

*Language and the Scientific Imagination*  
The 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference of ISSEI  
Language Centre, University of Helsinki (Finland)  
28 July – 2 August 2008



## **Charisma and the Case of Philip Rieff**

In a book project begun in the late sixties but abandoned by the mid seventies, the late critic of culture Philip Rieff took up a notion central to sociology since Max Weber, the notion of “charisma.”<sup>1</sup> Rescued not long before his death in 2006 and recently published, the rough manuscript opposed Weber’s sociological notion of “divine gifts” to the biblical notion of charisma (the gift or grace of God).<sup>2</sup> Rieff wanted to show the fatal inability of sociology to grasp either the nature of charisma or that of social order. That, he suggested, is irreducibly theological, a black hole for scientific reduction. Rather than a phenomenon of “domination,” as Weber sees it, order generated by charisma can function only as a given, a revelation, a gift of grace. Its sustainability depends on our ability to accept it; grace is a capacity to receive; faith is the capacity to obey. Instead of a barely disguised man of power, Rieff appealed to the Hebrew prophet. That repellant voice of holy terror recalls with fear and trembling the “commanding truths” of omnipotent authority, divine prohibitions that open up the space of revelation. Sociology cannot theorize order without in effect dissolving it. In effect, this aborted book was Rieff’s farewell to sociology in any conventional sense, in the name of its own constitutive object, “sacred order”.

The critical vein of Rieff’s argument might be put as follows. In the guise of historical sociology, Weberian charisma is a backhanded legitimation of democratic culture,

increasing geared towards the charisma of “exceptional” individuals in the absence of more authoritative sources of order. It disavowed charisma’s biblical meaning (despite its evident appeal to the example of Christ) though that or something similar was implied in any substantive concept of order—a founding act of divine command, or a revelatory concept of the sacred. In its place, Weber set something closer to a quasi-pagan *ingenium*, a dominating power of personality or the magnetism of a “superior” will.<sup>3</sup> As a “force of nature,” it was morally neutral, susceptible of being wedded to good or evil ends. Despite its stress on responsibility, Weber’s intellectualism is a disintegrative element of modern culture. Appearing to recall the spontaneity of origins of a civilization grown sclerotic through routinization, in fact it prepared the way (unintentionally) towards the likes of Stalin and Hitler.

In this, sociology shared a common fate with other “human sciences,” such as psychoanalysis or anthropology. Such sciences were motivated by a perceived crisis of modern society, rooted in the ambiguous consequences of the decline of religion in the original sense, that of a sacred bond. The progress of science, commerce, technology, industry, liberty, and equality inevitably led to the *dis*-integration of individual and community. And that in turn entailed an internal disintegration, a loss of cohesion in the self, reflected in the spiritual confusions and pathologies of democratic man. Thus Weber’s famous “iron cage” of bureaucratic rationalism, or Emile Durkheim’s notion of “anomie”—alternative formulations of the loss of integrating authority, or its petrification into impersonal, de-humanized forms. A similar problematic is evident in Freud’s civilizational “discontent,” a psychic revenge society takes on the individual for the

weakening of its bonds in liberalism. A century after the height of its optimism in French Revolution, these thinkers voice the Enlightenment's melancholy enlightenment about the results of its own "progress"—the failure of its success, so to say. One hundred years of relative peace, prosperity, and progress inspired rather a growing sense of nihilism and decadence, confirmed by two world wars, the Jazz Age, Communism, and Fascism, all by the mid twentieth century. Human sciences aggravated that crisis, though, a double one, of the relation of the individual to social order, and of the social order to the sacred. The detached, ironic, subtly subversive "intellectualism" Weber exemplified (alongside that of other outstanding minds, such as Freud or Durkheim), conceived as a response to civilizational crisis, proved rather to be essential to it. And a far more effective foe of the remnants of tradition than its declared enemies, such as Ludwig Feuerbach, Friedrich Nietzsche, or Karl Marx.

