

**PART ONE:
APPROACHING CHARISMA**

The Concept and Theory of Charismatic Leadership

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The term 'charisma' was used by St. Paul to describe the gifts of divine grace which manifest themselves in forms such as prophecy and healing. In the late nineteenth century, it was picked up by Rudolf Sohm as part of his historical analysis of the way by which inspired individuals transformed Christianity into the charismatic Catholic Church, bearing the mission of redemption. Since the early twentieth century, the term has been especially associated with the German sociologist, Max Weber, who in many ways anticipated the challenges to liberal democracy which were to emerge from new forms of political movement and dictatorial regime in the post-1918 era.

Weber developed insights drawn from his remarkably broad studies into a threefold 'ideal-typical' classification of legitimacy and power. The first type he termed 'traditional', which he linked with systems such as monarchies. The second he termed 'bureaucratic', and was associated with institutions such as democracy and political parties (in part influenced by Robert Michels' turn of the twentieth century work on the 'iron law of oligarchy' and later elite theory writings). The third Weber termed 'charismatic'. Although his use of the term 'charisma' was not always clear or consistent, Weber's main focus was on the emergence of exceptional, radical leaders in times of crisis. Weber believed that such charismatics could attract an affective community of supporters, largely unconcerned with rational economic affairs. However, he thought that it would be difficult to sustain such support as it would require the constant achievement of 'miracles', and it was unlikely that such personalised rule could be 'routinised' or stabilised – though he did briefly discuss possibilities for continuity, including forms of 'clan' and 'institutional' charisma.¹

Subsequently, the term 'charisma' entered the professional vocabulary of many historians and social scientists, though few have sought to delineate a precise conceptualisation or theory of charisma.² Typically, the pioneer mass society theorist, Hannah Arendt, held that Adolf Hitler was charismatic but saw this as largely a question of his immense self-confidence, writing that:

The problem of Hitler's charisma is relatively easy to solve ... it rested on the well-known experiential fact that Hitler must have realised early in his life, namely, that modern society in its desperate inability to form judgements will take every individual for what he considers himself and

professes himself to be ... Extraordinary self-confidence and displays of self-confidence therefore inspire confidence in others; pretensions to genius waken the conviction in others that they are indeed dealing with a genius ... Hitler's real superiority consisted in the fact that under any and all circumstances he had an opinion.³

These comments are typical of much of the initial writing on charisma, which focused on what might be termed the 'charismatic personality': namely specific traits associated with exceptional leaders – facets which were sometimes related to psychological explanations concerning the leader's background, such as problems in childhood that supposedly led the afflicted youth to crave attention and achieve spectacular success.⁴ More recently, there has been a tendency to concentrate on the nature and causes of what can be termed the 'charismatic bond', namely the relationship between leader and followers, which is often seen in quasi-religious terms.⁵ Even where the quasi-religious side is stressed less strongly, the focus remains heavily upon charisma as an affective relationship. Thus in recent years one of the few books which has appeared specifically on political charisma defines it as a: 'compulsive, inexplicable emotional tie linking a group of followers together in adulation of their leader'.⁶

However, whilst Weber's formulations have inspired many followers, the term 'charisma' has also attracted major criticisms. These do not simply reflect the recent professional academic fashion to stress the role of deep 'structures' (class, economy and so on) over 'agents' (individuals, parties, and so on.) Nor do they stem mainly from the fact that, in popular parlance, the term 'charismatic' has become debased and is often applied to media or sports stars, who are better termed 'personalities' or 'iconic'. Even academics who hold that 'agents' can play a major role in shaping history have argued that charisma is of little or no analytical use. For instance, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. has expressed the view of many when he argued that, as modern politics involves a balancing of appeals and policies, the concept of charisma is useless when analysing cases more complicated 'than those of medicine men, warrior chieftains, and religious prophets'.⁷ In another powerful critique, the sociologist Peter Worsley has damned the concept even in the context of pre-modern, South Sea island cargo cults, holding that charisma is nothing more than an amorphous and soggy 'sponge' concept.⁸ As a result, some historians and especially social scientists have held that the term should be banished from the historical and social science lexicons.

One major academic problem concerns the exact make-up of features which a leader must possess in order to be seen as a charismatic personality. What characteristics link the prototypical charismatic fascist leader, Benito Mussolini,⁹ with greyer dictators? To take a specific example of the latter: General Franco was a poor speaker who neither founded nor led an electoral mass movement in the period before seizing power, basing his initial power instead on his position within the military Establishment. Similarly, can Hitler and Mussolini be compared with the cautious and technocratic Antonio Salazar in Portugal, or the almost senile and traditionalist First World War hero, General Pétain, who nominally led Vichy France? Or again, what links the religious fanaticism of Corneliu Codreanu in Romania with Vidkun Quisling's more rational-technocratic quest for a socio-economic Third Way European order in wartime Norway?

A second, and arguably even more fundamental, problem concerns the relationship between charisma and support: namely the charismatic bond. Does crisis

create an existential gulf, which leaves supporters hungry for those who can supply new meaning? Did Fascism in Italy become a form of 'political religion', especially in the years after coming to power as it took on the liturgy and trappings of a secular 'church'?¹⁰ Did Hitler take on God-like aspects for many Nazi followers?: was there among 'committed [Nazi] believers, a mythic world of eternal strong heroes, demons, fire and sword' which 'displaced reality', a fantasy world that helps to explain the fanaticism of Nazism to the very end?¹¹ These questions are not easy to resolve. Leaders such as Mussolini and Hitler emerged in an era before opinion polls and 'focus groups'.¹² Outside Germany, where the Nazis contested many free elections during the rapid take-off phase between 1928-33, there is often remarkably little clear evidence concerning the exact motives for supporting such leaders. Even in the German case, electoral aggregate data do not fully resolve issues about individual motivations. There has been growing agreement that, by 1933, the Nazis were a trans-class (*Volkspartei*) rather than a middle class (*Mittelstand*) party, but debates still rage about why this occurred. Moreover, significant debate exists about the extent to which there was widespread, genuine support rather than coerced mobilisation or passive acceptance for leaders such as Mussolini, who enjoyed the backing of extensive propaganda networks which helped develop leadership cults after coming to power.

