

8. Charisma: Post-Weberian approaches

by *András Máté-Tóth* and *Gabriella Turai*

Several authors say that Weberian theory is complex, only partially elaborated and, at times, contradictory. They highlight that during his life, Weber dealt with charisma in multiple stages and approached it from various angles, which explains why it is not possible, in fact, to pinpoint in a clearly definable way what he meant by it. In this study, we will primarily focus on those questions raised by Weber that lead the train of thought further and seem expressly suitable for the further exploitation of his charisma theory. In the first step, we assess the interaction between charisma, institution, and institutionalization. There are two reasons why discussing charisma after Weber should start with that. On the one hand, we should refine the general opinion that charisma gets lost in institutionalization and its re-emergence will be manifest in opposition to the existing institutions. On the other hand, it should also be pointed out that Weber himself called various dimensions of the institution as charismatic, and often spoke about institutional charisma. In the following two steps we need to discuss the derailing of the charisma theory in a certain sense, which was intended by Weber as more or less value-free. One is the narrowing of the personal charisma to therapy, which disregards the responsibility of society to the community. The other is the historical and contemporaneous experience of the charismatic leader and his fanatic followers' behavior displayed towards him. Both aspects powerfully warn that Weber's charisma theory does not allow us to assign a clearly positive value to charisma. Last but not least, we will discuss the postmodern opportunities of the concept of charisma, which will reveal that, perhaps, charisma is not an extraordinary phenomenon opposed to institutional order, rather, the other way around, institutionalization is its extreme case.

The present paper presents three different receptions of the Weberian concept of charisma using the approaches elaborated by Philippe Rieff, Ulrich

Oevermann, and Zygmunt Bauman. They highlight that during his life, Weber dealt with charisma in multiple stages and approached it from various angles, which explains why it is not possible, in fact, to pinpoint in a clearly definable way what he meant by it. We agree with Cipriani's statement, quoted in the motto of our study: it's worthwhile to read Weber once more.

1. The Triumph of the Therapeutic

Philip Rieff's criticism of Weber disapproves of the value-free criteria of Weber's theory of charisma. Philip Rieff was born in Chicago in 1922, as the son of a Jewish family that escaped from Lithuania. He graduated from the University of Chicago, later also obtaining his PhD degree at that university. Subsequently he worked as a lecturer at Brandeis University, at Berkeley, and finally, at the University of Pennsylvania, where he was a university professor for three decades, until his retirement. In professional circles Philip Rieff's name is usually associated with Freud and psychoanalysis, since posterity considers him as one of the greatest interpreters of Freud, and not without good reason, since in most of his writings he deals with Freud and with the criticism of his heritage.

Rieff published his book entitled "The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud" in 1966, through which he became finally established as one of Freud's greatest interpreters. Later he published two major papers: "Fellow Teachers" (1973) and "The Feeling Intellect" (1990), but after these, he chose to remain deeply silent. His books titled "My Life among the Deathworks: Illustrations of the Aesthetics of Authority" (2006) and "Charisma: The Gift of Grace and How It has Been Taken From Us" (2007) were published posthumously. These latter two books can also be considered as the extended conclusions of his former works.

In Rieff's opinion charisma underwent a fundamental change: from the gift of grace it became the gift of evil. In the past, Jesus Christ was the prototype of charismatic authority, as opposed to modern-day charisma, which has been detached from ethical considerations and degraded to a "mere political animal" or aesthetic action or performance. In his works, Rieff tries to place the concept of charisma into what he believes is the original reference system and clean it of the errors of modernity, in which Weber and Freud are the primary representatives. He said to his disciples that he intended to write theology (!) that does not reject modernity but can be revived in the theoretical framework of modern sociology (Rieff, 2008: X).

In the volume of Rieff entitled "Charisma", published after his death, he tried to administer a lethal blow to Max Weber's charisma doctrine in a way

that was meant to summarize and to radicalize his theory of culture. The statement that it would have been better for today's culture if Weber had not published anything is a good example of how determined and radical Rieff was (2008: 138). According to Rieff, modern culture, which he calls therapeutic culture, is characterized by efforts to become free of ideas and religious norms. Modern culture is faithless, on the other hand, by virtue of its original essence, charisma cannot exist without faith. However, the concept of charisma as elaborated by Weber does contradict this existential concept of charisma. Weber's ideal, typical charisma, claims Rieff, does not require a connection with the sacred; it is not aimed to elevate the individual and society to the rites and mysticism of communion with the sacred. Weber interpreted charisma outside of the existential framework, and by the theory of routinization he denied the permanence of charisma and excluded the possibility of charisma being or remaining the vital soul of the institution.

