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Psychobiography and Charisma

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The concept of charismatic authority is nowadays less popular among political scientists than it was some twenty years ago. Max Weber introduced the concept (originally Biblical)\(^1\) into his analysis of religious as well as secular authority, claiming that these categories were universal and timeless. Since then charisma has become strongly associated with "third world" nationalist leadership in the era of decolonization. Consequently interest in this type of analysis has declined over the years as more and more former colonies attained independence. Moreover the concept of charisma, with its focus on power derived from personal identification between unusually gifted leaders and their followers, was strongly associated with the "great man" approach to history. That approach withered away as it became increasingly fashionable to analyze politics in terms of impersonal processes, structures and systems. However, because journalists have time and again been able to apply this highly specific term to a wide range of political leaders, it has never sunk completely into oblivion. "There is now the danger," as D.L. Cohen wrote in 1972, "that American newspapers will describe any politician who manages to get one per cent more of the vote than his opponent as a charismatic leader unless he is noticeably ugly, inarticulate or ill-mannered."\(^2\) The recent unwillingness of political scientists to use the concept is not based on some common agreement on the precise meaning of the category of charisma and on its usefulness for the analysis of leadership. Rather it reflects their recognition that charisma is a multi-faceted concept, an understanding of which would draw them outside the boundaries of their particular specialities.

Indeed, it is characteristic of the debate on charisma that it generally takes place inside the boundaries of numerous branches of the human sciences. William Friedland, for instance, is certainly right in stressing the fact that "[s]ociologists have been unable to come to grips empirically with the concept [of charisma] because, while charisma has been interesting, as presently developed, it lies outside the purview of disciplinary interests."\(^3\) However, this problem cannot be solved by disregarding the psychological dimensions of the concept, as Friedland seems to propose, and by concentrating solely on its social aspects. Simi-
larly psychoanalysts, including Sigmund Freud, have no doubt added to our knowledge of the psychological dynamics that prepare people for charismatic followership, but they have failed to appreciate the fact, already recognized by Weber, that a predisposition to charismatic followership requires social stimuli before it becomes manifest.

Charisma, when used with reference to political leadership, is by definition revolutionary and cannot be institutionalized without changing one kind of authority into another. Thus it will always carry with it some elements of the leader's past. To justify their actions, charismatic leaders can neither seek refuge in rules, as bureaucrats tend to do, nor rely on obedience out of respect for tradition, as monarchs or elders have done. Because they must continually prove that they are worthy of the awe and reverence accorded to them, charismatic leaders are very much the captives of their own particular missions in life. This means not only that they have to cope with certain kinds of social stress, as sociologists tend to argue, but they have also to be sensitive to the psychological needs of their followers, since charisma, as Weber noted, is a kind of hero-worship originating in feelings of excitation shared within a group. Thus it would be as futile to attempt to analyze charismatic leadership solely in terms of the social circumstances from which it arises as it would be to relate the behavior of charismatic leaders or followers exclusively to the psychological satisfaction that they are expected to give or to receive.

In this article I shall investigate the ways in which psychobiographies, by applying explicit psychological theory to political leaders, can add to our understanding of charismatic authority. In the first section I consider different interpretations of charisma offered by psychoanalysts in order to investigate the various ways in which psychobiographies approximate Weber's theory of charisma. And in the second section I examine psychobiographies of Martin Luther and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in order to discover how the psychobiographic approach enables us to fill out existing theories of charisma. In the conclusion I summarize my findings and argue that the student of charismatic leadership can learn from a psychobiographic approach, and that a better understanding of charismatic authority can improve the work of political biographers.

PSYCHOBIOGRAPHY AS A SUPPLEMENT TO WEBER'S "INTERPRETATIVE SOCIOLOGY"

In his later works Weber advocated a sociological method that
displayed many similarities with psychology; this was his verstehende Soziologie ("interpretative sociology"). The method of Verstehen derives directly from his well-known definition of sociology as a science directed to understanding meaningful social action and to explaining it in fundamental terms. The object of Weber’s sociology, then, is social action, behavior that relates to others because of the subjective meaning instantiated in it. Subjective meaning is the reason that the actor, if asked, would give for the action. Whether this subjective meaning could, from an external standpoint, be termed “correct,” is of little importance to the sociologist and could not in any case be determined by means of the interpretative approach.