A third set of problems relating to the concept of charisma relates more to policy during the regime phase of fascism. By the late 1920s, Italian Fascist intellectuals were specifically citing Weber in their attempt to bestow special powers upon Mussolini. There also developed in the interwar era significant cults of personality around not just dynamic personalities such as the *Duce* and Hitler, but also around leaders such as Franco, Pétain and Salazar. What impact did such charismatisation have on decision-making in regimes? A good case could be made that Mussolini became a prisoner of his own myth, with close colleagues in the 1930s all too often deferring to his 'genius' as he led Italy into ever more risky (and unpopular) external positions, especially the forging of the Axis with Nazi Germany. Ian Kershaw's major biography implies that Hitler's charisma, through its impact on close colleagues who sought "to work towards the Führer along lines he would wish",¹³ had its most fundamental impact after he became Chancellor, as it is crucial to understanding the 'cumulative radicalisation' of Nazism.¹⁴ The approach undoubtedly offers major insights into the mercurial nature of governing structures, in which cabinet meetings ceased in 1937 and the Holocaust appears to have been launched without a written *Führer* order. However, some recent academics have argued that the Holocaust was launched by incremental 'rational' decisions relating to population size, food supply and so on, often taken by officials at lower levels.¹⁵ And Hannah Arendt, in her widely-influential study of the Holocaust technocrat, Adolf Eichmann, has spoken of the 'banality of evil'.¹⁶ On this interpretation, some of those directly involved in the Holocaust may have been fanatics, inspired by a quasi-religious desire to eliminate the 'Christ killers', but most seem to have been obeying what they saw as legally constituted orders and/or to have officiously pursued career self-interest.¹⁷ But do these arguments gloss over the charismatic appeal of Hitler, especially on key members of the Nazi Party, or more generally the power of Nazi ideology?

In the pages which follow, I argue that what I term classic Weberian *contagion charisma* – namely the emergence of an intensely emotional bond with a leader, which then takes on a quasi-religious form – plays little part in explaining mass support for European 'fascist' movements and regimes during the 1919-45 era.

Weber's approach offers more insights if the focus turns to charisma's implications for the workings of government, but even in this context it is important not to underestimate the role of legal-bureaucratic legitimacy, nor to ignore the way in which traditional forms of legitimation were also present in these regimes.

Nevertheless, I will argue that charisma remains a useful analytical concept in the context of interwar fascism (and beyond) if it is reconfigured in three ways, which I term: i) *coterie charisma*; ii) *centripetal charisma*; and iii) *cultic charisma*. I develop these arguments within two broad sections. The first seeks to define the nature of the charismatic personality, linked to a discussion of relevant evidence about whether or not these inspired a charismatic bond. The second examines the factors which have allegedly helped to create and sustain the charismatic bond. As most of the subsequent essays in Part Two focus on leaders in power, the main emphasis here (and to a lesser extent in Chapter 2) will be on the support for leaders especially before achieving high office, rather than on their role in regime decision-making. As well as helping to balance later presentations, this allows for the study of charisma in a 'purer' leader context, where it does not become confused with the aura which is bestowed by office. The main case studies will be Italian Fascism and German National Socialism – not simply because of the constraints of space, but because these have been the major examples where charisma has been argued to have played a major part in explaining support.

Conceptualising Charisma

If we study the main interwar European 'fascist' leaders who have been termed 'charismatic', what features do they have in common? I will begin by adopting a Weberian ideal-typical approach, a problematic approach in some ways as fascism was highly syncretic and could present notably different faces. However, I want to argue that it is useful to isolate four main leader traits. Of these, the first should arguably lie at the core of any conceptual 'charismatic minimum', though the fourth is the characteristic most associated with this group as a set of dictators, encompassing both true fascist radicals, like Hitler, and more conservative authoritarians, like Franco, who were clearly influenced by what Stanley Payne has termed the 'style' of fascism – especially its charismatisation of leaders (for typologies of movements and regimes, see the Introduction).

1. *Missionary vision*

Charismatic leaders may at times make compromises. Mussolini's programmatic adaptation to conservatism during the quest for power offers a good example. Even after the establishment of a dictatorial government, Mussolini sometimes made notable concessions, especially to the Catholic Church with the 1929 Concordat and Lateran Pact. However, ultimately true charismatics are driven by some form of mission (though this is not necessarily a new one: Mussolini, for example, often portrayed his role as forging the completion of the *Risorgimento* and true national unification). From youth, Mussolini believed he was born to do great things.¹⁸ This sense of mission is often linked to a foundation myth, in which leaders like Mussolini portray themselves as the creators of radical new movements. Hitler appears to have been relatively apolitical while young, nor did he found the Nazi Party, which grew out of the small German Workers' Party created by a little-known locksmith in Munich at the end of the First World War.