It is a consequence of this concept of charisma that for Weber the church became nothing else than a bureaucratic system of power. This happened even though charisma, by definition, is outside the secular processes of institutionalization. Weber dealt with topics related to charisma in the system of reference of power and legitimacy, whereas, in contrast, Rieff claims that power does not create social order, only personal authority does. Power only creates a system of desire for more and more power, which cannot be stopped or restricted by reference to truths or values.

Rieff confronts Weber's concept of charisma with his own, considering the former as a product and marker of special significance of therapeutic culture. Since Weber detached charisma from faith and stripped it of its original significance, he can reduce such personalities as Jesus or Paul to a common denominator with other figures of authority of ancient times. Jesus was not a therapist – Rieff emphasizes – but a charismatic figure in the sense defined by his own use of terminology (2008: 47). The charisma of Jesus is the charisma of obedience, this is the only charisma that deserves its name in the full sense of the word, and it is totally opposed to every humanistic and value ethics (2008: 70).

In Rieff's interpretation charisma belongs to the culture of faith/sin, the logic of which is diametrically opposed to therapeutic culture, where the aim (to be accomplished by Freudian analysis) is not a return to the justice of faith and a turning away from sin but, instead, a compromise with the state of faithlessness, and, furthermore – at least in order to initiate and ensure the success of the therapeutic process – the suspension of moral principles. Therapeutic culture eliminates sin, but the culture of grace and faith preserves the weight of sin while providing an alternative to it through faith.

The essence of modern therapy is reflected the best in the process of psychotherapy, in which the individual is temporarily released from social expectations, to provide space for the psychotherapeutic processes. Therapy becomes a technique by which the individual can acquire an analytical mindset and accomplish his own redemption (Zondervan, 2016: 77).

Religion is a therapy that is both controlling and releasing:

Religion presents two easily recognisable and related alternatives: the therapy that controls everyday life, and the therapy that brings relief from the same control. On the one hand, religion is a kind of doctrine, which gets internalised and counters the instincts regarding its function. On the other hand, faith may be ecstatic or erotic as well; in this interpretation, faith lacks the internalization of faith doctrines, instead, religion gives an opportunity for the instincts to be expressed much more indirectly – for example, in religious orgies or by such a mystical state of mind that relieves the individual of traditional authority (2016: 72-73).

Therefore, for Rieff therapy means both the alignment of the individual and the social order (as it was interpreted by the cultural dynamism of pre-modernity), and the temporary release of the individual from the needs and expectations of society.

In his book entitled “Charisma” Rieff reiterates his basic position presented in detail in *Triumph*, that “the therapeutic and the charismatic are ideal anti-types”. It is an essential element of understanding the therapeutic that this is the anti-type of the charismatic, and, as such, the opposite follower of the charismatic, who follows his own concept of life and lives on the hope that it is possible for a society to exist without a normative order. It is his view of the charismatic person as one who can really restore the ambivalences of our lives by the introduction of interdictions, as a new fire of negating. And the therapist is the one who suspends the interdictions, who is a transgressive (temporary) figure (Rieff, 2008: 4-5).

To summarise, in his own way Rieff redefined the concepts of charisma and therapy, and in this process, he unilaterally radicalized Weber’s concept of charisma – removing the dimension of magic from it – and Freud’s concept of therapy, identifying it with a release from morals. And in a positive approach, he confronted these two ideal types in such a manner that enabled him to point out the boundaries of both Weber’s and Freud’s theories and could make an attempt to introduce a sociological concept of charisma inspired by theology.

2. The postmodern conditions of charisma

At the beginning of the 20th century, society meant some kind of whole for Weber and other system building sociologists, a framework of thoughts, emotions, passions and actions, which has a more or less coherent operating logic, something that can be observed, understood and described as part of a system. This is the effort and the paradigm in which sociology as a standalone discipline was born, and this paradigm is also its legacy from philosophy and theology. This framework of thought can be called a modernity paradigm, which retained its relevance until the end of the 20th century. The increasingly wider acceptance of the truisms of globalization or globality, the philosophical and social science impulses arriving from the former colonies and the network revolution – to mention only a few aspects – have cracked the paradigms of modernity. For this reason, beginning with the 21st century at the latest we should now think in terms of new philosophical, social science and theological paradigms, which have been called postmodern for lack of a better term and constantly disputed regarding that label since the 1960s. Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan – apparently mainly French thinkers – and many others have questioned and deconstructed the truisms of modernity, which means a profound, fundamental challenge and task for social science and theology.

Because of this turn, the theories and models of the classical works of sociology have reached the boundaries of their interpretive capabilities, and they can be considered suitable for the understanding of today's society and culture to a very limited extent only. The towering task for today's social science is whether it is capable of exceeding the paradigm applied by the classical authors for a hundred years and considered universal, and whether it is capable of interiorizing and routinizing the postmodern paradigm.

