detail of how movements can achieve schismatic containment through ideological inclusion, see Joosse (2007).

10. The most notable challenge came from Lutheran theologian Karl Holl, who pointedly contested Sohm's vision of the early church as being bereft of bureaucratic organizing principles (Trigg, 1981: 8). Weber (1922 [1978]) also credited Holl with "clarifying certain important consequences of" charisma (p. 216).

11.

    "Charisma" soll eine als außeralltäglich … geltende Qualität einer Persönlichkeit heißen, um derentwillen sie als mit übernatürlichen oder übermenschlichen oder mindestens spezifisch außeralltäglichen, nicht jedem andern zugänglichen Kräften oder Eigenschaften [begabt] oder als gottgesandt oder als vorbildlich und deshalb als "Führer" gewertet wird.

    (Weber, 1922 [1956]: 140)

12. Weber is clear that this relationship between leader and follower is mediated by the "charismatic aristocracy," a "personal staff, … of adherents who are united by discipleship and loyalty and chosen according to personal charismatic qualification" (Weber, 1922: 119). Thus, the typical charismatic group of Weber's description involves a three-tiered social structure, including the charismatic leader, the small inner circle, and rank-and-file members (Weber, 1922: 119; see also Balch, 1995: 159; Couch, 1989: 272).

13. Weber's use of passive voice in his definition is troubling, and as I will discuss below, it has led to some dire misunderstandings of his definitional passage.

14. As I noted above, Weber (1922 [1978]) did call Sohm's understanding of charisma "sociological" (p. 1112), but it is clear that he meant to apply this label only in the sense that charisma as a form of domination that helped to organize the societies of the early Christian churches – not, as Weber presented it above, in its *generation* among religious actors.

15. Political commentaries often center on the question of whether leaders "have" charisma. The conception of charisma as a "gravity" that surrounds a leader is more apt than it may first seem here, for understandings (or rather, *mis*understandings) of gravity are analogous to the errant tendency of seeing charisma as an inherent property of a leader. While it is easy to intuit that the earth exerts an attractive force on its inhabitants, less immediately apparent is that it does so only in relation to the amplitude of *our* attraction back. In short, we – like the charismatically involved devotee – have "mass." Particular extraordinary qualities, such as oratorical skills, striking physical appearance, psychological irregularities, and high intelligence – while they may have a profound effect on the organizational properties of movements – are neither necessary nor sufficient for charismatic formation. One only needs to contemplate the astonishing empirical variety among charismatic leaders to form an opinion about the dubiousness involved in the task of developing a substantive definition of the charismatic personality type (Willner, 1984; cf. Willner and Willner, 1965: 84). Thus, despite its etymological origins, Weber's definition of charisma takes us away from the idea of "gifts of the spirit," if by that we mean inherently possessed miraculous abilities.

16. Exemplifying perhaps the worst instances of this interpretational tendency, a whole business-management and self-help literature has arisen that seeks to equip prospective leaders with charisma, as though it is a personality characteristic that they might capture, develop, and employ. The fundamental mistake in such work is to assume that because leaders are the focal point of charismatic attention, they must possess this power intrinsically – as though the stone

in the fable of the stone soup actually contained nutritious or flavorful qualities. Another analogy might be helpful for clarifying the sociological objection to essentialist notions of charisma: It would be absurd to take a joker from a deck of cards and attempt to use it as "wild" in a game of Scrabble, since the card is only "wild" when positioned within the specific constellation of relations with other cards that give it such power. Similarly, a charismatic leader with autocratic pretensions should be happy to be met only with raised eyebrows when attempting to exert authority in a context that is divorced from the web of charismatic relationships that constitute his or her "extraordinariness."

17. Weber's full statement reads:

> It is true that I am absolutely unmusical religiously and have no need or ability to erect any psychic edifices of a religious character within me. But a thorough self-examination has told me that I am neither anti-religious *nor irreligious*.
>
> (quoted in Marianne Weber, 1926 [1975]: 324, emphasis is in the original)

It is difficult to understand what Weber meant by the last phrase *nor irreligious*, but suffice it to say that Weber never committed to an established religious tradition in his life, and his writings most frequently evince a tenor of pessimistic sobriety, not a religious comportment. Of the few hints that we have about Weber's personal commitments, perhaps none are more telling than a letter to a friend written late in life, in which he reminisced about his mental breakdown years earlier. In the letter, he pointedly challenged a well-known religious aphorism:

"Adversity teaches one to pray" – always? On the basis of my personal experience I should like to *dispute* this, although I certainly agree with you that very frequently it holds true – all too frequently for man's dignity."

> (quoted in Marianne Weber, 1926 [1975]: 240–241)

18. Smith erroneously quoted the passage from page 619 of Lukács' (1962 [1980]). The passage actually comes from page 629 of that work.

19. For a good description of the process of misattribution of divine causation in religious groups, see Kent (1994).

20. Guenther Roth (1978) noted that Weber "lived in an extended family in which the women were devout and articulate believers," and that he "could have disdained religion only at the price of offending those closest to him" (p. lxxviii).

21. In a similar vein, though Weber had a profound admiration and respect for Goethe, a hero of German letters, there is evidence that his attitude towards the poet was considerably more sober and tempered than that of Nietzsche, in that he "did not accept the idea of a special 'morality of genius' … he stood his ground when such discussions arose: what is 'sin' for Müller and Schulze (Smith and Jones) must be so for Goethe" (Marianne Weber, 1926 [1975]: 155).**)** Indeed, although Weber's work was heavily influenced by Goethe (and Nietzsche for that matter), he "refused to venerate Goethe as an untouchable sphere removed from human judgment … Goethe never embodied for him the *totality* of the human" (Marianne Weber quoted in Kent, 1983: 303).

22. It should be noted, however, that Reinhard Bendix (1960: 329) adamantly disagreed with Gerth and Mills' placing of Weber in this lineage.

23. Weber expressed the role of religious actors in passive voice in the original German version of the definition as well (see Weber, 1922 [1956]: 140, or note 11 above).

24. Thanks to Ray Morrow and Erika Banski for their help with my translation efforts here.

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