In Hitler's case, the epiphany seems to have come following a speedy recovery from blindness after gassing near the end of the war, which he took as a sign from God that he was destined to help restore Germany. 'Rebirth', together with a variety of other terms taken from Christianity, such as 'redemption' and 'salvation', were subsequently central to his language.¹⁹ The opening scenes of Leni Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will*, which depicts Hitler's plane landing prior to the 1934 Nuremberg Rally, shows how religious imagery also played its part, though in this case the metaphor is arguably a dual Christian-pagan one of God sending back to earth his only Son, borne in a Norse chariot. As part of their strategy, charismatic leaders frequently depict elements of their life within a wider narrative that they are trying to develop about their mission. For example, Hitler's relatively humble Austrian origins and accent neatly dovetailed with his central mission to create the long-desired Greater Germany and to secure *Lebensraum*-based prosperity even further afield. Similarly, Pétain's role in the First World War as the hero of Verdun underpinned his post-1940 claims to be the saviour of France in her new hour of greatest need.

Such claims seem capable at times of arousing in supporters the belief that a leader holds a special status. Certainly the Nazis were often known as the 'Hitler party' even before coming to power.²⁰ However, this is not to say that affective charisma was the main factor in attracting voters. A study conducted in the early phase after the Nazis had consolidated power showed that even among activists fewer than 20 per cent were Hitler cultists.²¹ Moreover, even if supporters were attracted by Hitler's confident sense of mission, this does not necessarily mean that they approved of Nazism's more radical sides, nor that they sought to found a form of secular religion. Indeed, many Nazis saw Hitler's mission as perfectly consistent with Christianity.²² In Italy, too, it is far from clear what role Mussolini's charisma played in the rise of Fascism: in many ways local leaders (*ras*), like Italo Balbo in Ferrara, and the violent movements they used to destroy opposition (often aided by the supposed forces of 'law and order') appear to have been more important.²³ A more clear charismatic sense of mission was developed around Mussolini after 1922, partly linked to achieving historic aspirations of colonial conquest. Although the argument is contested and evidence limited, by the time of the conquest of Abyssinia in 1936 Mussolini probably enjoyed a peak of personal support, in which regime failings could be passed off with the trusting sentiment: 'If only the *Duce* knew'. Nevertheless, it is important not to underestimate the power of coercion in silencing opposition, and even this could not suppress growing doubts about Mussolini's mission to make Italy a truly great power, which took the country into war on the side of the Nazis in 1940.

2. Symbiotic hierarchy

Charismatics can at times also portray themselves as ordinary men, merely obeying the wishes of the people.²⁴ As such, they often use collective terms, such as 'we', and employ abstract language to help build coalitions: detailed policy both risks alienating support and creating an impression of technocratic rather than charismatic abilities (a lesson Oswald Mosley might have done well to learn in the British case). Hitler began his first radio-broadcast speech to the German people as Chancellor on 19 February 1933 with a left-populist greeting to his racial-comrades ('*Volksgenossen*'), and then modestly reminded his audience that in 1918 he had been an ordinary soldier like the rest. His simple military dress

reinforced the man-of-the-trenches image for those present at the rally, or who later saw Hitler's speech in cinema newsreels. More generally, Hitler used a form of low rather than high language, the discourse of ordinary people rather than the grandiloquence of the political Establishment – a technique he had learned from the populist-nationalist politicians Georg Ritter von Schönerer and Karl Lueger in pre-1914 Vienna.²⁵ Mussolini also sought to cultivate a man-of-the-people image, even being photographed in the fields helping peasants to harvest the grain, though the dominant image was that of the *Duce*, the leader whose orders were obeyed. A good example of the latter image comes in the 1939 short propaganda film, *9th May, 17th Year*, which begins with one of the most common Fascist slogans, 'Have faith, obey, strive!', and which depicts Mussolini making appeals to which the people respond.²⁶

We do not have the tools to probe precisely how 'ordinary' people responded to such appeals, but identification with the dominant leader was undoubtedly a strong feature among core activists in the Nazi Party, one which helped to minimise the schism that afflicted some other movements, such as Valois' *Faisceau* in France. Hitler clearly inspired widespread devotion among the Nazi inner core. The power of his personality and self-belief were crucial in holding the Nazis together through the wilderness years of political opposition, when there was little hope of office or spoils. This was a remarkable achievement, as some of Hitler's closest colleagues from these relatively early days were forceful personalities and/or talented men – including Hermann Göring (a fighter plane ace in the First World War) and Gregor Strasser among the early joiners. The desire to please the *Führer* also underpins Kershaw's focus on 'working towards the Führer', which helped produce a disorganised system in which various acolytes vied for favour, in some cases by suggesting ever-more radical policy initiatives in the belief that this would please Hitler.²⁷ However, the Italian case demonstrates the limits to such powers over the inner core when the leader's 'miraculous' powers began notably to wane. In 1943, the *Duce* was overthrown after a vote in the Fascist Grand Council and in the face of new-found resolve on the part of the King and some in the army hierarchy. It remains a moot point as to why the Nazi inner core remained loyal until almost the very end in 1945: was Hitler more charismatic, or was the situation one in which there was no serious route for 'exit' given the Allies' insistence on unconditional surrender?