Thus the interpretative sociologist faces the task of discovering an individual’s motives; according to Weber, this requires the sociologist to articulate the thoughts and feelings of the acting subject. Consequently the interpretative method can only be applied to individual behavior and not to collectivities such as the state, church or political party, the very things with which sociologists in Weber’s time were preoccupied. To be sure, this does not mean that collectivities can be ignored by the interpretative sociologist, since an actor in society may take these institutions into account when deciding whether to behave in one way or another. But for Weber they are not primarily what a sociologist should be interested in, and they should always be regarded as mere composites of the behavioral patterns of individuals.

Unsurprisingly the question has often been posed whether or not Weber in fact advocated a psychological approach to human behavior disguised as an individualistic sociology. Weber himself always denied that his method was based on psychological reasoning, because in his view psychology could only help to explain human behavior that deviated from sociological laws, and thus should be regarded as supplementary to sociology. Julien Freund, however, points to the fact that in his rejection of psychoanalysis Weber did not refrain from using psychoanalytic insights into human behavior, especially in admitting that people are not always aware of the real motives for their behavior, or that they are driven by several, sometimes conflicting motivations.

Weber’s concept of charisma is a perfect test for determining the degree to which his sociology actually builds upon psychology. Charisma is a kind of legitimate authority, meaning that it is experienced as rightful by the people subjected to it. It is based on an unusual dedication to saints, heroes or other exemplary types of personality and to the order that they reveal or create. Thus it is a kind of authority which is founded on a strong
personal and emotional bond between leader and follower, often as a result of pure enthusiasm or personal need.

In so far as Weber defines authority as the potential for obedience to commands, he seems to be founding his analysis of authority on individual behavior and motives. In line with his interpretative method he distinguishes three types of authority, based on an individual's specific beliefs in the legitimacy of that authority. It might be expected, however, that he would have to delve deeply into the thoughts and feelings of his subjects in order to reveal the true content of their motives for obeying. But Weber, his interpretative sociology notwithstanding, did nothing of the kind. Having defined authority in terms of those who are subjected to it, he then went on to analyze it in terms of those possessing it. Thus he did not in fact develop a typology of authority based on interpretative sociology, as that would have required an analysis of the ways in which people experience the power to which they are subjected. Instead he developed a typology of authority based on the ways in which authority is exercised.

This becomes particularly clear when considering Weber's treatment of the origins of charismatic authority. Surprisingly he gives only a summary account of these origins, although he admits that in its earliest developmental stages charisma existed in its purest forms. Charismatic authority, according to Weber, is always the result of unusual extrinsic (political or economic) or intrinsic (spiritual) states, or a combination of both, and it arises out of the excitement which is the result of unusual situations and of a dedication to some kind of heroism. But we do not learn from Weber what exactly constitutes an "unusual state," nor do we learn why this should lead to a recognition of charismatic leaders, although these are the very kinds of questions that an interpretative sociologist should be able to answer. The same goes for the behavioral consequences of accepting a charismatic claim to authority. Charisma causes a complete and revolutionary change in an individual's world-view—an inner revolution, in Weber's phrase—but exactly what kind of behavior such a person is likely to display remains an open question.

It might seem justified to draw the conclusion that, whatever the merits of Weber's interpretative sociology, he himself had not succeeded in applying this method consistently to the social phenomena that he wanted to analyze, at least in his writings on charisma. To be sure we owe a debt to Weber for clarifying the external characteristics of such authority and for some intriguing hypotheses concerning the pressures that authority has to confront and the directions in which charismatic leader-
ship, once in existence, is likely to develop. But a deeper understanding of the motivations behind charismatic followership requires us to venture beyond the bounds of sociology and to enter the field of psychology. To be precise we must be prepared to breach one of psychology’s most disputed domains, psychoanalysis, since most psychological theories on charisma are psychoanalytic in character.

