Charisma, Political Innovation and Why Superman is Rational: The Case of Argentina’s Juan Perón

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Abstract: This paper offers a conceptual analysis of charismatic leadership, beginning with the observation that such phenomenon is often portrayed as irrational, disruptive and individualistic. As it is not unusual for debates in sociology to be presented in terms of dichotomous logic, the issue might be framed in terms of ‘agency versus structure’ and ‘reason versus emotion’, where emotion and agency are pitted against rationality and civility. Weber’s work on charismatic authority demands an understanding of these categories and of his methodology; this paper briefly establishes a degree of ambivalence in the approaches of the received scholarship in relation to these themes. I argue that the charismatic leader is neither an ‘irrational Superman’ nor the inevitable expression of forces of social change, but a rational crucial instrument in the transient process of political change and subsequent social transformation. The rest of the paper illustrates some aspects of this process with reference to the rise of Juan Perón in Argentina. The relation between agency and structure or between the charismatic leader and the systems that constitute society is shown to be interactive, fluid and immediate, accompanied by the destruction and reconstruction of institutions in the rational pursuit of a new social order.

Introduction: Conceptual and Methodological Considerations

Many long standing debates in sociology and in the majority of the human sciences are framed or imagined in terms of dichotomous logic. Questions of the relative roles of “social structures” versus “agency”, for example, have been formative for the discipline of sociology, serving on one hand to focus research questions and on the other, to limit the types of answers sociologists can offer. A reduction of the problem of charismatic leadership and its relationship to the institutional system in terms of dichotomous logic, as a representation of another iteration of the structure/agency debate “the individual versus the institution” is one way to approach the issue. When charisma and by implication, the charismatic leader, are characterised in terms of another product of such logic prevalent in Western philosophy, that of “rationality
versus emotion”, then we run the risk of being left with more antithetic categories, where emotion and agency are pitted against structural rationality and civility.

The use of such categories cannot be completely avoided. This is evidenced by the fact that for decades scholars of Weber’s work have been engaging in complex debates that attempt to clarify the use of such categories or terminologies present in his work on charisma, charismatic authority and several other interrelated themes, often with ambivalent results. The debates have been partly fuelled by the complexity inherent in Weber’s methodology. Weber’s historical and comparative sociological method is based on interpretative sociology and the use of verstehen (empathetic understanding) of the subjective meanings and purposes of social action necessary for the analysis of causal explanation in history, defined as a succession of unique events. The main methodological tool is the “ideal-type”, a trans-epochal and trans-cultural heuristic device, the selected features of which are extracted from specific historical situations, systemised and applied comparatively to diverse historical configurations to analyse various distinctive comparable features of historical phenomena.

An amount of conceptual order can thus be brought to disordered realities and to causal explanations of various historical phenomena, in terms of patterns of development, re-emergence or transformation that clarify the relationship between ideas and subsequent events. It is clear that this methodology attempts to address the conceptual gaps between historical specificity and sociological generalisation. For instance, the formulation of the concept of charisma as an archetype in Weber’s political sociology is based on extensive comparative investigations in the leadership and organisation of the early Christian Church, as well as various studies on religious
leadership. Features of patrimonialism (a form of paternalistic decentralised traditional authority that was an extension of patriarchy) can be found in charismatic authority, such as the element of personalism, loyalty and the relative dependence of the ruler upon the goodwill of his subjects. Such similarities strongly suggest that the innovative element in charismatic authority is subject to temporal and structural limitations, whereby features of traditional personalism and the force of custom intermingled with more modern legal-rational elements may resurface as the charismatic moment eventually fades.

While there is general agreement that charismatic authority is somewhat tied to the regeneration of the social system, there is considerable disagreement with regard to a number of pertinent issues. Some of these issues can be identified as, for instance, the significance of the “rational” and the “irrational” as either substantive or instrumental forces in modern systems, whether or not Weber’s sociology is heavily disposed toward individualistic subjectivism or whether it can be qualified as social determinism, or even pessimism (Turner 1996: 1, 52-53) and whether the tension between the external order and the demands of inner personality is the central theme of Weber’s work (Hennis 1988). Despite the level of sophistication of the analyses in question, much of the scholarship comes at times perilously close to interpreting Weber’s concept of charisma as the antinomy of rationality (Mommsen 1989: 142) and the charismatic leader as the continuation of the great hero type (Gerth & Mills 1946: 53).

In this paper I argue that for the problem of charismatic leadership and its relationship to the surrounding political institutions, dichotomous or dualistic categories such as
the “rational” and the “irrational” need to be understood as operating in a dialectical manner. Using the Peronist phenomenon in Argentina as an illustration, I argue in favour of an interpretation of the relationship between the charismatic leader and the political institutional system as complex and fluid, where charismatic leadership is a crucial albeit temporary instrument of political change and subsequent social transformation of orders that have become essentially irrational. This is the preferred approach that moves beyond the view of charismatic leaders as all powerful, extraordinary individuals or the charismatic bond as simply an irrational phenomenon. I also argue that this dynamic process between agency and structure or between the charismatic leader and the systems that constitute society is immediately interactive and essentially rational in its ultimate purpose, although not necessarily in some of its expressions.