3. Manichean demonisation

If fostering leader-follower identity often involves a language of community, another important technique in creating a sense of mission is the targeting of enemies – the demonisation of the 'Other'. In some cases, these can be internal, for instance the way in which Mussolini targeted the Left after 1919. Hitler's demonisation of the Jews is another example (in Italy Jews were not targets before the introduction of Nazi-style laws in 1938, and even then Jews were not a primary focus of Fascist propaganda). The 1940 Nazi propaganda film, *The Eternal Jew*, repeatedly stereotypes Jews as cruel and cunning, a degenerate source of Germany's misfortunes that must be eliminated in order for the nation to be reborn: the film ends with Hitler's 1939 Reichstag speech during which he threatened the Jews with destruction should they launch another world war. The underlying technique was openly stated in a widely-distributed 1937 propaganda pamphlet aimed at student and party leaders, which made it clear that 'political

faith needs an anti-hero', a scapegoat, a devil.²⁸ Enemies can also be external. Fascist propaganda after the imposition of sanctions during the Abyssinian War increasingly targeted the 'bourgeois' democracies of Britain and France for seeking to deny Italy her legitimate place in the sun. After launching Operation Barbarossa in June 1941, Nazi propaganda became increasingly anti-Soviet, often linked to claims that Jews dominated the Communist Party. This general Manichean technique was common among other movements and regimes in the interwar period, for instance, early Francoism's bitter hostility to the Left and the demonisation of both Serbs and Jews in wartime Croatia by Ante Pavelić and his Ustasha, which pursued its own policy of genocide.

However, the demonisation of the Jews did not play a significant part in Nazi campaigning in some areas before 1933.²⁹ And few Jews lived in the region where the Nazis were most successful electorally, Schleswig Holstein: here local opinion-makers and community norms offer more clues to the idiosyncratic pattern of Nazi voting. In spite of the recent growth of accounts of fascism that see it as a form of 'political religion',³⁰ in general there has been a move away from mass society theory approaches tending to underpin the view that the 'atomised' masses were in search of a new identity. Indeed, an important recent work has stressed that fascism was often most electorally successful where civil society was densest.³¹ Moreover, there has been a growth of 'rational choice' explanations of fascist support, especially the claim that fascist support grew rapidly at the local level as it began to address perceived economic needs, such as land for the peasants in Italy after 1918, and targeted aid for German rural and urban groups suffering distress after 1928.³² Whilst this approach is relatively weak at explaining the appeal of fascism to the young, there is no doubt that, in general, public opinion after 1933 particularly welcomed full employment, and social benefits such as holidays organised by the KdF, or Strength Through Joy (which, in 1939 owned the biggest hotel in the world on the island of Rügen). There are also dangers in over-stating the impact of traditional anti-Jewish Manicheism during the regime phase in connection with the Holocaust. It is important also to stress the impact of the deep-rooted tradition of eugenic science in Germany, which helps explain why doctors were particularly well represented in the ranks of the SS. This meant that killings were seen not so much in terms of vengeance, but as opening the way for a new social order.³³

4. Personal Presence

Charismatic leaders typically have great personal presence, or 'magnetism'. In some cases this involves physical traits. For example, contemporary commentators often referred to the piercing power of Mussolini's eyes. Mussolini also actively courted the image of a man of action, often being photographed in sporting pursuits such as fencing and riding. However, when the cultured and tall Ernst Hanfstaengl first saw Hitler in the early 1920s, he was unimpressed by his small stature and poor dress. Nevertheless, he came to be mesmerised by Hitler's power of oratory, including the brilliant use of techniques such as irony, and for many years Hanfstaengl played court jester to the *Führer*. Confidently held and well-informed views can also create a sense of charisma. Whilst Hitler often tried to talk in generalities, he was relatively well read, had a good memory for figures, and rarely entered a discussion among his inner circle without a preconceived opinion. These last techniques seem to have helped him to win over Joseph

Goebbels from the ranks of the Nazi critics, a man who became personally devoted to Hitler and who played a major part in developing the cult of *Führer*, especially after 1934, when President Hindenburg died and Hitler alone could take centre-stage. However, in some cases 'presence' was almost totally manufactured. For instance, during the long 'reigns' of both Salazar and Franco, elaborate propaganda machines charismatised these grey personalities as the embodiment of national mission and salvation. Quisling too was hardly a fluent speaker, but he was highly intelligent and a small group of acolytes sought to portray him as a harbinger of a new order after 1940.

There seems little doubt that Pétain enjoyed immense personal popularity after 1940; whilst there was some opposition too, initially resistance rarely took a violent form. However, personal esteem and especially presence is by no means a guarantee of support. Stanley Payne has claimed that the leader of the British Union of Fascists, Mosley, 'probably cut the best physical figure' of any European fascist leader,³⁴ but electorally the BUF was a dismal failure. Moreover, during the regime phase it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate personal charisma from office charisma – namely the sense of national or ideological mission and legitimate status which comes simply through holding a particular office (like the Pope). There are good reasons to think that the peak of popularity for Mussolini came during 1935-36, and for Hitler during 1939-41. This can be partly explained by the need for the charismatic leader to prove his special powers by demonstrating concrete miracles, as in the first case, Italy had just conquered Abyssinia; and in the second, Germany had swept all adversaries save Britain before it. However, there is also a general tendency for publics to rally behind national leaders at times of successful wars, though such support does not necessarily imply anything about commitment to the leader or the wider mission of the leader. For instance, many Italians seemed to have viewed Italy's 'fourth shore' in northern Africa in relatively limited terms of economic opportunity for settlement and trade, rather than through the prism of Mussolini's grandiose ambitions for great power status.³⁵

Theorising Charisma

The above brief discussion clearly shows that the linkage between leader discourse, dramaturgy and support cannot simply be inferred from style and themes. A model of charisma, therefore, needs to more carefully consider the bond with supporters as well as specific leader traits. In particular, it needs to consider theories as to why charismatic personalities might appeal. I will highlight four approaches which have been used to explain this, albeit often in a scattered and unsystematic way, in the historical and social science literature. Although they are presented here separately, at times they clearly overlap and much of the debate surrounding them focuses on primacy.