There are several ways in which psychoanalysts, beginning with Freud himself, have tried to answer the question why people are sometimes prepared to subject themselves to a leader or idol, whom they obey as if they were in a state of hypnosis. In his work of 1921 on mass psychology and ego-analysis, published about the same time as Weber’s theory of charisma, Freud argued that people in groups tend to suppress their conscious personalities in favor of an unconscious one. This then leads them to behave in an extreme, intolerant, impulsive and destructive way, fostering a need to subject or sacrifice themselves to someone in authority. Freud argued that this could only be explained by a desire to be part of a group. In his view it was a sexual instinct at work in any mass of people; diverted from its sexual goal, it constitutes the starting point for a process of identification. That process could fasten on an idealized leader in place of one’s own ideal ego. Freud interprets this type of behavior amongst individuals en masse as a regression into a primitive state, in which everyone was totally subjugated to a primal father who spreads fear and ends any freedom of the will, save his own.

By relating leadership and mass behavior to a process of identification, Freud had an unmistakable influence on later psychological contributions to the theory of charisma. Donald McIntosh, for example, argues that charisma, as a special kind of authority relationship, corresponds to the Oedipal stage in human development, and serves to bridge a gap between ego and ego-ideal, thereby silencing consciousness (superego). McIntosh proves to be more Freudian than Freud himself, because he attempts to explain the origin of charisma and the behavior of charismatic followers in terms of the interaction among id, ego and super-ego, whereas Freud attempted to account for mass behavior by postulating some kind of hypothetical primal state into which followers were expected to regress. This is far less convincing methodologically. But because McIntosh disregards the social stimuli required to trigger these psychological mechanisms, he—like Freud—fails to explain why, given this internal psychological pattern, charisma remains a highly unusual phenomenon.
A somewhat different approach to charisma, though one still focusing on the psychological development of would-be followers, is offered by Irvine Schiffer. According to Schiffer, charisma is a means to compensate for our own feelings of weakness and impotence, feelings that are awakened when a child learns to give up its symbiotic relationship to its mother and struggles to create a new identity of its own. In order to prevent the emerging and still fragile identity from regressing into the earlier state of total dependency whenever it is challenged by events in the outside world, an adolescent calls upon heroes to fight external (or externalized) threats. In that way charismatic leaders are saviors for people who cannot live with the knowledge that complete self-sufficiency and self-control are beyond the reach of mortal beings, and who continue to believe in an illusory omnipotence. The tendency to look for a hero is especially strong, Schiffer argues, in times of crisis, when our sense of identity and autonomy is most endangered.

The foregoing theories complement Weber's theory of charisma by focusing on a follower's tendency to submit to a leader's will. But the other side of the charismatic "dyad," the psychological constitution of the leader, has not been ignored by psychoanalysts. Lucien W. Pye, Victor E. Wolfenstein and Andrew S. McFarland, for example, have used Freud's views on the importance of the formation (or defense) of an identity as their starting point for analyses that center on the specific manner in which a leader has succeeded in creating an integrated identity. However, in these characterizations the weakness of psycho-historical approaches again becomes clear, in that psycho-historians tend to regard charisma as some kind of unusual gift within heroic individuals, rather than as a psychological construct of followers. Hence the coincidence of the capabilities of leaders with the needs of followers could only be accidental.

There is one psychoanalytical approach to charismatic leadership and followership that relates them both to one and the same dilemma in psychological development; hence leader and led can be considered simultaneously. The starting point for Jerrold M. Post's psychoanalytic interpretation of charismatic authority is a phenomenon identified by Heinz Kohut as "the injured self." This refers to a self-concept which has been damaged, because an individual has not been able to deal effectively with the loss of his capacity, in early childhood, to manipulate the environment in response to his or her needs. In order to cling to the childish belief that one is not merely the center of the universe but the universe itself, some people remain fixed in a developmental stage in which they either try to idealize them-
selves or in which they attach themselves to an idealized external object. This fixation results in two personality patterns: the mirror-hungry personality, and the ideal-hungry personality. In the charismatic relationship these two personality structures meet, and therefore to some extent the relationship between charismatic leaders and followers may be termed therapeutic.\textsuperscript{12}

