



Max Weber's Disciples: Theorizing the Charismatic Aristocracy

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Abstract

While several studies have explored the interactional dynamics of charismatic power, most have neglected the role of what Weber termed the *charismatic aristocracy*. This article revives the classical concept to respond to contemporary calls for performative, follower-centric approaches to charisma. Specifically, the charismatic aristocracy is placed at the center of an analysis of a reiterative moment in charismatization: when influential followers generate content for the emerging charismatic persona. In these germinal moments, the dialogical nature of charisma is most clear, precisely because it is then that charismatic leaders often are not themselves confident in their status and can be found responding to instructional cues—indeed following the lead—of those positioning themselves as obsequious followers. Drawing on 10 years of observations, multistage interviews, and media collections, I provide an interactionist account of the charismatic emergence of John de Ruiter, leader of a successful new religious movement. I conclude by tabling a model that conceives of the charismatic aristocracy as an important fulcrum for expectation, affectation, and recognition in charismatic interactions.

Keywords

charisma, Max Weber, symbolic interactionism, cultural sociology, relational sociology, power

When Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills introduced Weber's concept of charisma to English readers in 1946, they did so with some major reservations. Weber's emphasis on the charismatic leader, we were warned,

is a continuation of a “philosophy of history” which, after Carlyle's *Heroes and Hero Worship* [1841], influenced a great deal of nineteenth-century history writing. In such an emphasis, the monumental individual becomes the sovereign of history. Weber's conception of the charismatic leader is in continuity with the concept of “genius” as it

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was applied since the Renaissance to artistic and intellectual leaders. (Gerth and Mills [1946] 1958:53)

With such a consignment, it should come as no surprise that as twentieth-century researchers in the social sciences were developing an incredulity toward nineteenth-century fascinations with genius, a concomitant suspicion of Weber's "charisma" would also arise (see e.g., Bourdieu 1987; Cavalli 1987; Downton 1973; Friedland 1964). By the early 1960s, even Weber's friend Georg Lukács ([1962] 1980:629) was deriding charisma as a "pseudo concept . . . partly abstract, partly mystical."

Some of these objections were moral,¹ but the main sociological discomfort with charisma stemmed from perceptions of an essentialist "individualism" (Shils 1965:202) or "trait atomism" (Parsons 1963:lxxiii) in Weber's formulation (see also Derman 2011:53, 67-68)—that is, the anagogic notion that charismatic qualities are inborn, not subject to the normal forces of socialization, even miraculous and God-given (Adair-Toteff 2002; Swatos and Kivisto 1991). By contrast, traditional disciplinary norms suggest that the sociological mandate is to map and scrutinize the structural firmaments of power (Mills [1956] 1999), thereby acting as a salve to fascinations with lonely geniuses, explaining them "from without," via social, political, and cultural contextualizations (DeNora 1997; Geertz 1977; Lindholm 2013; Palmer 2008; Smith 2000; Willner and Willner 1965). Shifts away from the social psychological paradigm in the mid-century caused a further depreciation of the concept (Andreas 2007) such that scholars who took seriously Weber's (what we might call "distantly third"²) form of domination (*Herrschaft*) risked careers in a cul de sac: According to McGuire (1983:6), the phrase "quality of an individual personality" in Weber's definition sent "generations of sociologists off on a non-sociological tack" looking for "some oblique psychological factor such as 'special personality.'"

This article returns to Weber's original formulation, first to reexamine this supposed leader-centrism and then to repudiate it by retrieving a neglected element in his theory of charismatic social systems—what he called the "charismatic aristocracy" (Weber [1922] 1978:1119). Informed by data from an emerging charismatic group, I present a model that (1) repositions significant followers (the charismatic aristocracy) as central causal agents in the etiology of charisma, (2) pulls together and systematizes various details from Weber's descriptions of charismatic processes that heretofore have been underused, and (3) theoretically augments these descriptions with schools of thought that postdate him, namely, symbolic interactionism and various tenets of the performative turn in social theory. I conclude with a discussion of implications for broader contexts of leadership in political and cultural institutions.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL NATURE OF CHARISMA

It is worth mentioning at the outset that the apparent inattention to the role of followers in Weber's theory of charismatic authority is partly due to issues of grammar and translation. For example, Weber's ([1922] 1978:241) use of passive voice in his oft-cited definitional passage³ (in which the leader "is considered" and "treated as endowed with . . . powers" that "are regarded as of divine origin") consigns followers (those "considering," "treating," and "regarding") to negative space in these interactions. Parsons further contributed to this erasure by choosing passive verbs in his English translation of the passage. For instance, Weber's ([1922] 1956:140) "*soll . . . heißen*," which Parsons translates as "is considered," could also have been rendered as "to name," "shall title," "to command," or even "to hoist" as in "to hoist a flag"—all connotations that would have captured more completely the agentic role of followers in the construction of charismatic dominance (Messinger 1973; see also

Joose 2014:276-277). Finally, recent work shows that Gerth and Mills's aforementioned emphasis on the influence of Carlylianism was an anachronism, unjustly applied to Weber's thinking on the matter, since the development of the concept of charisma in his thought seems to have been informed much more by his readings of theological writers like Rudolph Sohm and Karl Holl (Weber [1922] 1978:216, citing Sohm 1892 and Holl 1898) and his concern with domestic German politics (Baehr 2008) than the "great man" preoccupations of his forbearers in the social sciences (Joose 2014).⁴

These contextual, grammatical, and translational matters notwithstanding, Weber is unmistakably sociological. Indeed, after bringing together several prescient passages of *Economy and Society*, Bourdieu concludes that Weber was anticipating whole schools of sociological thought, *avant la lettre*. In Weber, Bourdieu (1987:121) claims, we can find

a representation of the relations between religious agents that may be termed *interactionist* (in the sense in which we speak today of *symbolic interactionism*). If this is a view of things that has to be read "between the lines," this is because, so far as we can see, the intellectual tools Weber had at his disposal prevented him from forming a clear awareness of the principles he was applying (at least intermittently) in his research.⁵

Following in this vein, a host of contemporary studies (which I will discuss presently) use Weber's descriptions as the starting point for an elaboration of charisma in interactionist terms (Andreas 2007; Blasi 1991; Chan 2013; Couch 1989; DuPertuis 1986; Feuchtwang and Mingming 2001; Finlay 2002; Goossaert 2008; Joosse 2012; Junker 2014; Reed 2013a; Schuurman 2016; Wallis 1982; Wasielewski 1985; Zhe 2008). This research can be summarized in terms of two separate but complementary approaches.

One strand stresses the performative aspects of charismatic affectation and reception, viewing the charismatic leader as "a public character in a public drama" that is "larger than any one person" (Blasi 1991:4-5). In an important move away from leader-centrism, Reed (2013a:255) suggests that we "index and theorize charismatic performances" rather than leaders themselves. For Reed (2013a:283-84), charismatic personae emerge through performative spirals that are impelled according to their own logics of increase and decline, as evidenced by cases where individual leaders "outlive the charismatic form of their authority" and "lose their magic" (see also Weber [1922] 1978:242). In a previous article (Joose 2012), I combined insights from Weber and Erving Goffman to advance a dramaturgical approach to charismatic affectation, showing the careful manner in which charismatic performances can be crafted to shield the laity and wider publics from the more quotidian "backstage" aspects of the leader that would be antithetical to charismatic presentation.