The Individual, the Social Order and Innovation

In *Charisma* Lindholm (1990) argues that Western thought has traditionally portrayed human beings as creatures torn by the conflict between passion and reason. Lindholm sees two very distinctive models of leadership emerging from such philosophy. One is Nietzsche’s emotional and wilful Superman or *Übermensch* opposed to rational order, while the other is drawn from rational utilitarian doctrines, the “rational man” committed to order and “progress”. It is a short step from here to align Weber’s charismatic personality with Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, whose new values pave the way to authentic selfhood (Schroeder 1987).

Weber’s notion was however more complex than the glorification or the isolated struggle of the individual, because it attempts to link human thought and ideas to
changes and continuities in the social order. The charismatic individual is given the task of challenging the political system in order to induce change at all levels of society, particularly cultural and social. When charismatic authority prevails, the process of interaction between agency and structure is rapidly and intensely transformative of what constitutes “universal” meaning and values, collective and individual identities and social organisation.

It would be easy to interpret this strand of Weber’s work as antagonistic to rationality and order, and charisma itself as a merely revolutionary and disruptive force, but the distinction made by Eisenstadt (1995: 198-199) between substantive and organisational rationalism enables a much more sophisticated interpretation of Weber’s ideas. Substantive (or pertaining-to-values) rationalism can be understood as a drive toward the constant regeneration of what could be termed the “inspired organisation of ideas”. While charismatic leadership exists in a state of constant tension with organisational rationalism (for the latter is often a constraint) it is ultimately the means to a substantive rational end, that is, the search for alternatives in social order and organization.

In this Weberian scheme, the Renaissance-borne antinomy of “rationality versus passion” is also overturned, as Superman and the “rational man” become a singular entity, ridden with the same tensions that are reflected in the social order. The human search for meaning is therefore not the product of passions alone (as often implied in Western literature), but also of that substantive or pertaining- to- values rationality. New conceptions of goals and order are articulated in the time of charismatic rule that might in turn redefine collective and personal identity, societal centers and channels
of access to these centers and finally produce change in the social order. The rest of this paper will analyse the dynamics between a charismatic leader, Juan Perón, and the surrounding political institutions, in setting the stage for political and social innovation.

**The Fleeting Charismatic Moment**

Debates about charismatic leadership are often presented as interpretations from various disciplines, with little distinction between the preconditions and the dimensions of such leadership, the latter as modes not so much of definition but of expression and sustenance of charisma. More often than not, charismatic leaders do not create the institutional “preconditions” necessary for political change, but have the ability to recognise a political system that is not addressing economic problems, social malaises or cultural conflict. In a similar fashion, charismatic leaders also acknowledge the existence of a “predisposed” audience (Schiffer 1973).

These times of “crisis” are at their highest intensity when basic values, institutions, hegemonic discourses and the legitimacy of governments are brought into question. This scenario is best illustrated in Latin America, where the political culture already favours personalistic rule over legal-rational systems of authority. More often than not, the nature of the modernisation process that followed the independence movements is depicted as the cause of structural changes that have led to socio-economic conditions of disorientation and distress. The credibility of the pertinent political institutions is severely damaged when they have been unable to deal with these changes, often operating with high levels of incompetence and corruption. Those Latin American countries that have managed to establish frail democracies find
public opinion increasingly sceptical of an ideology that promises much more than it actually manages to deliver.

In Argentina, the preconditions for the Peronist phenomenon were clearly laid out at a time of economic depression and high rates of unemployment. In the early 1940s Perón was to rise to power in a country that was democratic (at least in the electoral sense). Argentina also possessed a system of unions unable to organise effective change, a politically unorganised working class not effectively represented by the national left wing and general disillusionment with representative government. To this picture, we should add the presence of a number of nationalistic movements that paved the way for the strong nationalistic dimension in Peronism, such as FORJA (Radical Orientation Forces of the Argentine Youth -1935) and the Alianza de la Juventud Nacionalista, established in 1937.

It should be clarified at this point that the existence of preconditions is a necessary but not sufficient variable in the development of charisma as a base of political authority. Preconditions do not “create” the charismatic leader, but certainly open up politically contestable spaces. If certain preconditions are present, a leader may come along, with both the ability and the willingness to challenge the existing political system. This is where it is crucial to understand that at the initial stage, the charismatic does not establish the basis of political authority by relying on force, custom or even on persuasion, but rather, through his or her alleged almost supernatural, semi-divine or superhuman power which, as believed by their followers, gives them (the leaders) the ability to redefine social and cultural values.
Charisma might well be an intangible phenomenon; however there are certain historic moments when it comes close to being visible in manifestations that possess a distinctly irrational element. As Norton describes in *Representation: Presence and Absence* (1988: 102), there is a moment in time when agency repudiates structure, a moment of recognition:

> The momentary repudiation of structure in charismatic authority makes the process of validation necessarily informal and immediate.