In summary, psychoanalysts have offered several hypotheses to elucidate the inner mechanisms that must account for the development of a charismatic relationship between leaders and followers. Some of these psychoanalytical approaches to charisma supplement Weber’s descriptive treatment of charismatic authority by focusing on the follower’s commitment. Others deviate from Weber’s approach by relating charisma to the psychological development of the leader, rather than to the recognition experienced by followers. To test the value of these hypotheses, in-depth analyses of cases of charismatic authority relations would be required. For that reason the student of charisma, looking for a supplement to Weber’s work, might profitably investigate psychobiographies of charismatic leaders. It may be, however, that psychobiographies fail to live up to these expectations.

CHARISMA IN PSYCHOBIOGRAPHY

Psychobiographies are always about people who deviated from the social mainstream and became “great” in their virtues or vices. Thus psychobiographies have been written about artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Richard Wagner, Edgar Allen Poe, Nikolai Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Ludwig van Beethoven—to name but a few—but we do not know much about the people who are fascinated by the smile of the Mona Lisa, who visit the Festspielhaus in Bayreuth or who read Faust over and over again, unless they happen to have been “great” themselves.\textsuperscript{13} Similarly, political leaders such as Abraham Lincoln, Napoleon Bonaparte, Mohandas K. Gandhi and Adolph Hitler have been the subject of psychobiographies, but it would be extremely difficult to find an equally sophisticated analysis of one of their many followers. This suggests that existing psychobiographies of charismatic leaders can only be useful in assessing the value of non-Weberian theories of charisma centering on the psychological development of a leader (the psycho-historian’s approach) or giving equal weight to leader and follower (Post’s approach); the alternative is to assume that no basic distinction need be made between the psychological mechanisms that induce people to become heroes or saviors and the psychological origins
of the blind faith and unthinking obedience that they inspire in their followers. There is little in Freud’s work on mass psychology that would allow such an assumption. With McIntosh, however, there seems to be no objection, as self-acceptance and ego-strengthening could be as essential to a leader’s psychological makeup as to a follower’s. Schiffer, like Freud, is not explicit enough with regard to the leaders’ motivational backgrounds to justify an equation between leader and follower; as the subtitle of his book suggests, he seems to regard charisma as an attribute of mass society rather than of the leaders of the masses.

To illustrate the methods by which psychobiographers have in practice approached charismatic leaders, I shall examine two works: Erik H. Erikson’s *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History*, which has become a classic, and one of the more recent studies in psychobiography, Vamik D. Volkan and Norman Itzkowitz’s *The Immortal Atatürk*.

**ERIK H. ERIKSON: YOUNG MAN LUTHER**

Erikson’s psychobiography of Luther appears to be a straightforward instance of the charismatic hero in McFarland’s “charisma paradigm” or in Pye’s “great man” mold, a hero who offers a new sense of identity to his followers, while struggling to find his own. Erikson’s starting point is the identity crisis facing adolescents, and his central theme is his conviction that Luther’s solution to his identity crisis “roughly bridged a political and psychological vacuum which history had created in a significant part of Western Christendom,” and that such a “coincidence, if further coinciding with the deployment of highly specific personal gifts, makes for historical ‘greatness.’” It is this formula which accounts for the claim made by Erikson that his study of Luther is really a study in psychoanalysis and history, not simply a psychopathological case study.

However, when we weigh the amount and richness of the material offered by Erikson on Luther as a subject for analysis against the way he treats the “political and psychological vacuum” that is said to have given this personal struggle its historical dimensions, or when we consider the exact nature of the “highly specific personal gifts” which enabled Luther to become a “great man,” we note an unsatisfactory imbalance. Erikson shows convincingly that people like the young Luther are in search of universal, ultimate values, but Erikson concedes that “what specific gifts and what extraordinary opportunities permit them to impose this alternative on whole nations and periods—of this we know little.” This, as Erikson seems to admit, reduces the
phenomenon of the "great man" to a matter of coincidence, such that any deeper insight by the psycho-historian is not even possible.\textsuperscript{17}