A second, complementary strand of work has sought to decenter the traditional approach to charisma research by, as Junker (2014:418) puts it, doing more "to understand the 'follower' side" of charismatic interactions. This follower side has been stressed recently in a move toward redefining charisma in terms of the expectations of followers themselves (Chan 2013; Feuchtwang and Mingming 2001; Finlay 2002; Goossaert 2008; Zhe 2008), a tack that is part of a larger ecological approach to charisma as something that is salient in moments of societal crisis (see Bendix 1960; Wilson 1975). Chan (2013), for example, reveals how followers were particularly agentic in contributing to and even reconstructing charismatic representations of Falun Gong leader Li Hongzhi during his nearly year-long disappearance from the movement amid repression from the Chinese government. In an echo of the old Feuerbachian insight, then, this strand of research contends that the birth of gods and remarkable leaders eventuates as an "incarnation of expectation" on the part of followers (Zhe 2008; see also Palmer 2008).

THE ROLE AND FUNCTION OF THE CHARISMATIC ARISTOCRACY

In light of these recent contributions, it comes as a surprise that none draw specifically on the social structure that Weber indicates in his own descriptions of charismatic authority. Indeed, even in the germinal moments of its “purest” form, the “charismatic community” (*Gemeinde*) is marked, writes Weber ([1922] 1978:1119), by a “definite social structure” involving an interactional triad consisting of lay followers, leaders, and an inner circle—the charismatic aristocracy (see also Couch 1989; Gerth 1940). This “small group of enthusiastic disciples” clearly has special significance for Weber given that “recognition is a duty” that they must perform, given that they need to continually “prove their usefulness charismatically,” and given that they, unlike the laity, partake in the autarky that the leader enjoys (Weber [1922] 1978:244, 249, 444-445, 1111-1120, 1136, 1167; see also Bendix 1960). Roth (1975:151) notes that Weber’s usual pattern when dealing with the “triangle” structure of the forms of legitimate domination is to give “the greatest amount of attention to the administration (the staff).” When one surveys the scholarship inspired by Weber’s work, however, one searches in vain for anything other than passing mentions of the charismatic aristocracy (see e.g., Bell 2002; Cavalli 1998; Immergut 2013; Wallis 1982). The lack of analyses of the specific role of the charismatic aristocracy in the sociology of power proceeding from Weber’s contributions can therefore be considered out of step with both his pattern and intentions.⁶

But what specifically was Weber’s vision of the charismatic aristocracy, and what was its function? There is no question that all organizations—charismatically led or not—benefit from having a class of high-level members who can skillfully carry out administrative and ideological labor. A select few in charismatic organizations, for example, will tend to be responsible for the “show business” of charisma, using their special skills to convey an aura of extraordinariness from the leader to the wider charismatic laity. As Glassman (1975:624) notes, “the leadership clans, classes, and cliques surrounding the manufactured charismatic leader” often serve their movements by “making sure that robes, sceptres, insignias, myths, ideologies, and ceremonies strictly and carefully surrounded the leader at all times.” Here we may think of Leni Riefenstahl’s ([1935] 2000) filmic genius or L. Ron Hubbard’s efforts to attract media-friendly celebrities to honorific positions within Scientology, mobilizing them as “opinion leaders” (Kent 2002).

But the group that Weber called the charismatic aristocracy is defined and selected not primarily on account of its aptitude for this type of public relations activity—that is, activity comported to the world external to the interactional charismatic core. Such rationally instantiated (*Zweckrational*) offices of “public relations” are made of a different material from the connective tissue of the charismatic community, which is first and always a personalized and “emotional form of communal relationship” (Weber [1922] 1978:243, 1116; see also Roth 1975). Rather, as Weber ([1922] 1978:1119) maintained, the charismatic aristocracy is distinguished from the laity by its *propinquity* to the leader as a “select group of adherents who are united by discipleship and loyalty and chosen according to personal charismatic qualification.”

A relational understanding of charismatic authority allows us to interpret “personal charismatic qualification” to mean not that members of this select group, like their leader, evince a proclivity for becoming a focal point of charismatic devotion in their own right. While this form of “disciple charisma” may be salient later, once the leader’s singular dominance is firmly established (Andreas 2007; Bendix 1960; Samier 2005), such suffusions of charismatic fascination across the community in the earliest stages would attenuate, if not contradict, the indispensable and initially delicate social distinction at the heart of charismatic appeal, namely, the leader’s status as being “set apart” or “*spezifisch außertäglich*” (specifically outside the everyday) (Weber [1922] 1956:140; see also Aron 1967; Barker 1993; Shils 1965; Weber [1922] 1978).

Instead, when Weber speaks of the “personal charismatic qualification” of the charismatic aristocracy, he is best read as asserting that these intimate followers are marked by an excellence in their ability to comport themselves as *exemplary charismatic followers*—followers who are exquisitely qualified to perform roles as valiantly subservient partners in the charismatic interaction.⁷ Bendix (1960:300) stresses that in charismatic interaction, there is “a degree of commitment on the part of disciples that has no parallel in the other types of domination.” As is so often the case with the categorical nature of Weber’s thought, this “uniqueness” and “purity” go hand-in-hand, and it is thus the devotional aspect that is central to Weber’s ideal-typical vision. In the absence of legitimation from traditional or legal regulation, unparalleled devotion speaks to a prescient need—indeed it predicates a certain deficiency—that threatens charismatic actualization in these earliest stages. There are two dimensions to this threat.

First, the potential leader may lack the confidence required to seize a leadership role that is entirely reliant on the presumption of an extraordinary personal acumen. Tucker (1970:87) highlights the need for the charismatic leader to radiate “a buoyant self-confidence in the rightness and goodness of the aims he proclaims for his movement,” and Kohut (1978:825) maintains that charismatic leaders must “display an apparently unshakable self-confidence and voice their opinions with absolute certainty.” Weber ([1922] 1978:) himself discusses at length the importance of self-confidence, buttressed by the confidence of disciples, in connection with the case of Jesus.⁸

Although such remarkable confidence may at times be due to intrapersonal factors (e.g., when Weber [1922] 1978 describes the “epileptoid” visionary), most often this confidence will have social origins. Without external assurance, prospective leaders may develop a “role distance”⁹ that precludes such charismatic confidence (Goffman 1961). In an article about the Children of God (an offshoot of the Jesus movement of the 1960s), Wallis (1982:31) relays an autobiographical note by leader David Berg, who, in the midst of feeling incompetent and directionless in his leadership role, described his encounter with “Maria,” the first of what was to become many love partners:

I think I’d really given up on *myself*. . . . And it almost looked like God had given up on me because I wasn’t seeming to accomplish anything. . . . Then Maria came along, and all of a sudden I found somebody who believed in me! . . . She trusted and believed and I didn’t dare fail her. I mean God put me where I *had* to deliver.

This interaction took place very early in the movement’s history, before Berg assumed the elevated religious status of “Moses David.” In a very real sense then, *Maria converted Berg* to the new leadership role and therewith to the new religion they were co-founding. At the very least, we may say that the conversion process was a bilateral interaction.

Second, prospective leaders may simply be unaware of their status as a medium for followers’ charismatic vision. As Couch (1989:268; see also Bennett 1964) notes, Martin Luther King

did not seek leadership during the early stages of the civil rights movement. . . . Others began to think of him as their leader at the time . . . [and] it was not until sometime later that he assumed the identity of *the* leader of the civil rights movement, [a role that] was the *consequence of action initiated by others* [italics added].

Here we see clearly the role that intimate followers can play in spurring awareness and shoring up confidence in what Friedland (1964:25) calls “incipient charismatics.”