Weber applied charisma to describe certain social processes inspired by the Bible, Sohm's ecclesiastical law, disputes of Protestant theology, and the personalities and élan of the sects of his time. However, as this term can be considered somewhat ageless, since it is used in the Bible, it is quite suitable for us to make an attempt based on the postmodern paradigm to understand today's social conditions as well. What Weber could not yet have raised within the framework of the modern paradigm about charisma can be raised in relation to this paradigm. Weber assumed that in its default state society is traditional and rational, and raised charismatic authority against this as a third state, remaining within the framework of thinking about society as a comprehensive reality. The postmodern movement deconstructed this comprehensive reality and rationality as well and replaced it with talk about communities of experiences and memories, fluid concepts, imagery and performativity, and, from

this angle, different dimensions of the ageless concept of charisma were foregrounded than earlier.

According to Weber, in pre-modern society charismatic legitimacy existed side-by-side with traditional authority legitimacy (tradition), in which the bearer of the charisma creates a non-traditional community of his followers. However, after that – as a feature of the demagification of the world – personal charisma becomes depersonalised, it gets detached from its original bearer and becomes institutionalized. Transcendental legitimacy remains, but it is no longer personal. In Weber's opinion, this is one of the key events of modern society, its most important feature. Continuing this logic, in the logic of legitimacy of the postmodern society, personal experience is in focus, and the rationally and ethically driven paradigm turns into one that is emotionally and aesthetically driven. While being charismatic in the Weberian sense is built on a source that points beyond itself, postmodern charisma refers to a dimension located on the other side of itself – it points deep down rather than high up (cf. Rieff, 1987).

Art and religion, Weber argued, are related inasmuch as both enable a special creativity and also attachment to tradition. However, everything is intellectualized as part of the general process of traditionalization; it loses its magical dimensions and displays rationally understandable values that explain themselves. Lyotard also shares Weber's observation, and, as the explanation of the process, he also finds that the former state of aesthetics and religion was lost owing to the loss of sensitivity to the sacred (cf. Gane, 2002: 104). Carrying on this process of change, religion and the creation of works of art used to connect the consumer with a magical and traditional sphere earlier, then to values that can be rationally captured in the modern era, but in the postmodern era both religion and works of art find meaning in the emotional experience and private enjoyment of the consumer, and it is from this perspective that it gets filled up with consumer dependent sense and meaning.

One of the key concepts of Weber's theory of society is demagification, during which the magical powers and mystical explanations impacting society get replaced by rationality, which process he called demagification, as a comprehensive term. Charisma and charismatic authority are replaced by rational decision making and the bureaucratic organizational model. Postmodern authors, namely Lyotard, Foucault and Baudrillard, also attached significance to rationalization and market processes in their theoretical topics, processes that turned something that was called charismatic by Weber into something that is now demagified. Lyotard also talks about some kind of historical decline, in which art and works of art lose the religious type function that they used to have earlier in social formations, because culture has lost its sensitivity to religion. Art is no longer connected to magic, to the ritual; instead it becomes part

of the rational discourse of aesthetics (Gane, 2002: 104). Like Weber, Baudrillard represents the opinion that in the world of science pure reason could not fully dispel or displace the arationality or irrationality of the magical world view. Both of these thinkers let us know that the existing word and culture are vulnerable, and they cannot be fully disassociated from symbolic arationality (Gane, 2002: 83-151).

In Weber's sociology of religion, it is important to make a distinction between the religion of the masses and religious virtuosos. Weber assigned the masses to the church type, while religious virtuosos can rather be found in the medium of sects and through persons with charismatic authority. At the same time, the masses need the special charisma of virtuosos in order to strengthen their own religious traditions, which create a temptation to corrupt charisma. The theory of the religious market displays the close relationship between religious demand and supply. For bearers of charisma, in Weber's theory justification means being accepted by the followers.

In the conceptual system of the theory of religious market, this can be described with a synchronous relationship between demand and supply. While in Weber's theory religious virtuosos were considered individual and rare phenomena, as opposed to the everyday nature of the masses, in postmodern conditions charismatic Pentecostal movements provide the most dynamically expanding and growing religious masses. While in modern conditions the bearer of charisma live off the worship of a reality that was perceived by him as sacred, the postmodern religious trends, instead, indicate that masses worship the worship itself. While according to the Weberian concept, charisma meant a revolution or contrast compared to the traditional and rational order, in postmodern conditions charisma is a phenomenon that maintains the system of needs for experiences, a kind of new fundamentalism.