1. (Socio-Economic) Crisis

Most studies of charisma dating back to Weber see some form of structural crisis as the necessary starting point: they are in an important sense 'situational' rather than individual.³⁶ These approaches offer fertile insights, but what exactly is the connection with crisis? Indeed, what is a 'crisis'? There is a crucial structure-agency point here. Crisis is normally portrayed as an objective reality, which unfolds according to structural determinants. Thus it could be argued that the

crisis in France in the early 1930s was less serious than in Germany, partly because unemployment was much lower. But charismatic leaders can heighten, even create, a sense of crisis by framing 'objective' reality: crisis can be talked up or down. Structural causes are often less important than the specific unfolding of a crisis, which is in many ways a function of chance or political decisions. For example, Mussolini's March on Rome, which could have been halted by firm orders to the military from the King, came at a time when the post-war economic crisis in Italy was if anything receding. Similarly, Hitler's refusal to accept anything less than the Chancellorship in 1932 was an important part of the late-Weimar governing crisis, as was the Nazis' apocalyptic portrayal of an economic '*Endsituation*'.

Some explanations that focus on crisis have tended to stress its threat to identity more than its economic and political impact, and are often linked to the view that fascism was a political religion. Thus the rapidly growing appeal of Hitler and the Nazis after 1930 has been viewed in terms of the *Führer's* alleged resolution of a 'sense making crisis', whose origins lay deep in social change, reinforced by the cataclysm of the First World War.³⁷ Underlying such approaches is usually a variation on mass society theory, which stresses the impact of the rise of anomie and 'atomised' individuals.³⁸ However, rational choice theories have helped to undermine the more sweeping versions of mass society theory. Moreover, as has already been noted, on balance the evidence points to the fact that fascist support tended to be greatest where a sense of community remained strong, with community leaders like clerics or doctors often leading others into (or against) the fascist movement. In many ways the problem was group rather than individual isolation, and more specifically the existence of an extensive 'uncivil society' of *völkisch*, military veteran and other groups that were no friends of liberal democracy and which were often penetrated and taken over by the Nazis, especially after a major reorganisation of the party led by Gregor Strasser after 1928.

2. (Cultural) Legitimation

A second common approach holds that the rise of charismatic leaders requires some form of historical-cultural legitimation (an approach which raises important questions about the extent to which charismatic authority can necessarily be separated from traditional authority). Thus the German tradition before 1945 is typically seen as one that stresses the favourable consequences of strong leadership, for example the great achievements of Frederick the Great of Prussia, or Otto von Bismarck.³⁹ During the post-1919 Weimar governments, Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes* was re-issued under the imprint of the Diederichs right-wing publishing house and sold very well. Predictably, even before becoming Chancellor, Hitler frequently made allusions to the role of great men in German history. Croatian political culture had a similar deep-rooted longing for a strong leader, a factor which in 1940 helped Pavelić establish his legitimacy as the harbinger of a national mission, in spite of his somewhat lacklustre personal skills. Conversely, the dominant English conception of kingship was based on a relationship of first among equals among the nobles, in addition to wider constitutional limits on power dating at least as far back as the Magna Carta in 1215. As a result, Mosley struggled to make the *Führerprinzip* appear to be part of the British tradition in the 1930s; he thus tended to dwell on other forms of historical legitimation, such as seeking to link corporatism to the Medieval guilds.

Nevertheless, France's tradition of strong leadership (Napoleon Bonaparte et al.) did not help produce a major fascist movement in the inter-war era, an interesting lacuna as there were other aspects in the French tradition which might have favoured dictatorship, including anti-liberal tendencies in the French Revolutionary tradition.⁴⁰ Moreover, does the absence of suitable examples of strong leadership in the recent past necessarily prevent charismatic leadership appearing? Italian history arguably provided few examples to plunder,⁴¹ but before the First World War writers like Giovanni Papini turned this around to argue that the task of creating a truly united new Italy needed a *Duce*, a man who could be both guide and chief. After Mussolini came to power, the cult of *Romanità* was widely propagated – with its lessons of great leadership – but arguably here, the process was more one of the invention of tradition rather than playing on strong, pre-existing views. This points to the wider fact that tradition cannot simply be taken as a given, which the leader is powerless to influence. Germany unquestionably underwent various crises after 1918, but no charismatic leader immediately emerged. In 1923 at the time of the Munich *putsch*, Hitler was less well known than his fellow conspirator, the First World War hero Field Marshall von Ludendorff. What changed after 1923 was the specific manner in which subsequent economic and political crises developed, and the role of Hitler and the Nazis in developing both the Hitler myth and organising the party as an effective electoral as well as paramilitary force.

3. (Political) Facilitation

The emergence of Hitler as a charismatic leader cannot be separated from the development of Nazi Party organisation. Indeed, the improvement in election results at the local level after 1928 probably owed more to this than to Hitler himself, repeating the pattern of early Italian Fascist growth. A general lesson of this period was that dictatorships need some form of party to organise support and perform other roles, such as recruiting key personnel. Certainly this is one the lessons which Franco learned not just from fascism, but from the earlier dictatorship of General Primo de Rivera – hence his co-option of the *Falange* during the early days of the Spanish Civil War after the premature death of its founder, José Antonio, who became the subject of a Francoist death cult (and the only politician in modern Spain commonly known by his first name). Within the Nazi Party, the myth of the *Führer* figured prominently during the 1932 presidential elections, helped by the fact that such elections focus on the individual and highlight issues such as political presence. In these elections, Hitler was the first politician in Europe to use an aeroplane to fly regularly to major rallies, and introduced other campaign innovations as well, including the use of the first campaign films in Europe. However, there is no necessary connection between charisma and presidentialism. It would probably be more accurate to generalise that charismatic leaders are most likely to emerge when political parties are weak, or held in contempt. Such a situation can emerge from both structural cleavages and institutional design. For instance, the Weimar Republic was undoubtedly plagued by the former, but institutional design – a highly proportional electoral system, the potential for a strong presidency, and other features – did not help when major crises struck after 1929.