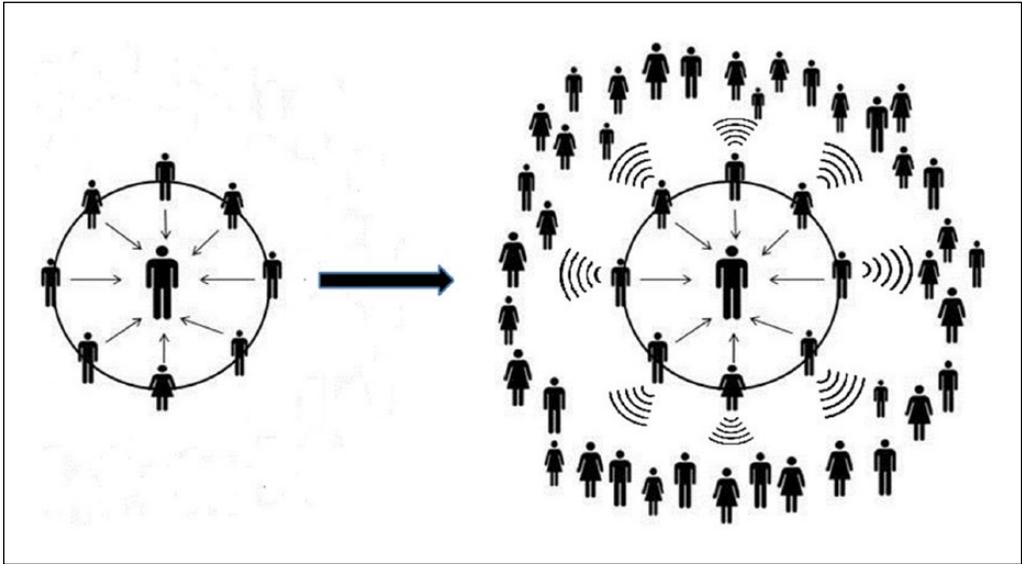


Figure 1. The charismatic aristocracy's comportment, both inward toward the interactional charismatic core and outward toward the laity.

In the early moments of charismatization, then, it is essential that the leader may look to a trusted few who, with very few conditions, can be relied on to affect an assuring, uncompromised faith and direct the leader toward charismatic forms of self-ideation. Emirbayer and Sheller (1999:176) note how charismatic dynamics involve “mechanisms of projective identification [that] set up *unconscious role structures* within a group that constrain and enable members' actions, including those of the group leaders.” This is the charismatically-specific application of Berger and Luckmann's (1966:127) insight that “the revolutionary intellectual must have others who maintain for him the reality (that is, the subjective plausibility in his own consciousness) of the revolutionary ideology.”

The “show business” at these early stages, then, is not the result of a calculated effort to impress wider publics. Rather, it is a collateral effect issuing from the devotional performances of close disciples, who in turn serve as models for the laity. Figure 1 shows these two performative valences of the charismatic aristocracy: the inward comportment toward the charismatic core (in the mode of emotional and ideological assurance) and the resulting, unintentional, outward comportment toward the laity (in the mode of exemplary followership). It is thus through a mimetic mechanism (Girard [1965] 2009) that the set of intensely personal charismatic relationships that would otherwise be limited to social impact at small, interpersonal scales can begin to be writ large, attracting a penumbra of followers (the laity) who will add numerical heft to the emerging community. The role of the charismatic aristocracy must therefore be seen as etiologically prior (even if only by single “beats” in a charismatic interaction) to that of the laity.

But simple confidence is not enough. To inspire vocational commitment on the part of the leader, the leader must also have a sense of *content* with respect to his or her persona and mission. I submit that the charismatic aristocracy can be subtle purveyors of such content, but to describe how, we must turn to an illustrative case that can serve as the basis for the model generation that rounds out the remainder of this article.

A CASE OF CHARISMATIC EMERGENCE

What follows is a narrative account of the emergence and ascension of John de Ruiter, leader of a successful contemporary new religious movement (de Ruiter 1999; Hutchinson 2001; Jooose 2006, 2012; Leon 2015; Marvelly 2002; Parker 2009; Versluis 2014). Three times each week, 300 to 400 men and women, many of whom have traveled from around the globe, gather among marble pillars, gleaming chandeliers, and before the proscenium of de Ruiter's multimillion-dollar conference center. There, they wait for the appearance of their leader, as recently described in *Vice Magazine*:

Suddenly, the energy of the room shifted dramatically. There was no music—just silence and a few coughs. We were acutely aware of John's presence as he stood at the side of the stage for what seemed an incredible amount of time. Then he slowly walked towards his large comfy chair, his footsteps loudly reverberating throughout the hushed auditorium. The atmosphere was mausoleum-esque. John sat and slowly put on his headset, with dramatic effect. Then he began staring, his eyes glistening like pooled Visine. . . . The entire room was intently focused on him and the intense gaze emanating from his steely blue eyes. . . . On each side of the stage were mammoth video screens, both projecting an extreme close-up of John's face. For the next hour, we all silently stared at John. (Leon 2015)

Insight into charismatic actualization is difficult to obtain since all studies of charisma face the same difficulty, namely, grasping after something that is by definition fleeting and ephemeral, something that "may be said to exist only *in statu nascendi* [in the process of being formed]" (Weber [1922] 1978:246; see also Jameson 1973). By the time charismatic social systems have grown to the point where they start to command wider levels of cultural recognition (of which academic attention is an example), the germinal processes of charismaticization will likely have lost something of their protean character, being formalized into broadly predictable (although this is not to say static) performance repertoires by leaders and followers alike.

Moreover, as time passes, the original processes of charismaticization are likely to be further obscured by a growing "surfeit of history" generated by the movement itself: layer upon layer of hagiographic interpolations of "origin stories" about the leader, generated within and for disparate cultural moments and audiences. We must recognize, for example, that a dialectical chasm separates us from the "historical Jesus" such that no contemporary scholar would presume to be able to follow Weber's lead and speak about "the magical charisma that [Jesus] felt within himself" (Weber [1922] 1978:440).

But we cannot ignore that Weber did in fact theorize about these things, and we must not discount the possibility that his perspicacity transcended the limits of his method, albeit in ways that produced ideas that were at times "more stated than developed" (Geertz 1977:122). What we can do is access members of contemporary groups who can speak directly from experience to the interactional dynamics of power-building at the earliest stages of leadership formation and use these accounts to refine, elaborate, and verify the models that Weber propounded. While the main contribution of this article is conceptual rather than empirical, in the following section, I draw on participant observation, multi-stage interviews with close disciples and lay members, media accounts, and videotaped meetings in ways that will add interactional granularity to our understanding of processes of charismatic actualization.¹⁰

Stage One: Becoming an Emissary for Christ

Born in 1959 to postwar Dutch Catholic immigrants, John de Ruiter grew up in the small Canadian town of Stettler, Alberta. Initially irreligious, as a teenager he began connecting with Christian circles, joining a Pentecostal church in the nearby city of Edmonton. Little is known about this first exposure to a religious community, but we do know he formed an intimate relationship with the pastor in the church, and he became an avid attendee at youth rallies. Inner circle member Rebecca¹¹ recalled how one rally was particularly generative for de Ruiter's understanding that he would one day have an important religious role:

A prophet who was doing big rallies with youth called John out at some point and said "YOU," and they called him to the front and they said [to him], "*You will be a mighty man of God.*" . . . So, he started having visions of being an important person in the Christian circle, and when he spoke to me he would talk about being that—something like Billy Graham.

Inspired, in his late teens and early 20s, de Ruiter read Christian books voraciously, married his wife Joyce in 1982, and left with her to seek out formal religious training, first for a year at the Toronto Baptist Seminary and subsequently a year at the Prairie Bible Institute in central Alberta.