In the problem of charisma, Rieff hit upon a key to democratic culture. Weber conceived charisma historically, as a type of "domination" creating institutions that then debased their generative inspiration. The modern world represents an ossification of its creative origins. But Rieff sees in this construction of charisma a distinctively (though not uniquely) modern phenomenon, a regular feature of politics in the age of equality. As inherited authorities decay, the ambiguous force of personality gains as one of its organizing principles. Weberian charisma is a structure of relations, of leader and followers, for example, or master and disciples. The charismatic appears to his contemporaries to hold the secret of their salvation. He affords them a new law in the context of an inherited order whose authorities no longer serve or satisfy their felt needs.

Implicitly democratic, charisma is a moral “election” under conditions of relative reciprocity; “divine gifts” are the expression of a social relation. But Weber also obscures the mechanism of this relation as if its phenomenal effects captivated him, shrouded in the aura of the generative will of the revolutionary. Yet it is in the modern age, not the primordial past, that we observe both the purest and the most degenerate forms of charisma in the sociological sense, in mass politics, popular culture, and consumerism. Weber adapts figures and types of the past to the exigencies of modern ideology.

Weber did not merely describe charisma, though; he also exemplified it. As one of the first true “public intellectuals,” he exercised extraordinary influence for an entire generation of thinkers and intellectuals, not only German.<sup>4</sup> His “intellectualism” was not just encyclopedic, profound, and original; it was widely received as an existential model, a stance towards existence in a de-converted world, and a bridge between life and politics, public and private. In the garb of sociology, he presented his contemporaries with a paradigm of being; some consider him to be the first proper twentieth century existentialist, *avant la lettre*.<sup>5</sup> Yet, according to Rieff, Weber unwittingly helped prepare the culture for far more demonic forms, despite his high-minded stress upon vocation and accountability.

This brings us to the problem of the essay. Even though *Charisma* was abandoned, its theme is at the heart of Rieff’s life-project, a sociological critique of democratic culture. Given its compulsive antinomianism, modern culture is ordered around outstanding personalities (powerful or celebrated) as much as or more than around the authority of

institutions. But it is also the guiding principle of Rieff's own hermeneutic. His sociology is not aimed at society so much as culture, nor is it grounded on statistics and observations or ideal types. As an interpretive sociology, it is not, like Weber's, so much of types or forms as of the conflicted individuals who exemplify them. The type is the individual, such as Sigmund Freud or Max Weber. Rieff called them "feeling intellects," of which he counted himself one. Loss of appreciation of the "feeling intellect"—the theoretical personality of the thinker, his intellectual character—is one of the signs of what he called the decline in the "tragic sensibility" that ought to characterize the "officer class," the governing elites necessary in every department of social life. For Rieff, the hermeneutic of sociology is not directed so much at texts as at the individual characters articulated in them. Works are personalities, the decantation or crystallization of a thinker's attempt as an individual to mediate the inner contradictions or ambivalences of his culture. They are a "symbolic" that aims to mediate the relation of sacred order and social order, as he put it in his final books. The node through which that passes can only be the psyche of the individual. It is not only impossible to eliminate the real writer from the text or to reduce authorship to a social construct, as structuralists wanted; it is profoundly misguided, not to say misleading. Rieff's occupation with charisma is part of his own attempt, out of season as Nietzsche might say, to reaffirm the reality at the heart of culture—human beings, especially exemplary ones, situated along the axes of "sacred order," rising, falling, shifting sideways. So even as Rieff criticizes the debasement of charisma in democratic culture, his own method reflects it, in its fascination with exceptional individuals—intellectuals—the makers of culture's "symbolic." This brings us to a critical ambiguity in the work and the man.

Rieff mounts a powerful attack on Weberian charisma, but on the basis of a hermeneutic that is indebted to it. His work and life are notoriously pervaded by such incongruities. In *Charisma*, he insists upon the theological underpinnings of order, sociologically irreducible, yet makes this argument from within a sociological, inherently secular frame. He rejects the functionalism of Durkheim, yet does so on the basis of that thus conceived the sacred cannot perform its social function. A non-observant Jew, he defends an almost Catholic sense of order (against the Protestant decadence of Christendom). But while saddling Protestantism with the unraveling of modern culture, he identifies with Søren Kierkegaard, in his sense of the cultural crisis of his time. His occasional “Catholicism” and “Protestantism,” though, cohabits with deep Jewish distrust of historical Christianity.