In 1929, Hitler also benefited from the fact that Alfred Hugenberg, a nationalist media baron, decided to open the doors of his papers and newsreels to Hitler as

part of a joint campaign against a new reparations settlement, the Young Plan. This publicity very much focused on Hitler personally and appears to have been crucial in the growing tendency to view the Nazi Party through the prism of Hitler. Once in power, the interwar dictators were able to use the full panoply of the media to boost their image. This era witnessed the rapid development of new forms of media, most notably radio and sound film. State subsidies helped mean that, by 1939, Germany had the highest percentage of radios per head in the world. Over a thousand feature length films were made in Nazi Germany, accompanied by regular newsreels which often featured the *Führer*. Partly because Goebbels disliked overt Party propaganda in feature films, some of the most elaborate films made were clearly historical allegories linking Hitler with earlier heroic phases in Germany's history, such as the Napoleonic Wars 'blockbuster' *Kolberg* which, in the closing stages of the Second World War, was parachuted into a besieged garrison to help fortify resolve. Whereas in democracies the media can debunk as well as elevate leadership, in interwar dictatorships they were a major vehicle of charismatisation.

4. (Psychological) Personality

Various attempts have been made to explain the appeal of fascist leaders through psychological approaches (as well as attempting to explain the psychology of charismatics themselves). Much of the early post-1945 work on fascism was influenced by Theodor Adorno's theory of the authoritarian personality, which depicted strict up-bringing within the family, school and other institutions as producing a tendency towards conformism and respect for leadership. Another common, early approach stressed the impact of war on young men, including those too young to fight, which both brutalised them and also encouraged obedience to strong males.⁴² However, whilst these approaches offer some general insights, they clearly tend to homogenise support for fascism, and are weak at explaining the sudden electoral take off in both Italy and Germany.

An interesting psychological approach directly related to charisma has been proposed by Saul Friedländer (adapting Erik H. Erikson), who has suggested that there are certain historical conditions, such as the waning of religion, in which people in large numbers become 'charisma hungry'. Pursuing the point further, he distinguishes three forms of distress to which a charismatic leader may minister: i) 'fear', as in the fear of medieval European Jews; ii) 'anxiety', especially as experienced by persons in an identity-vacuum; and iii) 'existential dread', or the distress that people experience under conditions in which rituals of their existence have broken down.⁴³ Another rare attempt to specifically analyse the psychological appeal of charisma comes from Douglas Madsen and Peter Snow.⁴⁴ They argue that a person overwhelmed by change may have low efficacy and simply not vote, but a charismatic leader helps give people a sense that politics is not pointless – that the leader can change things, whilst at the same time remaining responsive to the followers' needs. Put another way, people have a need to understand complex events, and often find it easiest to come to terms with complexity through the image of a single person who is held to be special, but in some way accountable. Madsen and Snow call this 'proxy control'. However, whilst the last two approaches offer interesting hypotheses about why people become hungry for leaders, they do not tell us exactly what type of leader appeals. They unduly focus on the magnetisability of followers rather than the

magnetism of leader – an omission which occurs, in varying degrees, in all Weber-inspired theories of charisma.

At this point, the appeal of leadership can be added back into the equation. Thus an important factor which those who stress psychological approaches might note is the appeal of leaders who use conspiracy theory, which figured prominently in the Nazi demonisation of the Jews. Conspiracy theory has been seen as appealing especially to those who do not merely want to have simplistic explanations for complex events, but who also desire to possess special or cultic knowledge: conspiracy theory is thus in a sense like religious revelation. This seems to point towards the conclusion that many of the interwar dictators did in fact lead 'political religions'. However, conspiracy theory can be understood in other terms. For example, a leader who fingers a plotting enemy increases the efficacy of supporters by pointing to the possibility of eradicating the cancer. Indeed, as this conclusion will underline, one of the most important aspects of the charismatic leader is an ability to put together support based on notably different factors and motivations.

Conclusion

It is important to underline that the foregoing discussion has not only been highly synoptic, it has also ignored many important issues.

A more elaborate answer to the question of what constitutes a 'charismatic personality' would need to consider both diachronic and synchronic approaches: a leader's image can be multi-faceted, and techniques and themes can change through time. For example, in 1919 Mussolini's image was heavily based on his wartime experiences, on being part of a young male 'trenchocracy'; by the 1930s Mussolini had new dimensions to his appeal, including a father-like image targeted at young females.⁴⁵ Hitler could also target appeals differently depending on the audience: for instance, in 1932 he presented a highly respectable front when addressing key businessmen, and in his first broadcast to the German people he was remarkably conciliatory by Nazi standards. On the latter occasion, it was left to Goebbels to give a 'warm-up' speech, in which he adopted a more strident line, including threatening to shut the mouth of the 'lying Jewish press'.

A second question which would need elaborating is the issue of pseudo-charisma, which could be used to distinguish the true believer from the manufactured and/or those who lack a wide range of charismatic skills. There seems no doubt that Hitler believed that he had a special mission, especially after the 1923 Munich *putsch*, when his self-image changed from being that of the drummer (*Trommler*) of revived German nationalism to its true *Führer*. But did, say, Salazar really see himself in such messianic terms? Was Franco driven by fascist utopian dreams, or was he more an example of conservative reaction, one packaged during the dictatorship in a way to help make him more acceptable to a broad swathe of opinion? However, if the focus turns specifically to the nature of the charismatic bond, then the concept of 'pseudo-charisma' is of little value – unless it is used to argue that the created charismatic in some way lacks the range of manipulative tools open to the true charismatic. From a theoretical point of view, there is a need to explain why a certain type of leader image appeals, regardless of whether that image is at least partly contrived.