The new couple's stints at these institutions were relatively short due to John's displeasure with the rigidity of instruction. Desiring to enter once again into a more personalized internship, he joined Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Edmonton, studying under the wing of the head pastor there. This work involved occasional preaching, and from all accounts, he was an atypical sermonizer, sometimes weeping uncontrollably, sometimes repeating the same phrase over and over. When he underwent the rite of Confirmation in 1984, he spoke for nine hours, late into the night and the early morning.

It was during this session that church councilman Bob Emmerzael first recognized something that caused him to devote himself to the nascent leader. The two men began spending hours alone together outside the church setting, meeting several nights each week and staying up until four or five in the morning. Long theological dialogues between John and Bob led to a preoccupation with the text of Isaiah 53, which Christians take to be one of the strongest Christological prophecies in the Old Testament. During these exchanges, the two developed the belief that this text also referred to de Ruiter in some way. The de Ruiter and Emmerzael families—cemented by John and Bob's special relationship—became the central components of a five-family cell group that eventually left the Lutheran congregation altogether in 1986. This group tithed to support de Ruiter in his independent ministry.

These house-church meetings replicated the dialogical interaction style that de Ruiter and Bob had developed during their early meetings. Joyce de Ruiter recalled that Bob would sometimes writhe on the ground, making "orgasmic" sounds: "We would all just sort of watch this . . . we were told that he was exorcising the demons of other people" (McKeen 2000). From this humble platform—working as an orthopedic shoemaker by day, preaching to a few families at night and on weekends—John de Ruiter's charismatic persona would develop.

Charismatic leaders who base their authority on a claimed special access to supernatural beings of preceding religious traditions often appear in histories of religious movements. De Ruiter's draw for early members of this house-church stemmed from such a claim. He claimed to see Christ, to talk to him, and to know Christ's wishes. To evangelical Christians struggling to cultivate a relationship with a "personal Lord and Savior," de Ruiter's claims

would no doubt seem tantalizing, if perhaps blasphemous. Inner circle member Mary recalled:

He would begin to know Christ's heart towards people. . . . He would begin to say "Christ has a smile inside for you." . . . So it was as if he was in touch with Christ face-to-face. And I think he would probably say that he kind of sees Christ all of the time. That it's before him and he would say [that] to him it was as clear as you and I seeing each other. . . . Yeah, different "responses of Christ"—that's the word. He would know Christ's responses for people.

In 1993, with the encouragement of his boss, another early religious mentor, de Ruiter chose to convey one of Christ's messages more widely, erecting a billboard outside his workplace that read "JESUS CHRIST SAYS CHRISTIANITY IS SATAN'S MASTERPIECE."

For the first time, de Ruiter was addressing the message of his independent ministry to a constituency other than his very small circle of initial followers. The billboard generated interest from a local reporter, and in the subsequent news article de Ruiter explained his reasoning for erecting the sign: "The initiative came from Jesus . . . it is not my own personal agenda. It is Christ's" (Pedersen 1993:C2). Readers across the city also learned of de Ruiter's claim that "when I spend time with Christ I can see him. . . . I can see his face—his whole person" (Pedersen 1993:C2). Finally, de Ruiter gave an exclusive air to his relationship with Christ by claiming that most members of mainline Christianity "only encounter an imaginary Christ which is accepted by faith" but which is in fact the workings of "demonic spirits" (Pedersen 1993:C2).

This was the first time the wider population of Edmonton—a city of more than 600,000 people at the time—received notice of the nascent spiritual leader in their midst. Although readers were given the impression of a relationship to Jesus that sprung directly from de Ruiter's personal connection to a metaphysical realm ("the initiative came from Jesus"), the beginnings of his conception that he would have a special role vis-à-vis Christianity actually developed amid long-standing relationships with pastors in supportive religious congregations. Moreover, the particular nature of his special connection to Christ emerged within an intense interactional crucible involving affirmations first from Bob and later from others in the house-church. Finally, the first act of proselytism for his independent ministry occurred by way of resources and encouragement from his boss, another early religious influence. We can see, therefore, that the establishment of his initial charismatic status involved the support and mediation of close followers, but the expression of this status at wider scales involved a partial diminution or even occlusion of these "minor characters." Through this dynamic, de Ruiter's role had emerged as one that placed him decidedly outside the auspices of mainstream Christianity. Although not yet claiming to be a Christ figure in his own right, he was nevertheless claiming a special status as an intercessor to the spiritual realm. In an extraordinary (and therewith charismatic) sense, he was an *Emissary for Christ*.

Stage Two: Donning the Mantle of Christ

In 1996, de Ruiter began holding open meetings in bookshops, clinics, and rented halls. He made connections with new followers who, through connections of their own, arranged speaking engagements in Maui, London, and Byron Bay, Australia. Some attendees of these engagements in turn followed him back to Edmonton, infusing the local group with an eclectic range of New Age knowledge and practice. As new (but local) follower Amy described:

People would get together all the time for dinners . . . and they were always discussing John. . . . How do you explain to your friends, like, “*Who is this man?*” You know [laughs], there’s pictures of him everywhere and there’s some guy from Germany doing naked yoga in the backyard, and another one from, you know, wherever making a sweat lodge on the other side of the yard, and like, there’s six people downstairs chanting. . . . It was actually really cool.

Indeed, “*Who is this man?*” was an unsettled and increasingly salient question in group discourse at the time. Along with the growing eclecticism among de Ruiter’s followership, de Ruiter himself was becoming increasingly adventurous. His behavior during this early period was marked by a pattern in which he would continually seek out spiritual guidance from a variety of sources—some of them new attendees from different religious traditions—only to reject each teacher or tradition in turn.¹² At various points, he spent much time learning from people who had come to group meetings, such as osteopathy practitioner Gideon Seth and Neale Donald Walsch, a quasi-Christian guru and the best-selling author of the *Conversations with God* book series. After Emmerzael, however, his most intense relationship was with a local reflexologist and metaphysical teacher named Boots Beaudry, a new follower who opened up her reflexology clinic to the group to host meetings. For over a year, Beaudry and de Ruiter frequently convened together privately, during which time she taught him techniques she had learned during her broader explorations with mysticism. De Ruiter in turn would try these techniques on other followers from his inner circle. Remembers Rebecca:

I remember specifically one day where he sat me down across the table and told me to stare into his eyes. He wanted to try this experiment with me. . . . There was definitely this time where John was learning to do this. He would be in a discussion . . . and suddenly he would just stop and he would start staring . . . and this would go on for up to an hour and at a certain point John would . . . break the connection and then he would ask what they saw and what they experienced. I totally do believe now that this was the time that he was learning, and he was looking for feedback.

Before this point, de Ruiter’s meetings were often quite lively and loquacious, involving active dialogues with followers. Under Beaudry’s influence and after this “practicing” phase, de Ruiter’s speech at the public meetings became much slower and sparse, involving long silences and deep staring in which de Ruiter would deliver what he called “transmissions” (de Ruiter 2014; see also Joosse 2006; Pagis 2010). Followers began to report a variety of extraordinary experiences, seeing gold light behind him, seeing him transform before their eyes, and feeling intense accumulations of tension and energy that would discharge in vocal outbursts, startling and regaling other attendees.

As fruitful as the relationship with Beaudry had been, however, it did not last. Lay member Amy witnessed the emotional fallout for Beaudry:

[She] was the one teaching John a lot of these “methods” and things like that and I think at one point she was hurt because she was kind of put in the forefront, and then kind of left behind when John learned what he needed to learn from her.