If we take Zygmunt Bauman's fluid modernity theory for the definition of the postmodern system of conditions, what differentiates the postmodern from the modern is that in the latter the starting point is order, from which crises emerged, and which was restored, even if in a modified form, after the resolution of these crises, whereas the most characteristic feature of the postmodern condition is a permanent crisis, and flexibility is necessary to get oriented in it. In the Weberian approach to charisma, and, according to several interpretations following it, charisma is the extraordinary, the non-everyday, the non-conformant state and provocation, which is against order and irritates it into transformation, and as soon as it has completed this role, which can also be considered revolutionary, the modified routine will re-emerge. However, taking the postmodern conditions as a starting point, the permanent transition and crisis, i.e. the charismatic condition, is considered fundamental, and the routine becoming everyday means that the process got stuck. We find that Ulrich

Oeverman had the same concept. Although he did not refer to postmodern conditions, he considers the charismatic state as the default, and order as an extreme state.

3. Charismatization by Ulrich Oeverman

The Weberian charisma is a characteristic feature not of exceptionality but of normality, compared to which routine is the extreme case, if we interpret society in a dynamic model. The charisma (the charismatic person) is an accessory of the crisis, in that he senses the crisis of a transition or creates an awareness of crisis. In this process, he will get his followers around himself relying on his extraordinary talents, and the followers will be willing to suspend their usual activities if requested to do so by him, since talents are attributed to him for finding their way out of the crisis. If the charismatic solution is capable of being implemented in the long run, then it will become a routine. It is important in this process that the charismatic does not lack tradition and special authority, as was claimed in error by several interpreters of Weber (Oevermann, 2016: 86-87). Charisma denotes the trust or structural optimism which enables a decision to be made for action which could become justifiable in the uncertain, open future.

It applies to both the universal-historical rationalization process of Weber and to the enlightenment of Horkheimer and Adorno that, on the one hand, they diagnose the universal historical process not merely as a change aimed at self-sustenance, rather by formal rationality, material rationality, and by the iron structure of obedience and as growth against instrumental sense, on the other hand, they originated this orientation not from teleology arising from history philosophical necessity, rather they assume non-everyday crisis type eruptions for this process of routinization and becoming non-everyday, in which the resolution of crises by charismatisation forces the birth of something that is new and not foreseeable (2016: 87).

It is exactly the decisive moment in charismatisation that although the person regarded as charismatic by the followers does not possess the system of arguments that can be used for the resolution of the crisis, he only refers to his own charismatic talents and the source of charisma that exceeds his own talents, to which he also is submitted, and to which he must make his followers submit to as well (Oevermann, 2016: 89).

4. Outlook

The above examples – which undoubtedly have been selected somewhat arbitrarily – show that the Weberian concept of charisma is a theory developed in the framework of modern society, and if we omit this wide paradigm of the interpretation of society, then the Weberian concept of charisma will serve to throw light on other contemporaneous relations. Besides the broad discussions whether societies in Europe construct themselves in the framework of modernity or postmodernity, for the societies in Central and Eastern Europe the question of charisma and charismatic authority seems to be crucial. With reference to Rieff's theory, we can ask for the value dimensions of the trends in private and public consciousness in the religious sphere too. The teachings and witnesses in the church focus more on the inward harmony and religious emotions than on value perspectives. Perhaps we go not too far by mentioning that Rieff's criticism of Weber's charisma theory is valid for the religious sphere in Central and Eastern Europe too. The region can be characterized through permanent instability and fluidity with the consequence of collective traumas. As Bauman mentioned, modernity is fluid in the postmodern time, and no longer rigid, as in the modern time, therefore, we should take charisma as the everyday condition and order as the extreme. We can turn to the contemporary expectations regarding religion and churches in our region, in which, exactly at the time of extreme fluidity, people need stability at least in religions and churches. For a further and deeper analysis of the spirit of the region, the concept of charisma and charismatic authority can play an important hermeneutical role, possibly unquestionably. But, in what kind of understanding and interpretation, that remains a question, and to find an appropriate answer we need to reread Weber, and not only Weber, once again.

References

- Cipriani, R. (2017). *Diffused Religion: Beyond Secularization*. Cham: Springer International Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-57894-1>
- Gane, N. (2002). Max Weber and postmodern theory: Rationalization versus re-enchancement: Springer.
- Oevermann, U. (2016). "Krise und Routine" als analytisches Paradigma in den Sozialwissenschaften. *Die Methodenschule der Objektiven Hermeneutik: Eine Bestandsaufnahme*, 43–114.
- Rieff, P. (1987). *The triumph of the therapeutic: Uses of faith after Freud*: University of Chicago Press.

- Rieff, P. (2008). *Charisma: the gift of grace, and how it has been taken away from us*: Vintage.
- Zondervan, A. W. (2016). *Sociology and the Sacred: An Introduction to Philip Rieff's Theory of Culture*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.