Turning to this central issue of leader support, a major problem with classic theoretical formulations of the charisma thesis is that they feature a binary

approach which focuses on macro (societal) and to a lesser extent micro (individual) factors in model building. But local and group (meso) perspectives are also crucial to understanding support, especially the role played by opinion leaders and uncivil society.⁴⁶ This points to the possibility that charisma may act mainly upon a small minority, who then recruit – often by using other forms of appeal – a wider constituency. This is an interesting hypothesis, but one which is virtually impossible to test empirically at the mass level. Whilst we know a relatively large amount about core activists around the main leaders, we know much less about local activists – though the evidence from Germany, which is the best-documented case, does suggest that the Nazis used remarkably varied local appeals – even successfully courting Catholic and Left-support in some areas, groups which were not normally ‘open’ to their propaganda.

Considering the issue of the charismatic bond more generally, it is in many ways hard not to agree with those who argue that, whilst there have been many generalisations, the theory of charisma has moved on little or not at all since Weber’s initial formulations.⁴⁷ It is interesting in this context to consider a general point about leadership made by two American social science specialists on leadership, who argue:

there seems to be little cumulative advance in our understanding: the empirical regularities are neither robust nor compelling; the theoretical formulations are neither precise nor reliable. Perhaps leadership is epiphenomenal and derivative. Perhaps it is so dependent on contextual circumstances as not to permit holistic treatment.⁴⁸

Certainly nothing like Weberian mass *contagion charisma* characterised interwar fascist support. Even during the regime phases, when there was extensive charismatisation of the leader, the evidence points to a broad variety of motives for support, including respect for the office *per se*, and the importance of economic as well as more affective motives. However, I do not want to agree with those who argue that historians and social scientists should banish the term ‘charisma’. Rather, I want to argue that charisma remains an important approach in three major senses.

First, I want to suggest that whilst leaders like Hitler have failed to exert mass affective charisma, they have unquestionably attracted significant *coterie-charisma*. In other words, they attracted a hard core of supporters, both in their inner courts and more locally, who have held that the leader was driven by a special mission and/or that the leader was invested by unique powers. As a result, they have accorded this leader great loyalty and have been willing to make special efforts on behalf of the cause, both before and after coming to power. It is also important to note that within the coterie at the inner core there tended to be a remarkable variety of views. This is arguably even truer if the term coterie is widened to apply to key local activists. Indeed, in some ways fascist movements operated as small individual units, each with its own position and function.

Secondly, I want to argue that it is important to distinguish between the personalisation of politics (a general phenomenon over the twentieth century) and the way in which some leaders become the personification of a party or regime. Many people came to see parties like the Nazis through the lens of their leaders – a characteristic which I term *centripetal charisma*. In other words, the tendency of charismatic leaders to operate in confident, but often abstract and

general terms, allows support to come from a variety of sources. Put another way, the ability of a party to present a united front, epitomised by a single leader, has two important consequences. First, voters are offered, to adopt rational choice terminology, a low cost form of signalling, which helps send key policy messages to potential supporters. Second, by becoming the epitome of their parties, leaders like Hitler helped to overcome the dissonance which might have been created by the market segmentation politics which their parties had pursued. The Weberian conception of charisma implies a leader dominated by a single mission, but leaders like Hitler have gone out of their way to target appeals at different sectors of the electorate and elites – helped by the strongly syncretic nature of fascist ideology. Dissonance was partly resolved by developing these discourses most fully through coterries at the local level, or in private for business and other elites. But many individual voters, by perceiving politics through the medium of the national leader, appear to have used a form of cognitive dissonance to homogenise their image of leader-party in a way which would have been much less likely had their primary focus been on policies and the party in general.

Thirdly, whilst this dimension has not been a major focus of this essay, I want to argue that it is useful to analyse the process of charismatisation, or what I term *cultic charisma*, namely the deliberate attempt to create a sense of almost religious aura around a leader. For example, Hitler, in the second volume of *Mein Kampf*, specifically discusses how Marx adopted the role of prophet, as well as the need to make Nazism a form of counter creed (*politisches Glauben*). This tells us much about how dictators (and their advisors) in the early twentieth century saw an increasing need to legitimise their rule in the eyes of the masses, and more specifically how fascist ideologues sought to create a ‘new man’ political culture. However, it should not be taken as an endorsement of the claim that movements like Italian Fascism or German National Socialism were forms of political religion. It is much easier to study the style of fascism than to read the hearts and minds of those who supported it. The political religion approach seems to me to pay insufficient attention to the very diverse motives which led people to support fascism. Culturalist approaches to fascist language and symbolism rightly point to a common desire for moral renewal, but this is not the same as any form of belief in a higher being which is central to religion. Indeed, in an important sense fascism was modernist in that its mission was man rather than God-centred. This is yet another issue which needs arguing more carefully, so I will simply end by citing from the testament of one of the Nazi leaders, Robert Ley, shortly before his suicide after the *Götterdämmerung* of 1945: ‘In place of his divine grace we substituted our own human will’.⁴⁹ Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* is in many ways a superb example of cultic charisma, and its opening scenes underline the religious dimension of fascism – but ultimately it is a celebration of a charismatic leader and *his* dynamic will.

Notes

1. See especially M. Weber, *Economy and Society* (New York, NY: Bedminster Press, 1968).
2. For example, see the otherwise excellent R. Overby, *The Dictators: Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia* (London: Allen Lane, 2004), p.32.
3. Cited by M. Canovan, “Hannah Arendt on Totalitarianism and Dictatorship”, in P. Baehr and M. Richter (eds.), *Dictatorship in History and Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.246.