The semi-divine mystical quality that these leaders possess in the eyes of their followers will, albeit temporarily, allow agency to overcome the constraints of structure (organisational rationalism). At these moments, the charismatic leader and the message articulated are highly relevant and meaningful to people. In Argentina such a moment is widely acknowledged to have occurred the 17th of October 1945, when the masses congregated in Plaza de Mayo screaming for Perón’s release from jail until late in the evening, when he appeared on that famous balcony.

Making the Moment Last: The Charismatic Leader and the Institutional Context

A clear distinction should however be made between the relationship the charismatic leader has with the followers and that of the same leader with the political-institutional order. In many ways, the charismatic leader begins his or her political career as an anomaly in the system. Although supported by certain classes or sections of that particular society (in the case of a populist system such as the one in Argentina, by a multi-class coalition), such leaders do not normally represent any such bodies in a formal or complete manner; in fact there will be very little initial reliance on established political institutions and procedures. In a revolutionary fashion (although not necessarily in the conventional sense of the word), the initial
detachment of the charismatic leader from the institutional setting allows the immediate contestation of political space, with acts of institutional “destruction” and “reconstruction” of some elements, thus setting the stage for the subsequent transformation of the social order.

As soon as Juan Perón accessed power in 1946, he dismantled the parties that had supported his ascension, including the Partido Laborista and the Unión Cívica Radical-Junta Renovadora, subsequently forming the Peronist Party. According to the testimony of one of his officers, Perón stated:

> If we attempt to modify the actual state of things abruptly, we do not doubt that this minority (referring to the oligarchy) would swallow us up at once...Consequently, we will change the political, economic, and social physiognomy of the country by means of new procedures and methods that will progressively break down the old and bureaucratic organisations. (Lucero 1959 in Barager 1968: 178)

Institutions were created or reshaped by both Juan and Evita Perón, such as the Department of Labour and Social Work and the Eva Perón Foundation, in order to carry out their political programs; in 1944 a Secretariat of Industry and Commerce was also established, to promote business interests. But perhaps the most innovative move Perón made was to institutionalise a state-controlled system of unions that redistributed national wealth.

**After the Deluge**

As Weber had argued, the perceived superhuman powers of any individual are not sustainable as a basis of political authority for long. Charismatic leaders need to employ a number of strategies to reaffirm their legitimacy, prolong their power in the
in institutional setting and maintain the recognition of their followers. These strategies can virtually be equated with the various ways charisma is expressed, diluted and eventually institutionalised. Three such strategies are identified in this paper as material, discursive and symbolic. The first is concerned with a possible range of material benefits that charismatic leaders bestow on their followers. The second strategy employed is discursive, meaning the articulation or re-articulation of certain values and goals. Often such discourse includes elements of nationalistic sentiment, quasi-religious connotations that hail the leader as “the saviour”, the Manichean construction of a political field in terms of “us” and “them” (where the enemy is often exaggerated or created) and the offering to the followers of a sense of political identity and purpose. The third way charisma is sustained is arguably the most significant, for it is concerned with the body of rituals and symbolic associations that shape national culture and mythology. In the *The Spellbinders* (1984), for instance, Willner argues that charismatic leaders have the ability to evoke, associate with themselves, draw upon and manipulate the body of myth and sacred symbols in a given culture.

The Argentine working class gained a number of tangible material benefits from the Peronist experience, particularly from the first government (1946-1951), including higher real wages, pension schemes, improved working conditions and a range of other benefits (Hodges 1976: 16). But Perón also gave his descamisados (shirtless ones) political identity and a sense of class consciousness that they had never had before. His political discourse did not address the workers as atomised individuals, but as part of a valuable organised political and social force (James 1988: 7-40). The Peronist Movement can be understood as a nationalistic, social movement that
attempted (and succeeded, to an extent) in establishing a new social order, with new societal rituals and symbols in Argentina (Plotkin 1993).

Charismatic leaders inevitably leave a mark in a nation’s collective memory; more often than not they divide rather then unite public opinion. Hated, loved or feared, they are seldom ignored. While their leadership is transformative in the sense that it alters the political system, it does not necessarily modernise it, since a number of its traditional features might be utilised and hence reaffirmed. This range of responses is nothing if not a reflection of the versatile nature of charismatic authority, as a force with disruptive and creative dimensions. The charismatic leader is neither pure actor nor an inevitable expression of the forces of social change. This paper stresses that this phenomenon is best understood as a process of complex interaction between agency and structure, rather than as an expression of individualistic free will triumphing over social structure for however short a period of time. Most importantly, the overall process and its *Ubermensch* are essentially rational in the quest for new regulations, new collective symbols and discourses that arise in response to the need to redefine some of the central values and meanings of the social order.

**References**


