
CHAPTER 8

Max Weber, Charisma, and the Disenchantment of the World

Max Weber (1864–1920) is one of the giants of sociology, and his work forms a substantial part of the core of that discipline. He had extraordinary vision and a vast knowledge of history and cultures. He is considered a founder of the sociology of religion, and his best known work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–05) retains its influence and is still debated today. Weber was one of those exceptional figures who underwent a creative illness.¹ While in his thirties, he had a breakdown that left him incapacitated for several years and intermittently thereafter. Nevertheless his output was immense, and in his lifetime he produced thousands of pages. Much remained unfinished at the time of his death, and later a number of scholars collaborated to compile, edit, publish, and translate his work.

Weber strived to address fundamental sociological issues, including the crucial topics of authority and domination. Authority is required for any civilization or society to exist; authority serves as a foundation. Authority establishes laws, rules, determines what is true, specifies what will be done, by whom, and when. It is a broad concept that any comprehensive sociological theory must address. In his massive two-volume work *Economy and Society* (1913),² Weber differentiated three types of authority: bureaucratic, as seen in today's society; traditional, as in feudal and primitive cultures; and something he called charismatic authority.

The term charisma refers to an extraordinary power, and Weber defined it thus: "The term 'charisma' will be applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as

are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary."³ Charisma can produce great good or great evil—both Hitler and Ghandi were charismatic leaders. Such persons have had an exceptional impact on history, but surprisingly many introductory sociology texts quickly skip over charisma. Even entire books have been devoted to it, but as I will show, sociologists subtly avoid confronting its full implications.

Weber's concept of pure charisma is of primary interest here. Though sociologists may discuss other types, it is pure charisma that they typically ignore. This is an example of why it is so important to consult original sources and not rely upon summaries of others. Reading Weber and Victor Turner directly, one discovers that the properties of pure charisma are virtually identical with those of liminality, anti-structure and *communitas*. Weber drew predominantly from sociology and history, whereas Turner's sources were primarily from anthropology; thus the concepts were derived largely independently. The remarkable parallels between the two formulations indicate their considerable explanatory power, and I will review some of the commonalities. As with Turner, I will directly quote Weber rather extensively. I do this to not only demonstrate the clear overlap, but also to emphasize that Weber's explicit points on the supernatural have been willfully ignored.

In many passages, Weber's writings on pure charisma describe anti-structure. For instance he states that "in a revolutionary and sovereign manner, charismatic domination transforms all values and breaks all traditional and rational norms."⁴ He also says: "Since it is 'extra-ordinary,' charismatic authority is sharply opposed to rational and particularly bureaucratic authority, and to traditional authority . . . It recognizes no appropriation of positions of power by virtue of the possession of property, either on the part of a chief or of socially privileged groups."⁵ This is further elaborated, as Weber tells us that: "In radical contrast to bureaucratic organization, charisma knows no formal and regulated appointment or dismissal, no career, advancement or salary, no supervisory or appeals body, no local or purely technical jurisdiction, and no permanent institutions in the manner of bureaucratic agencies."⁶

Weber says specifically that charisma "cannot remain stable, but becomes either traditionalized or rationalized, or a combination of both."⁷ Because of their instability, both pure charisma and anti-

structure (liminality) are opposed not only to structure but, almost paradoxically, ultimately to themselves.

Charisma is also intimately linked with *communitas* and with mysticism. We are told that: "Pure charisma is specifically foreign to economic considerations. Wherever it appears, it constitutes a 'call' in the most emphatic sense of the word, a 'mission' or a 'spiritual duty.' In the pure type, it disdains and repudiates economic exploitation of the gifts of grace as a source of income, though, to be sure, this often remains more an ideal than a fact."⁸ He later explains that "In order to live up to their mission the master as well as his disciples and immediate following must be free of the ordinary worldly attachments and duties of occupational and family life. Those who have a share . . . in charisma must inevitably turn away from the world."⁹ He tells us that "charisma rejects as undignified all methodical rational acquisition, in fact, all rational economic conduct,"¹⁰ and like Turner, Weber cited Saint Francis as an exemplar!