That Erikson's approach suffers from the general weakness of any psycho-historical analysis of great leaders does not mean that his work is of no value, because in describing Luther's "provincial and personal strivings" Erikson touches upon themes central to other psychoanalytically oriented theories of charisma, most importantly the one offered by McIntosh. Thus Erikson's analysis of the crucial events in Luther's life seems to confirm the relevance McIntosh attaches to revelation in the development of charisma. According to the psychology outlined by McIntosh, the revelations that Luther experienced had to result in a strengthening of the ego.\textsuperscript{18}

VAMIK D. VOLKAN AND NORMAN ITZKOWITZ: THE IMMORTAL ATATÜRK

This biography employs Kohut's concepts of the "injured" and the "grandiose" selves, which also inspired Post's view of charisma as a relationship based upon narcissism. A charismatic leader is typically a person who tries to compensate for feelings of inadequacy, often resulting from an emotional undernourishment or insufficient care by a mother during childhood. Thus the subject cherishes fantasies of being special. For little Mustafa such a grandiose self, according to Volkan and Itzkowitz, was his most basic character trait, the result of his mother's aloofness. This was caused by her continuous grieving for the children she had already lost before Mustafa was born, and was underscored by the fact that she could not feed the child adequately and thus had to place her infant son with a wet nurse. In developing an image of the grandiose self, Mustafa was helped by the fact that his father had died during Mustafa's Oedipal age. Thus an agent that usually serves to tame images of a grandiose self had been removed, and, more importantly, Mustafa may have fantasized that he himself had been responsible for that removal and had won the Oedipal struggle. In that way Mustafa may have developed an inflated ego.\textsuperscript{19}

Throughout his life Mustafa felt a need to prove to himself and to others that he was justified in thinking himself superior and deserving of special treatment. This remained a driving force behind his conduct, and it seems difficult to overestimate its effects. Eventually he set himself the modernization of Turkey as his major task, especially its westernization and secularization. An unconscious desire to separate himself from the negative,
religious image of his mother may have played an important role in this respect, according to Volkan and Itzkowitz. In 1934 Mustafa Kemal received a new surname, Atatürk, or father of the Turks, reflecting the Oedipal victory on a national scale, having saved the grieving motherland from the evil sultan and having furnished it with a better future in order for it to admire him all the more and to satisfy his narcissistic needs. Thus he was not a destructive narcissist devaluing others in order to feel superior, but a reparative one.20

Volkan and Itzkowitz present the life of Atatürk as a case study of an individual whose psychological makeup impelled him to settle his internal conflicts on the stage of world history. Reading this story, however, one cannot escape the feeling that more is needed to account for a life like Atatürk’s than a single childhood experience on which, moreover, the authors offer only very brief and unconvincing material. There is no hard data on the issue whether little Mustafa really experienced any inadequate mothering, save the fact that his mother was not able to feed her son. But as William Runyan notes, “the bulk of quantitative empirical studies do not demonstrate connections between character-types and specific childhood experiences associated with feeding or toilet-training,” and one should as a consequence “proceed sparingly with statements attributing adult behavior to childhood experiences, deprivations or conflicts.”21 Also, it may be true that because of the fit between his childhood experiences and his perceptions of the external world, Mustafa Kemal was perfectly suited to assume a role of national, if not supra-national dimensions. But to be successful in such an undertaking requires not only a strong will in a leader but also a strong willingness in a people. What is missing in The Immortal Atatürk is the ideal-hungry follower who complements the image-hungry leader.

CONCLUSION

Consideration of Erikson’s Young Man Luther and Volkan and Itzkowitz’ The Immortal Atatürk illustrates a common observation: most people would agree that in order to achieve greatness in politics one has to attract a great following, yet the specific motivational background of followers is largely ignored in psychobiographies. Leaders tend to be regarded by psychobiographers as people with special gifts or pathologies who are able to mold their environments to their own wishes, rather than as persons who achieve greatness through an unusual capability to let their wishes be molded by their environments.
While an analysis of the expectations of followers might not be essential to a psychobiographical account of leaders representing routinized types of authority, it seems difficult to understand great revolutionaries, as so many charismatic leaders seem to have been, without having any ideas concerning what is in the hearts and minds of the people that they were able to inspire. While it may not be true in general that, as Weber thought, the expectations and belief systems of subordinates are of such importance to the way in which authority is exercised that they should be the foundation of any typology of authority, it is still very much to the purpose to state that the bearer of a non-institutionalized kind of authority such as charisma must indeed be extremely sensitive to the needs—conscious or unconscious—of potential followers. As Weber noted, it is recognition by followers which determines whether and for how long leaders may claim charismatic authority. To that extent charismatic leaders are not so much the product of their own pasts as they are an expression of the pasts and presents of others.