These and other paradoxes indicate deep ambivalence on Rieff’s part, but one indicative of democratic culture itself. Rieff embodied, if in antithetical form, the same paradoxes and antinomies he excavated in others. What he identifies in the range of thinkers he is especially concerned with is “anti-culture,” a perverse culture devoted to the deconstruction of culture or order itself. He brought out their opposition to culture in his opposition to them. This may help us to understand and appreciate the significance of Rieff as a bellwether of modernity. In his uncompromising opposition to modern (anti-) culture, Rieff himself evinces it. Democratic culture is not simply opposed to an earlier, religiously traditional culture; it *is* their opposition. It is not able to digest its past but neither may it dispense with it. The internal unfolding of this antithesis seems to be the peculiar legacy of the West, ongoing and insoluble—though the balance of forces has long since shifted in favor of revolt. Modernity is not one of two but two-cultures-in-one,

“traditional” and “modern”; it is their union, their fraternal enmity. Ambivalence is not just a characteristic; it is its structure. The cacophonies of the culture-wars belie the fact that *culture-war* itself is the substance of democracy, not an accident but a fate that has become a destiny. Rieff evinces this impasse, without expressing quite so directly—not because he misses it, but because he is fixed within it.

This is not simply aberration or hypocrisy, as the unsympathetic mind likes to cast the spiritual conflicts of others. It is the condition of the modern intellect itself, strung out between two contrary worlds. Rieff does not so much confront as live this fact, with honesty unmatched by his contemporaries, mostly content to construct for themselves ideological fairy-tales Left or Right. As a Kierkegaardian aesthete might say, this makes him “interesting,” or a Freudian, a real “case.” But he cannot be faulted for not doing what only self-deceiving ideologues imagine they can do. This is his Kafkaian dedication to truth. It suggests that we should grasp Rieff’s sociology partly in a sociology of Rieff.

Rieff exemplifies a structure aptly described by René Girard as “mimetic rivalry”: his “rivals” are his “models.” But he does so in a way that reveals it as both constitutive and destructive of democratic culture. For Girard, the basis of rivalry is, paradoxically, identification; it is the rival’s perception of himself in the mirror of his adversary that expresses itself in antagonism and animosity. The model is a rival, if not an enemy, just because he is a model. Likewise, Rieff’s cultural adversaries were his inspirations, and his inspirations exuded an adversarial element. The most important of these models and rivals are not living ones, to be sure, as in the relation of Nietzsche and Wagner, for

example, or, say, Marx and Lasalle, or Hegel and Schelling or Schleiermacher. Rieff's model rivals seem intellectually reflected onto the plane of history, a combat with dead heroes rather than living ones. Surely, though, it is not an accident that his first wife Susan Sontag went in exactly the opposite direction. Sontag enjoyed acclaim as a writer, critic, and novelist, outside the academy despite her scholarly credentials. Instrumental in bringing structuralist criticism to America, she was intellectually the inverse of Rieff in virtually every respect. Pointedly Rieff chose the opposite course, almost a kind of writerly failure, as if conspicuously rejecting any kind of literary "success" as public intellectual. The radicalism of Rieff's anti-modernism is a reflex of his own modernism; it is a Jekyll to modernism's Hyde. His critical "animosity" to his cultural rivals is governed in part by his felt identification with them, as purveyors of modernity. This in no way diminishes the problematic he saw in them, as implicit exponents of "anti-culture." Rather, it is what enabled him to see it. But in them Rieff encounters himself as a sociologist—that is, intellectual exponent of democratic man. Defending the irreducibly theological nature of order, he did so in a sociological idiom. He did not become an orthodox believer.

Rivalry crosses a critical threshold into enmity when rank breaks down and no longer reins it in within certain limits. Where inherited forms lose their mediating power, rivalry takes on a life of its own, independent of real goods. Individuals are carried away by fascination with each other, heedless of limits. Mimetic crisis in the most intensive sense is a breakdown in culture, as its symbols are drained of the capacity to raise desire to something beyond individuals themselves. Socially inherited models no longer suffice to



contain passions within manageable bounds by elevating them to higher ends; they lose the power to resolve the inevitable inner and outer conflicts. They cease to evince a sacred order transcending individuals putting them in order. This is a danger every historical culture faces. But in modernity, it becomes a “law” of culture itself. Equality unleashes a reciprocal mimetism leveling out all higher laws or models. The upshot is loss of the knowledge of *how to imitate*—the most indispensable and difficult of human cognitions, the generative core of culture. As Christopher Lasch suggests, the so-called “borderline personality” is one who is incapable of a genuine model. He has lost the capacity for genuine selfhood because he cannot properly imitate.<sup>6</sup>