Pure charisma, like liminality, is directly linked with the supernatural. It is "guaranteed by what is held to be a proof, originally always a miracle."¹¹ The leader "gains and retains it solely by proving his powers in practice. He must work miracles, if he wants to be a prophet."¹² The role of altered states of consciousness was also recognized as critical, and Weber mentions "the ecstatic states which are viewed, in accordance with primitive experience, as the pre-conditions for producing certain effects in meteorology, healing, divination, and telepathy . . . We shall henceforth employ the term 'charisma' for such extraordinary powers."¹³

Weber also discussed more attenuated kinds of charisma, that allowed its accommodation by more stable, bureaucratic cultures. For instance some of the more moderated, rationalized versions are referred to as pseudocharisma, lineage-charisma, charisma of office, and manufactured charisma. The transition from pure charismatic authority, involving miracles and supernatural power, to one of the more stable forms is a source of ambiguity and causes confusion among scholars. Turner faced similar difficulties as he tried to distinguish the liminal from the liminoid.¹⁴

Disenchantment Of The World

The concept of rationalization was one of Weber's seminal contributions to sociology, and it is directly related to charisma. In his usage, rationalization has several related meanings that are a bit difficult to

summarize because it affects so many aspects of culture. Briefly, it involves instrumental use of objects and requires planning. Talcott Parsons explains that "Rationalization comprises first the intellectual clarification, specification and systematization of ideas."¹⁵ This of course requires abstraction and drawing of clear distinctions, both of which are antithetical to the trickster. In law, rationalization leads to a growing body of rules and regulations, and the duties to enforce and interpret them lay in the offices (established legal positions) rather than individual personalities. For production of goods and services, it begets standardization and interchangeability, both of machines and of people. A regimentation emerges. There is increasing specialization in education and occupations. Social structure takes on greater and greater complexity, leading to ever growing hierarchy and differentiation. Bureaucracies act to maintain and advance themselves; they take on a life of their own, and people become alienated.

These aspects of rationalization are well understood in sociology, and there is an enormous amount written on them. But there is another feature—"the elimination of magic from the world."¹⁶ Weber recognized that a direct product of rationalization was *die Entzauberung der Welt* or the disenchantment of the world.¹⁷ Another scholar of Weber, S. N. Eisenstadt, explains that this is "a concept which denotes the demystification and secularization of the world, the *attenuation of charisma*" (emphasis added).¹⁸ Rationalization-disenchantment is a long-term process, extending over thousands of years through which there have been stagnations and even reversals of the trend. Details of Weber's rationalization theory have been criticized, and critics have pointed to counter-examples, but the broad sweep remains valid when a sufficiently long time span is considered. The overall trend is unmistakable.

Weber noted that in ancient times as priests became differentiated from magicians, injunctions were placed against the use of magic. He specifically commented on the "rational" training required for priests in contrast to the "irrational" initiations of magicians. This is consistent with the findings of Winkelman presented in the last chapter.

The rise of Protestantism was one step in the global rationalization process, and its contrasts with Catholicism are instructive. Catholicism has the stronger mystical component, whereas Protestantism largely disavows mysticism and monastic orders. Protestantism has no priests who serve as mediators between God and humanity. In the Catholic Mass with transubstantiation, bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ, but in Protestantism, they are only symbols. Protes-

tantism is more “text-based,” with God being mediated more through the written word of the Bible. Protestantism fostered the Higher Criticism, which disputed the reality of miracles. Many now look upon these differences as only arcane theological disputes, but in reality they have profound implications for our world.

A set of factors merits contemplation here: Weber has immense stature in sociology; his ideas are universally known therein; he remains influential in other disciplines. Charisma has had enormous impact in the history of the world, and miracles played central roles (e.g., the miracles of Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed gave them legitimacy). Given all this, it is altogether astounding that social scientists ignore the question of the reality of supernatural phenomena. In fact, the vast majority of scholars writing on Weber’s notion of charisma give no hint that it involves such phenomena; if they do, it is typically in extremely vague, abstract terms.¹⁹ Even sociologists who write on the paranormal avoid mentioning it, even though Weber explicitly cited telepathy as a property of pure charisma. Only by reading Weber directly does one discover the importance of magic, the miraculous, and supernatural phenomena. This near-universal avoidance by academe is an important clue to the nature of the paranormal.