On the heels of these innovations in technique came innovations to the charismatic persona as well. Close follower Mary remembered tentative steps away from the “emissary” status described earlier and toward a persona that more closely identified with Christ proper.

The first stage in this move saw de Ruiter claim an equivalency between his and Christ's missions:

There was kind of a transition from Christ teaching him, to him becoming that himself. . . . He's evasive about it. He isn't Jesus Christ, but becoming "the one" or "the representative." He has different ways of defining that. Um, it would be like carrying Christ's mantle, is the best way that I can understand it.

Rebecca was emphatic that this elevation in status was the product of new expectations from some of his new followers: "It wasn't until he met the New Age people that they turned him into a guru and started talking about him being a Christ figure." A close witness to this process, she saw how this status elevation was initially met with ambivalence by John himself:

I sort of saw [his ambivalence] as humility—that he's not buying this, [but] that he's just letting them do it for their sake. . . . I think he was confused. I think he wasn't quite sure what to do with this. Those were the critical times where he had the choice to say, "Wait, no, don't do this." I think those were the times where he had the choice to stay human and stay one of them, but where he allowed himself to become "a Christ" or "god" beyond them. And that happened within probably half a year where *they turned him into a messiah and he allowed it to happen* [italics added].

Indeed, emotional force for this transition seemed to come from lay members who, in the absence of direct or specific claims from John, were drawing from a sociocultural storehouse of concepts to make sense of the remarkable experiences they were having (Swidler 1986). Typical of this process of follower-driven status origination was lay member Olivia's recollection of a time when, in the process of talking with de Ruiter, "the most amazing thing happened! It felt like I saw bright lights and then behind him it looked sort of like a foggy cross." She later explained how, because of her Roman Catholic upbringing, this vision was particularly meaningful to her:

I thought it had something to do with Jesus because of the fact that I was brought up Roman Catholic. To me, it's going back to my childhood and I have very fond memories of the little baby Jesus, and Jesus was love, and all of these associations so that when I saw the cross, I thought "wow!" you know, "*there's gotta be something to do with Jesus with this man!*"

New follower Yvonne also referred to her own process of Christological attribution when describing her early attraction to de Ruiter. For Yvonne, the initial fascination had more to do with the phenomenon of de Ruiter's followers than with de Ruiter himself:

It just seemed there was this aura around him being there and a kind of excitement and also—because he was coming to [my city] every three weeks—he kind of had his little group of Edmonton people who were traveling with him, so it was almost like Jesus and his disciples, right? Like he'd go somewhere and they'd come.

The irony of the dynamics of this attributive process is that while this "aura" and "excitement" was enacted by close and long-standing devotees whose charismatic apprehension of de Ruiter was predicated on an "emissary" status, these performances caused others (who were at this point only onlookers to the charismatic core) to attribute *more exalted* statuses;

statuses that were based on notions of an equivalence between de Ruiter and Christ. Even though the new enthusiasms of people like Yvonne and Olivia caused some consternation among house-church members who were attached to their own understandings of de Ruiter as an “emissary” and even though de Ruiter’s success with charismatic performance and technique resulted in a hurtful sidelining of previously close devotees like Beaudry, a trajectory of charismatic ascent, rooted in an interactional dynamic that contained its own logic of status attribution, was becoming clear. In this second stage, de Ruiter’s charismatic status had (for some) risen from that of a messenger with exclusive access to Christ, to someone who himself had donned the *Mantle of Christ*.

Stage Three: The Living Embodiment of Truth

In February 1999, de Ruiter traveled to Pune, India, where a community of followers of the late guru Rajneesh/Osho had remained living together since his death. When a large contingent from this group followed de Ruiter home, this influx to the Edmonton community had a profound impact on the nature of de Ruiter’s charismatic persona. These new members had already held long-standing commitments to teachers and had traveled internationally for these commitments. When they came to Edmonton, they brought with them well-developed repertoires of devoteeship. As second-wave follower Yvonne remembered:

I really saw the flavor change when he went to India and then he came back because the people who came back from India were the seasoned guru-type people . . . and they were the ones who were throwing themselves at his feet and kissing his feet.

These new, increasingly supplicatory performances led to further accumulation within the movement of a class of long-standing members who remembered earlier iterations of de Ruiter’s charismatic persona. These members were at times resentful of the way that new, exotic devotees influenced the charismatic flavor of their leader. Amy provided an interesting perspective in this regard:

I wouldn’t totally . . . completely blame John for where it’s gone to because it is a group dynamic, I think. I mean, I think the more people that are just willing to give up everything to him and the more people that, you know—women that are falling in love. It’s like, people are giving him their power too. It’s not like he was always taking, not even really in the beginning. . . . I would be frustrated when people would be going up to him and kissing his feet ’cause then it’s just, like, “why are you being so silly?” You know, *it was almost like they were being more silly than John could ever be* [italics added], you know what I mean? . . . I would [say] equal party in the whole way that it’s changed, for sure. . . . Yep, definitely a group effort.

Inner circle member Rebecca recalled how a man named Dilbagh Singh (Baba) Bhangoo, an ex-Sikh of Indian origin, was instrumental in modeling the role of devotee to other followers:

Baba represented a hundred percent devotion. He’s Indian, right?—so he knew the whole world and [he] liked the protocol of being a disciple. So he sort of *modeled*. He just worshiped John, and sort of modeled that servanthood. . . . And he was very intelligent, but he became very weak and meek around John.

By this point, she recognized this introduction of a “protocol” for discipleship as a familiar pattern in which the group would fixate on followers who “were sort of, you know, ‘credible’

people. There were certain people that we all used as ‘*credible followers*,’ ah, you know, they gave us confidence that this [religious practice] was okay, sort of.” In response to the “hundred percent devotion” of Baba, and as an indication of the social mechanism that encouraged devotional one-upmanship within the community, de Ruiter would go to Baba’s place for meals between the Monday meetings.¹³ This became a much discussed and much coveted privilege: Attention from de Ruiter—and proximity to him—was increasingly becoming the coin of the realm for the growing community. Baba would play an important role when the public’s attention was drawn to de Ruiter’s extramarital affairs with a pair of sisters who had recently become devotees. Baba gave the following explanation to a national news program:

Most of us are not qualified to have even one [spouse]. We’re not qualified to be married. We’re not qualified to be in relationships. We’re just not qualified to be in that. But somebody who *is* qualified actually can be a husband, a worthy husband not just to one, but to many. (CBC 2001)

Here Baba, the “model disciple,” explicitly tabled the charismatic distinction that is so central to Weber’s ([1922] 1978) ideal-type, namely, that between “qualifications for status” of the “ordinary” (i.e., followers) versus “extraordinary” (the leader) members of the charismatic community. The link between de Ruiter’s special “set apart” status and the legitimacy of his transgression of social norms against polyamory and adultery was thus clear as a charismatic logic expressed by Baba to the wider community and via the media to the nation at large.

While many of de Ruiter’s followers were by this point only too eager to hoist him up as a Christ figure for the current age, de Ruiter had developed an ambivalence toward such comparisons. One follower, Jason Horsley, began projecting the persona of “Kephaz”¹⁴ within the community, composing and distributing songs of dedication containing lyrics like “I will be your Rock, I will be your Peter.” After de Ruiter refused to reciprocate this biblical role-play, Horsley left the group and engaged in online debates with followers about de Ruiter’s legitimacy as a spiritual teacher.¹⁵ At another point, a man confronted de Ruiter because he was distraught about the fact that his wife was considering moving three hours away to be with the group. After the man explained the basis for his wife’s attraction to de Ruiter (“she knows you’re the embodiment of Christ or truth”), de Ruiter replied, “I’d say yes, but that doesn’t necessarily mean anything” (King 1999:A1). The next year, de Ruiter explained to a reporter why he no longer talked about Jesus or the Bible: “‘I shy away from speaking about it because it’s too big a thing . . . it’s too loaded’” (McKeen 2000:E8).