This brings me to my final conclusion. In order to understand charismatic leaders we must understand the environments in which they appear. This conclusion is in line with the results of an empirical study of revolutionary leaders by Mostafa Rejai and Kay Phillips, in which they argue that the emergence of revolutionary leaders can only be explained by an interplay between a revolutionary situation, a set of psychological dynamics, and a range of skills.\(^22\) This does not imply that a sociological approach to charisma should be preferred and that nothing can be expected from psychobiography. In his treatment of the "psychobiography debate," Runyan identifies a number of reasons why biographers may be attracted by a psychoanalytically oriented interpretative scheme.\(^23\) Psychoanalysis raises questions that might otherwise be overlooked, and it points to behavior that would normally escape the attention of the biographer. It also enables the biographer to explain unusual patterns of behavior, and it enables the biographer to speculate on the basis of fragmentary evidence that would normally remain unused. Moreover, it offers conceptual tools flexible enough to account for a wide variety of behaviors, and, despite its flaws, some aspects of psychoanalytic theory—such as theories concerning unconscious motives and conflicts, identification, and the use of defense mechanisms—can be valuable.

However, we cannot claim to understand charismatic leaders when we have traced their private motives for public behavior. In order to gain a more than fragmentary understanding of this behavior, we require an approach that takes mass-psycho-
logical observations as a starting point, and then includes psychological analyses of specific individuals as well as sociological materials. Case studies of charismatic leadership should concentrate on the leader and some of his most prominent followers, thus covering the social-psychological mechanisms working on both sides of the charismatic “dyad.” In political science there is ample justification for focusing on leaders, but there are no leaders without followers.

NOTES

1 Generally the origin of the term charisma is referenced to I Corinthians, in which it figures among the gifts bestowed by the Holy Ghost. But the prototypes for Weber’s ideal type may have been the judges or prophets of the Old Testament. See Peter L. Berger, “Charisma and Religious Innovation: The Social Location of Israelite Prophecy,” American Sociological Review, vol. 28 (1963), pp. 940-50.

2 D.L. Cohen, “The Concept of Charisma and the Analysis of Leadership,” Political Studies, vol. 20 (1972), p. 304. It should be noted, however, that political scientists have sometimes succumbed to the tendency to stretch the category of charismatic leaders to include leaders of western, highly institutionalized and relatively stable political systems that allow gifted people to become extremely popular. But these circumstances are not conducive to strong emotional ties between leader and followers and do not include the blind faith and unconditional obedience characteristic of charisma.


This question arises the more so as McIntosh admits that “the vast bulk of mankind in their main psychic constellations either remain fixed at the Oedipal phase or regress to a pre-Oedipal level.” Donald McIntosh, “Weber and Freud: On the Nature and Sources of Authority,” *American Sociological Review*, vol. 35 (1970), pp. 906.


A conclusion which is largely substantiated by research on members of religious sects; see, for example, Alexander Deutsch, “Observations on a Sidewalk Ashram,” *Archives of General Psychiatry*, vol. 32 (1975), pp. 166-75. See also Jerrold M. Post, “Narcissism and the Charismatic Leader—Follower Relationship,” *Political Psychology*, vol. 7 (1986), pp. 675-88.

Thus we know something about Hitler’s admiration for the music of Wagner; see, for example, Johann C. Fest, *Hitler* (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 1973).

This, strangely enough, does not restrain him from giving a detailed account of the charismatic image of the leader; see Schiffer, *Charisma*, pp. 21-55.


Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, pp. 94, 217.

23 See Runyan, *Life Histories and Psychobiography*. 