Winston Davis, a professor known for his writings on religion and East Asian Studies, summed up the current situation: “if there is any attitude that is universally regarded as irrational and anti-modern, it is the outlook of the magician.”²⁰ Weber noted that “the magician is permanently endowed with charisma.”²¹ Davis elaborates: “The conflict between the magician and the secularist is every bit as intense as the struggle Sir James George Frazer depicted between the magician and the priest of old. Not only theologians, but sociologists and intellectual historians seem convinced that this *must* be a battle to the finish.”²² He also comments: “We are told that in the modern world, magic must be sequestered or else it will cause the maladjustment of individuals or the dysfunction of the entire social organism.”²³ Even casual reading of the academic literature will confirm Davis’ observations.

Academe today is both a product of and an agent for the disenchantment of the world. It has steadily become more bureaucratic and hierarchical. Davis noted that “Weber believed that the very progress of civilization inevitably led to the permanent anesthetizing of the human spirit.”²⁴ Anti-structure, pure charisma, and supernatural phe-

nomena are needed for the vitality of culture. In academe they are marginalized, occasionally denounced but generally ignored.

All these ideas illuminate the trickster. Weber states that “Bureaucratic authority is specifically rational in the sense of being bound to intellectually analyzable rules; while charismatic authority is specifically irrational in the sense of being foreign to all rules.”²⁵ The trickster is explicitly a crosser of boundaries, a violator of rules, a denizen of the irrational. These ideas also raise matters pertinent to psi. In discussing Weber’s notion of disenchantment, Davis noted that one factor “less obvious from the annals of intellectual history, may be even more important: the disenchanting effect of the routines of everyday life in industrial society.”²⁶ Davis is perceptive. “Routine” is antithetical to spontaneity and synchronicity. As will be described later in the book, William Braud’s research has shown that spontaneity facilitates the occurrence of psychic phenomena. Rigid structures of thought, behavior, and belief all conspire to reduce magic, suppress the trickster, and marginalize the paranormal.

At this point something needs to be said about a small misunderstanding by Weber on the topic of magic. Magic is never actually eliminated from the world; it is only marginalized. It is removed from the conscious attention of cultural elites. The bureaucratic institutions of government, industry, and academe now ignore it, but it is still found in popular and low culture. As will be explained in coming chapters, cultural elites relegate magic to fiction, and large industries now flourish by portraying magic and the paranormal in and as fiction.

Despite the small (but significant) error, Weber provided us with grand vistas on history and sociology, and from them we can see patterns of the paranormal. Miracles (paranormal phenomena) are found in conjunction with pure charisma. Pure charisma is a source of primordial power, but it’s unstable; like liminality it’s dangerous; it can overturn established orders. It needs to be attenuated and rationalized. In all this, Weber’s ideas are compatible with those of Victor Turner.

However, Weber’s general formulations on rationality and disenchantment have additional implications—far beyond what he, and most others, have recognized. We will encounter those ramifications in a variety of contexts, and it may be helpful to give some idea of the coming discussions. Here I can outline them in only broad, general terms; much more detail will be given later. The concepts and terms may be difficult for those who have little prior familiarity, but some

forewarning may be helpful even so. These are central to foundational issues being debated in academe today.

One reason that the full force of Weber's ideas has not been recognized is that they ultimately implicate the limits of rationality—the very foundations of Western thought. Science ignores those limits, and it is at those limits that the supernatural erupts. But it is not only the supernatural that is of interest, the problem of meaning, the idea of objective reality, and the validity of logic are all directly related to rationalization and to each other. These matters are entirely ignored within science, but they are at center stage in the humanities—particularly in postmodernism and deconstructionism. When these ideas are raised in regard to science, scientists become anxious, panic, viciously lash out, and display an unconsciousness of the fundamental issues.²⁷

In post-structuralist literary theory, meaning is a central concern. By meaning, I am not referring to some grand purpose for an individual or for humanity, but rather the simpler and more prosaic concept discussed by linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. The connection between a signifier and its signified, between a word and its referent, is the issue. Science today considers meaning to be entirely unproblematic. It assumes that a word can be unambiguously attached to an item or event. Ambiguity is repressed from consciousness. Deconstructionists recognize that meaning is problematical. They point out that a reader and writer can have very different interpretations. They emphasize the ambiguity inherent in language. Scientists steadfastly refuse to acknowledge the problem. Deconstructionists see the fundamental difficulty, and a few even vaguely suggest that a theory of literature requires a theory of telepathy. With this, magic and meaning are joined.