In viewing the Christ status as “too loaded,” perhaps de Ruiter was beginning to sense that characterizing himself in strictly Christological terms might not be the best strategy for recruiting from the diversity of religious traditions found among the Rajneesh group and the more general milieu of seekership that was becoming his biggest source of followers. Or, he may have realized that such comparisons might raise hackles with more traditional followers who would perceive blasphemy in the Christ claims. But such rational calculations are not necessary to account for these developments. More generally, this activity conforms to a pattern common to all processes of charismatic actualization, in which flirtations with anti-nominalism, rejections of precedent, and symbolic closures comprise the signal and substance of an emerging institutional autonomy (Abrutyn 2009; Eisenstadt 1968, 1980). To the extent that de Ruiter was becoming more important to his followers, he was also becoming more independent of traditional, preestablished doctrinal/theological models for his status; that is, he was less reliant on comparisons to established charismatic examples *per se*.



Figure 2. Leader-follower interaction as depicted by a follower.

Currently, the characterization of de Ruiter as a Christ figure has indeed been replaced with the much harder to define persona of the “living embodiment of truth”—a charismatic status that has remained largely unchanged since the turn of the century (de Ronde 2000; Oasis 2015). Rather than relying on the language of Christianity, this new characterization employs de Ruiter’s own lexicon of highly interpretable terms as well as his dialectical *satsang* meeting style that has provoked consternation and wonder among bystanders and devotees alike (Joosse 2006).

These meetings seemed almost designed to provide opportunities for the vicarious experience of others’ charismatic attraction. It is striking, for example, that this third-party perspective is central to a drawing by one participant, in which de Ruiter, surrounded by a dazzling halo, shares an intense gaze with a close follower (see Figure 2).

Going to meetings myself, I too would experience what I can only describe (in a vein similar to Yvonne and Olivia, earlier) as “vicarious charisma.” I would marvel at attendees who were queuing up ahead of the meeting, the most devoted members having already signed up for the closest rows of seats. I would be struck by the hush that descended upon the crowd when de Ruiter emerged from one of the side doors before the meetings. While seated, I found myself and others in the back almost continually looking toward others closer at the front—a literal inner circle—who were giving enrapturing performances of their own enrapture, their bodies rigid with attention as they waited for de Ruiter’s words, gasping in response to his syllables, their eyes tearing up and aglow. I would take notes, but I was often distracted by others who seemed to be much more dedicated to the task, annotating their experiences and consulting others later to compare transcriptions and interpretations. I would watch with fascination as followers made their way to the special station of the “questioner’s chair,” asking oracular questions like: “Who should I marry?” (de Ruiter has performed several impromptu marriages during meetings), “Should I maintain my job?” “Should I move to Edmonton?”

Particularly impressive interactions would in turn be captured and later reproduced in de Ruiter's publications and videos:

I can't believe this is happening. I've never trusted anybody in my life. I haven't trusted the world. I haven't trusted myself and I have total trust in you. Total trust. I can't believe that I can go "home," and it's possible to go "home." And you're Truth and we're Truth. Why is this happening? How is this happening? ("Questioner," de Ruiter 1999:102–03)

In these interactions, de Ruiter was continually being invested with social power, and these investments were themselves what drew me in as an onlooker. After so many between-meeting conversations over coffee, at which fellow attendees regaled me and others with accounts of their experiences—seeing the face of a lion, or seeing de Ruiter bathed in gold light, or hearing how his words uncannily addressed their secret needs—I would find myself back in my seat, looking with determination toward the stage, catching myself hoping for some such experience of my own. This "drawing in" happened to me to a degree that I remember being hesitant to convey to colleagues back at the university.

Needless to say, I never became a devotee of John de Ruiter. I realize now, however, that my initial attraction to the group—my "research mandate"—was not altogether dissimilar from the motivation of many bystanders who, driven by little other than curiosity, enter the halls of the Oasis Centre for the first time. "What do people see in him?" "Will I also be moved?" I realize now that my original understanding of my role—as a dispassionate researcher, utterly distinct from the "true believers" around me—was predicated on a false dichotomy. Indeed, this fascination with de Ruiter (or to be more exact, this *fascination with the fascination* surrounding de Ruiter) is every bit as much an element of the process of charismatization as that which affects so many lay members who are looking toward a devotional, interactive core.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In 1977, Geertz wrote that there are "multiple themes" in Weber's formulation of charisma, and "the preservation of the force of the concept depends upon developing them and uncovering thereby the exact dynamics of their interplay" (p. 14). In his 2006 survey of charisma research, Dawson was still calling for "enlightened microanalyses of the patterns of social interaction through which charismatic authority is constructed" (p. 22). This article identified the hitherto largely undertheorized role of the charismatic aristocracy as a promising site for exploring themes and patterns in what Barker (1993) calls "charismatization."

From the aforementioned description of the charismatic emergence and ascension of John de Ruiter, readers will have noticed symbolic negotiations, tentative experimentalism, a careful evasiveness in the face of definitive characterization, the dramatic influence of exotic performative repertoires from new followers, and a gradual departure from established tradition coupled with a developing esotericism and symbolic autonomy. Although the above account is organized into a three-stage progressive development, it would be a mistake to regard these stages as being discrete or chronological. Rather, they are only real to the extent that they represent in broad strokes the collective averages of what is, at more detailed levels, an irreducibly polyvalent set of performative negotiations between the leader and the led. These negotiations are not only always in process but also in process at different rates and in different directions for different followers. Clearly, however, a charismatic aristocracy was instrumental both in terms of the learning process of de Ruiter himself (on how to

be a guru) and for the learning of lay members (on how to be devotees). I hope that the reader will permit a few more observations.

First and most obvious is that the emergence here of an authority “alien to all regulation and tradition” (Weber [1922] 1978:1115) was something that transpired by way of a drawn-out developmental process that involved close disciples—it was not present in full form during the first flushes of de Ruiter’s leadership (see Finlay 2002). I expect that increased attention to these developmental processes will pay dividends for future analyses since while accounts of “pure” charisma will always be difficult to understand for outsiders to the charismatic process (Barker 1993; Palmer 2001), such outsiders will nevertheless be able to arrive at etic understandings if these “alien” forms of authority are contextualized by a history of antecedent iterations of the charismatic persona. It is important to know, for example, that de Ruiter’s current authority was hewn from Christian tradition at the same time as it is a repudiation of Christian tradition.