Led more by instinct than theory, Rieff’s contrast of charismas points to a crisis of imitation, of divine (or holy) and human models. The true charismatic invites imitation, being a model of imitation, not just a model to be imitated. In all humility, he affords a model by following one. The Weberian charismatic, to the contrary, is ambiguous: he gives the law but is himself above it. His command is, “do as I say, not as I do.” Not anyone can give the Law; only the sovereign can do that. He who gives the law, must be beyond it. This is precisely not the case with the Rieffian charismatic. He exemplifies imitation itself, so to say, in the only form in which it can be exemplified, obedience. That the Weberian charismatic, a moral or political “genius,” cannot abide. His relation to his followers is asymmetrical. His example is not a revelation of the Law but of the purely human nature of charisma as a differential relation, in which one plays the role of savior and redeemer to the others. Weber’s charismatic is not just a leader, but a savior, an

individual who redeems a felt lack of being in others. Through him they are made whole. His power over them is their belief in his power.

But here charisma turns from a key to an obstacle for Rieff. Even as he brings out the Weberian degradation of authentic charisma by contrasting it with its Hebrew origins, he fails to perceive—or at least to exploit—its democratic reality, encased in Weber’s understanding of it as a social relation, a form of reciprocity. This may be degraded, but it is characteristic, the creation of a differential relation, leader and followers, master and disciple, redeemer and redeemed, within the framework of equality, secularly. Charisma is a stumbling-block for Rieff, the object of simultaneous attraction and repulsion. He incarnates the cultural crisis he elicited from Weberian charisma—a “mimetic crisis” (in Girard’s terms). From his sociological starting point, Rieff arrives at a crisis of imitation in the problem of charisma—a decomposition of the models that make up the core symbolic of culture. The same sociological starting point, though, prevents him from going further; he can recognize the mimetic crisis, but he cannot untangle the mimetic knot that produces it. He is trapped in mimetic crisis himself, a kind of double bind, indicated by the way he identifies with his intellectual adversaries, rivals who also afford him with inspiration. Thus Freud, Weber, Kierkegaard, and Kafka, to take the most central of his rivals and models.

In order to recover the springs of Western culture, Rieff adopts the adversarial model, the mimetic rivalry, all but expressly. He elevates it from personal relation to intellectual principle. It attracts him even to the fallen angels of modern culture, the Kafkaian keepers

who guard its secrets. Mimetic rivalry becomes a more or less conscious strategy, granting a certain reverence to at least some of his critical opponents. As in Nietzsche's "worthy enemies," if with a less fatalistic ring, this intimates a level of identification with the demons Rieff seems to be striving to cast out. This gives him an access to critical antitheses that drive Western culture. In so doing, though, Rieff reveals more than he expresses. As he analyses and fights the contemporary culture-wars, he incarnates their essential truth—that of insuperable impasse. But that is not all. He intimates, not evidently deliberately, that this "anti-cultural" principle is at the base of Western culture itself.

Stephen L. Gardner

Department of Philosophy and Religion

The University of Tulsa

800 S. Tucker Drive

Tulsa, Oklahoma 74104

USA

[stephen-gardner@utulsa.edu](mailto:stephen-gardner@utulsa.edu)

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper is the first part of an essay on Rieff, Weber, and charisma.

<sup>2</sup> Rieff, P. (2007). *Charisma : the gift of grace, and how it has been taken away from us*. New York, Pantheon Books.

<sup>3</sup> Weber, M., G. Roth, et al. (1978). *Economy and society : an outline of interpretive sociology*. Berkeley, University of California Press. Vol. I, 241-251; Vol. II, 1111-1156.

<sup>4</sup> Heidegger, Lukács, Löwith, Strauss, Aron, for example.

---

<sup>5</sup> Such as his friend Karl Jaspers.

<sup>6</sup> See Lasch, C. (1980). *The culture of narcissism : American life in an age of diminishing expectations*. New York, Warner Books, 37-42.