In order to explore and explicate this, future chapters will examine the precursors to deconstructionism. It is well recognized that structuralism immediately preceded deconstructionism, but the precursors to structuralism have rarely been fully understood. The linguistic root receives attention, to the neglect of the anthropological influence. Most assume that deconstructionism's consequences are limited merely to text. They're not, and the implications for the real world are uncovered by considering the anthropological root.

Furious debates about postmodernism, deconstructionism, and post-structuralism revolve on the issue of power. Deconstructionists assert that there is no objective reality, and that all attempts to define and control the world can be reduced to plays for power. Scientists

maintain that there is an objective reality that, in principle, everyone can know, and that it does not depend upon power to force agreement. Weber's contribution is of exceeding importance here because his work extensively addressed issues of authority, power, and domination. The concepts of bureaucratic, traditional, and charismatic authority are central to the debates—especially charismatic authority, because it is the primordial source. It is the wellspring of supernatural power.

Another issue we will meet in future chapters is the reluctance to examine foundations too closely. Existence of society requires collectively held fundamental premises, beliefs, and assumptions. When they are questioned or challenged, disruption ensues. Western science adheres to the myth of objective reality, but it does not comprehend the foundations of that myth. Rationalization (and our society generally) presupposes the validity of Aristotelian logic, but that has severe limits. One way to demonstrate them is through paradoxes generated by reflexivity. Reflexivity is found in diverse areas, but there is a subtle and pervasive avoidance of the topic. These should be central issues for science and knowledge, and as I will show, the paranormal is fundamental to them.

In summary, Weber's concepts of charisma, rationalization, and disenchantment are crucial to understanding the structure and stability of societies. They also explain why the paranormal is marginalized. The implications are even deeper; they address the very foundations of Western thought.

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¹ Ellenberger, 1964/1968.

² The date 1913 was of the original manuscript, see Ephraim Fischhoff's appendix in Weber's *The Sociology of Religion*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1964, p. 277.

³ Weber, 1978, p. 241.

⁴ Weber, 1978, p. 1115.

⁵ Weber, 1978, p. 244.

⁶ Weber, 1978, p. 1112.

⁷ Weber, 1978, p. 246.

⁸ Weber, 1978, p. 244.

⁹ Weber, 1978, pp. 1113–1114.

¹⁰ Weber, 1978, p. 1113.

¹¹ Weber, 1978, p. 242.

¹² Weber, 1978, p. 1114.

¹³ Weber, 1978, p. 400.

¹⁴ Turner defined the liminoid as an attenuated version of the liminal. The liminoid is found in modern Western societies, the liminal in more aboriginal ones. Turner had some difficulty in making the distinction as can be seen in his essay “Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual” in his *From Ritual to Theatre* (1982).

¹⁵ Parsons, 1963/1964, p. xxxii.

¹⁶ Weber, 1904–05/1958, p. 105.

¹⁷ He adopted the phrase “the disenchantment of the world” from Friedrich Schiller. See H. H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills, “Bureaucracy and Charisma: A Philosophy of History” (in Glassman & Swatos, 1986, pp. 11–15, see p. 11.)

¹⁸ Eisenstadt, 1968, p. liv.

¹⁹ For moderate exceptions see “Charisma and Modernity: The Use and Abuse of a Concept” by Joseph Bensman & Michael Givant in Glassman & Swatos (1986), pp. 27–56; McIntosh, 1970.

²⁰ Davis, 1980, p. 10.

²¹ Weber, 1978, p. 401.

²² Davis, 1980, p. 10.

²³ Davis, 1980, p. 11.

²⁴ Davis, 1980, p. 299. Other scholars have echoed this theme; see for instance *Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America* (1990) by historian Page Smith.

²⁵ Weber, 1978, p. 244.

²⁶ Davis, 1980, p. 299.

²⁷ One example is: *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science* by Paul R. Gross & Norman Levitt, Baltimore, MD: The Johns

Hopkins University Press, 1994. This book has been highly praised in the pages of *Skeptical Inquirer* and the authors have made presentations at a CSICOP conference. Another examples is: *The Flight From Science and Reason* edited by Paul R. Gross, Norman Levitt, & Martin W. Lewis, New York Academy of Sciences, 1997. A number of CSICOP members contributed to that volume.

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