Second, in this case, recognition of the leader during the movement’s beginnings was far from a simple, passive “appreciation of extraordinariness.” Rather, recognition was a vector for the attribution of *new* leadership statuses, and as such, it was a wellspring of content for the evolving charismatic persona itself. Kress (2010:34) notes that an ongoing feature of semiotic work is transfiguration, in which interacting social agents “reorient, refocus, and ‘go beyond’ by extending and transforming what there was before the interaction.” As social actors who were “charisma hungry” (Dawson 2011:120), the significant followers and lay members clearly displayed this proclivity for “going beyond,” pushing at the upper bounds of de Ruiter’s status, from ordinary Christian, to Emissary for Christ, to Christ Figure, to Living Embodiment of Truth. These discursive and performative innovations took place at times amid evident confusion on the part of de Ruiter himself. The dynamics of this active attributional process thus give life to Searle’s notion that certain speech acts are not merely descriptive, in the sense of being solely referential toward preexisting states of being. Rather, speech acts can be operative “declarations [that] bring about some alteration in the status or condition of the referred to object or objects solely in virtue of the fact that the declaration has been successfully performed” (Searle 1975:358–61; for debates and alternative formulations of this idea, see Austin [1955] 1975; Butler 1997; Derrida 1977; Goffman 1959; for current applications, see Craciun 2016; Reed 2013a, 2013b). Whether it is a judge pronouncing a defendant “guilty” or a couple’s first reciprocal utterance of “I love you,” statements can have a promissory nature that works to create a new reality, a new form of relationship. In a similar fashion, the charismatic leader here became worthy of an exalted status (in Weberian parlance, “legitimate”) because such statuses were at times thrust upon him in a manner that caused them to “stick.” As the intimate beliefs of de Ruiter’s followers were externalized as declarations and enacted through new devotional practices, they became reified social objects that cloaked de Ruiter with an aura of charisma. Thus, what Berger and Luckmann (1966:60) call “objectivation” is perhaps akin to what Weber had in mind when, in his definitional passage, he wrote that the leader “*soll . . . heißen*” extraordinary (Weber [1922] 1956:140).

Third, the novel and sometimes clumsily introduced devotional performances, coupled with the leader’s guarded responses and negotiations, indicate a performative “testing ground” for the emergence of the charismatic persona. Because charismatic statuses are audacious by definition, certain forms of “plausible deniability” on the part of leaders gain currency because they allow him or her to hedge against the danger of raising hackles or eliciting incredulity among followers who are not prepared to accept the new status. As Katz (1975) notes, there is a moral ambivalence at the heart of the dynamics of charismatic imputation because such imputations are intrinsically bound together with the possibility of being

perceived as deviant. In de Ruiter's case, this danger was ameliorated because it was his followers who risked being perceived as overly fervent in their enthusiasm, that is, "more silly than John could ever be." It was followers who were credited with the at times controversial task of "turn[ing] him into a guru." These sentiments therefore speak not only to a certain acquiescing passivity on the part of the leader at the earliest stages of charismatic development but also to the privilege enjoyed by the leader who possesses a "first right of refusal" with respect to new devotional approaches ("he had the choice to say, 'wait, no, don't do this'"). In this regard, highly interpretable terms like "mantle of Christ" are well suited for tentatively indicating a charismatic status while also avoiding potential negative fallout from perceptions of hubris. If one were to derive a maxim from this dynamic, it might be to "let others say of you what you dare not say of yourself."

Fourth, we can see that the aforementioned privilege is the basis for a modicum of security for the leader, who can remain buoyed atop the social hierarchy while each successive wave of follower-generated charisma passes through the community. The counterpoint to this buoyancy and line of charismatic ascent, however, is the precarity of the close disciples or charismatic aristocracy whose positions are mediated by such processes. If their self-understandings as important followers render them inflexible to the vagaries of the developing charismatic culture, they will find themselves no longer in emotional accord with their station, cease to "prove their usefulness charismatically" (Weber [1922] 1978:249), and be left prone to remonstrations for their "lack of vision." Their devotional styles will be vulnerable to eclipse by the new charismatic enthusiasms of lay members (e.g., the initial New Age followers or later the Rajneeshee wave) who will be continually vying for closer emotional proximity to the leader. The charismatic aristocracy thus constitutes a crucial slipping point between the leader and the laity, their fungibility serving as the social lubricant that allows for the rejuvenation and amplification of enthusiasm that is so necessary for charismatic development.

Fifth and finally, although this narrative account points to the key role played by particular close disciples in the innovation of new performative repertoires for followership, my observations of meetings also suggest that from the vantage point of new attendees or lay members witnessing the charismatic performance, it did not matter so much *who* the close disciples were or *whether* the people at the core were permanent or momentary occupants of these stations. What mattered for me (as an initiate to the performance) was simply that there *were* people ensconcing the leader in an aura of value. One can surmise that this lack of knowledge of the identities of the charismatic aristocracy may itself be propitious for charismatic mobilization because it is charismatically salient that de Ruiter's persona should command singular and persistent attention above all others. Thus, although Weber ([1922] 1978:1119) stressed that the charismatic aristocracy is a "select group," a parsing of the "outward" and "inward" performative valences of the charismatic aristocracy (see Figure 1) allows for a qualification on this point: For the incipient charismatic leader, steadfastness and loyalty (and thus the appearance of a semi-permanent "personal staff"; Weber [1922] 1978:232) are no doubt useful for mustering charismatic self-confidence. But for the lay member (and members of the wider public), whatever permanence may exist with respect to the charismatic staff can at times be incidental to the achievement of the performative, mimetic mechanism through which charismatic valuation takes place.¹⁶ Thus, in the manner of Reed's (2013a:255) point that we should "index and theorize charismatic performances" rather than leaders themselves, this analysis concludes with a similar recommendation: We should stress the importance of the charismatic aristocracy while being careful not to reify particular aristocrats. Figure 3 depicts the dynamic processes of interaction described in the preceding five paragraphs.

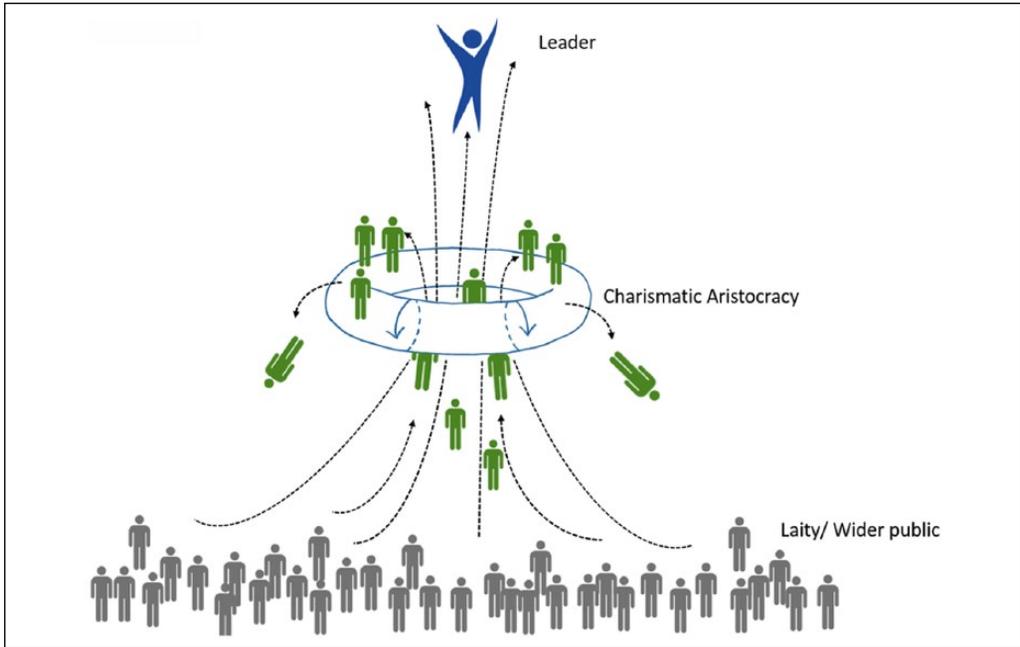


Figure 3. The fungible charismatic aristocracy, acting as a “slipping point” between the leader and the laity.