4. For example, W. C. Langer, *The Mind of Adolf Hitler: The Secret Wartime Report* (New York: Basic Books, 1972).
5. R. A. Wilner, *The Spellbinders: Charismatic Political Leadership* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984).
6. C. Lindholm, *Charisma* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p.6.
7. A. Schlesinger Jr., "On Heroic Leadership and the Dilemma of Strong Men and Weak People", *Encounter* XV/6 (1960), pp.6-7.
8. P. Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound* (London: Paladin, 1968), the Appendix.
9. E. Gentile, "Mussolini's Charisma", *Modern Italy* 3/1 (1998).
10. E. Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge MA.: Harvard University Press, 1996).
11. M. Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History* (London: Pan, 2000), pp.8-9.
12. Even with the advantage of such tools, it is not easy to decipher the impact of charisma/personality. On claims that recent 'extreme right' leaders have been 'charismatic', see R. Eatwell, "The Rebirth of Right-Wing Charisma? The Cases of Jean-Marie Le Pen and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy", *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 3/3 (2002).
13. I. Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889-1936: Hubris* (London: Allen Lane, 1998), p.xxix.
14. H. Mommsen, "Cumulative Radicalisation and Progressive Self-Destruction as Structural Determinants of the Nazi Dictatorship", in I. Kershaw and M. Lewin (eds.), *Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorships in Comparison* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
15. C. Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy September 1939-March 1942* (London: Heinemann, 2004).
16. H. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977).
17. Z. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989).
18. A. J. Gregor, *The Young Mussolini and the Intellectual Origins of Fascism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979).
19. R. Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London: Pinter, 1991).
20. See C. Fischer (ed.), *The Rise of National Socialism and the Working Classes in Weimar Germany*. (Oxford: Berghahn, 1996), and D. Mühlberger, *Hitler's Followers* (London: Routledge, 1991).
21. P.H. Merkl, *Political Violence under the Swastika* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), especially p.463.
22. R. Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
23. P. Corner, *Fascism in Ferrara* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).
24. The charismatic personality has normally been associated with males, especially in the inter-war years, when 'mission' was often associated with conflict and war. However, there is no necessary connection, especially when different frames of discourse predominate, for example, the post-1960s' Western tendency to view politics in market rather than martial metaphors which helped charismatise Margaret Thatcher's authoritarian-populist mission (though arguably the peak of her popularity came after the successful Falklands War).
25. B. Hamann, *Hitler's Vienna* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), and I. Kershaw, *The 'Hitler Myth': Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).
26. The film clearly copies Vertov's *Three Songs of Lenin*, which shows Soviet citizens responding to Lenin's word.
27. Kershaw (note 13).
28. Cited in U. Tal, *Religion, Politics and Ideology in the Third Reich* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.21.
29. W. S. Allen, *The Nazi Seizure of Power* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1966).
30. For example, R. Griffin, "Introduction: God's Counterfeiters? Investigating the Triad of Fascism, Totalitarianism and (Political) Religion", *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 5/3 (2004). See also R. Eatwell, "Reflections on Fascism and Religion", *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 4/3 (2003).
31. M. Mann, *Fascists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
32. W. Brustein, *The Logic of Evil* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), and E. S. Wellhofer, "Democracy and Fascism: Class, Civil Society and Rational Choice in Italy", *American Political Science Review* 97/1 (2003).
33. P. J. Weindling, *Health, Race and German Politics between National Unification and Nazism 1870-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
34. S. G. Payne, *A History of Fascism 1914-45* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995).
35. R. Mallett, *Mussolini and the Origins of the Second World War, 1933-1940* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003).
36. R. C. Tucker, *Politics as Leadership* (Columbia, MI: University of Missouri Press, 1981).

37. R. Griffin, *International Fascism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1998), ch.17.
38. W. Kornhauser, *The Politics of Mass Society* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1959).
39. M. R. Lepsius, "Charismatic Leadership: Max Weber's Model and Its Applicability to the Rule of Hitler", in C. F. Graumann and S. Moscovici (eds.), *Changing Conceptions of Political Leadership* (New York, NY: Springer-Verlag, 1986).
40. J. L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1952).
41. A notable exception was Giuseppe Garibaldi, who played a key role in the unification of Italy, but Garibaldi was not a national leader.
42. K. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987).
43. S. Friedländer, *History and Psychoanalysis* (New York, NY: Holmes and Meier, 1978).
44. D. Madsen and P. G. Snow, *The Charismatic Bond* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1991).
45. M. Fraddosio, "The Fallen Hero: The Myth of Mussolini and Fascist Women in the Italian Social Republic", *Journal of Contemporary History* 31/2 (1996).
46. This is a point which I have also developed in relation to contemporary extreme right parties: see R. Eatwell, "The Dynamics of Right-Wing Electoral Breakthrough", *Patterns of Prejudice* 32/3 (1998).
47. There is a large literature in management studies about the importance of charismatic leadership, but in general this refers to a far less affective and radical style of leadership. Indeed, it is sometimes referred to as 'transformative' rather than charismatic to avoid Weberian overtones: see J. M. Burns, *Leadership* (New York, NY: Harper Row, 1978).
48. M. P. Fiorina and K. A. Shepsle, "Formal Theories of Leadership: Agents, Agenda Setters and Entrepreneur", in B. D. Jones (ed.), *Leadership and Politics* (Kansas, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1989), p.17.
49. R. Overy, *Interrogations: Inside the Minds of the Nazi Elite* (London: Penguin, 2001), p.481.