This work follows others who have begun to explore the agency of charismatic followers more generally. Specifically, the model (1) stresses the social and processual mechanisms through which charismatic innovation may take place, (2) pays heed to the *agentic* role of intimate followers in generating content for the charismatic personage, (3) accounts for a *vetting process* through which new innovations in the leader’s charismatic status may be accepted or rejected by the leader and community, and (4) describes co-functional relationships among the laity (who are originally onlookers to charismatic devotion), the aristocracy (the original performers of devotion), and the leader who chooses, to varying degrees, to serve as a devotional focal point. These interactions constitute and preserve the three-tiered power structure that Weber repeatedly indicates in his descriptions of charismatic authority.

This analysis calls for several extensions in future research. First, while the most vivid examples of what Weber called “pure” charisma seem to apply most consistently to religious leadership, there is no question that he viewed the category as essential for analyses of political, military, and cultural authority (Eisenstadt 1968; Shils 1965; Willner and Willner 1965). Indeed, a little-known backstory to Weber’s development of the concept was his own preoccupation—predominantly in his more polemical writings—with combating the demagogic Caesarism that threatened German politics from Bismark’s leadership onward (Baehr 2008: 11-114). A strand of political sociology has followed in this train (Bourdieu 1987; Cavalli 1987; Gerth 1940; Joosse 2017; Madsen and Snow 1991; Schweitzer 1974; Willner and Willner 1965), along with calls for attention to the role that charisma plays in social movement formation and revolution (Andreas 2007; Downton 1973; Reed 2013a), terrorism studies and asymmetrical warfare (Hofmann 2016; Hofmann and Dawson 2014; Joosse, Bucerius, and Thompson 2015; Scott 1990), celebrity culture and artistic genius (DeNora 1997; Dyer and McDonald 1998), and management studies (Conger and Kanungo 1988; Gardner and Avolio 1998; Khurana 2002). Because charismatic processes are clearly salient for this wide range of fields, future work should examine how performances of charismatic aristocracies are shaped

by field-specific structures that constrain or increase their agency. Explorations of the formal parallels between charismatic structures across these areas may help us draw closer to the promise Weber saw in the world-historical applicability of his concept.¹⁷

Second, this may be helpful for others who have followed Eisenstadt's (1968) attempts to show how charismatic interaction is a central process in sociocultural evolution and institution building. The macro-level dimensions of these processes have received much attention, but these authors have repeatedly called for micro-level extensions (Abrutyn 2009; Abrutyn and Van Ness 2015; Eisenstadt 1964). Within this framework, Abrutyn (2009:458) notes that "the construction of elite roles requires counter-roles, or those who recognize elites' legitimate claims and who exchange intangible resources like commitment and loyalty . . . with elites." Abrutyn and Van Ness (2015) describe how the leader creates and implies the existence of generalized counter-roles, but the model I describe gives fuller account of how "counter-leaders" (i.e., performative followers) also participate in the creative institutional dialectic. I hope that the processes described here provide detail that will be helpful for future elaboration of theories of institutional evolution.

Third, this analysis may point the way toward expanded scholarly discussions about processes of routinization. Weber ([1922] 1978:1122) maintained that the "turning point" toward routinization "is always reached when charismatic followers and disciples become privileged table companions" within the charismatic community. That is, to the extent that the aristocracy becomes ossified, it will also seek a traditionalization/regulation of charismatic interaction. This analysis has revealed how members of a charismatic community can, at times, perform in a manner that results in their ascendance to privileged ("aristocratic") positions within the community. Future work should continue to explore how such members, once in these positions, adjust their performances to affect a change that results in a greater permanence of station. Weber ([1922] 1978) devotes a lengthy section to these processes himself, and a dramaturgical analysis would no doubt complement this work and allow for further theoretical elaboration.

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NOTES

1. Philosopher Dorothy Emmet (1958:233) hinted that partial blame for Hitler's rise was to be found in the typically Weberian desire for charismatic release from the bureaucratic morass of modernity: "I cannot help thinking there is something rather Teutonic, suggesting the Führer-Prinzip, about [Weber's] description" of the charismatic leader. In the postwar years, there is no doubt that the growing salience of the concept derived from its readiness to serve as a tool for understanding the darkest examples of transformational leadership in the twentieth century—above all Hitler (Derman 2011; see also Becker 1946; Gerth 1940). Controversies surrounding former students like political theorist Carl Schmitt are indicative of the unease with which some approach Weber's ideas about leadership (Engelbrekt 2009). In a different line of critique, others lament the erosion of Christian exceptionalism that is implicit in Weber's generalization of the concept (Haley 1980; Joesse 2014; Smith 2013), which was concomitant with the rise of a secular, therapeutic culture more generally (Rieff 2007).
2. Joas (1992:47) refers to charisma as "a more or less clandestine residual category" within Weber's tripartite model.

3. In the third chapter of the second draft of what would become *Economy and Society*, Weber ([1922] 1978:241) writes:

The term “charisma” will be applied to a certain quality of 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, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a “leader.”

4. Neither Carlyle ([1841] 1912) nor Spencer (1872), his most famous critic, appear in Weber’s discussions.
5. Although Bourdieu ([1971] 1987) was ultimately critical of symbolic interactionist approaches, other scholars argue that Bourdieu’s own reconsideration of charisma elides the dynamism that Weber was trying to indicate in his descriptions, presenting only a more routinized form of the ideal-type. Verter (2003:153, note 7), for example, notes that Bourdieu “retains the term [charisma], but only in Weber’s ([1922] 1978:1139–141) sense of ‘the charisma of office.’” Similarly, Turner (2011:235) notes that Bourdieu’s treatment “transforms Weber’s theory of charisma into a rather conventional theory of religious institutions.” A full assessment of Bourdieu’s reimagining of charisma is beyond the scope of this article, but see the aforementioned sources as well as Smith (2013) and Corso (2012) for thoughtful discussions.
6. Although it is difficult to establish a “pattern” in Weber’s late and sporadic writings on charisma, it is worth noting that its first appearance comes in the *Protestant Ethic* by way of a description of the “apostolic model,” in which close disciples of Jesus are themselves bearers of “charisma” as a form of “carrier group” (Weber 1920, 1946). At this point (prior to 1905), his usage was clearly closer to that of Sohm (1892) and Holl (1898) and indeed closer to the conception that Paul seemed to espouse in his epistles to communities in early Christianity (e.g., 1 Corinthians 12:4–11; Romans 12:1–8; see also Smith 2013 for an insightful discussion of the Moravian Brethren, the exemplar of the apostolic model that inspired Weber’s first published use of the term *charisma*).
7. This interpretation squares convincingly with a shift in emphasis that accompanied Weber’s appropriation of the term *charisma* from contemporary theological writers. Sohm and Holl maintained a fidelity to the Greek usage of charisma as a noun for *gift*, but Weber consistently shows a preference for the adjectival form *charismatic*, which he appends as a qualifier to a particular form of social arrangement—a “domination.”
8. The editors of *Economy and Society* chose to reference Mark 10:51–52 here, but while this is the story about a single instance in which Jesus “heals a blind man,” Weber ([1922] 1978:564) actually states that this connection between faith and miraculous success is something that happens “repeatedly” in cases where Jesus “heal[s] the crippled and those possessed by demons.” I believe, therefore, that Weber was actually referencing the stories in Matthew 9:1–7 (in which Jesus heals a paralytic man after seeing “how much faith they had”), Matthew 17:14–20 (where lack of faith prevents the exorcism of a demon-possessed boy), and possibly Matthew 14:28–31 (where Peter initially walks on water but then begins to sink after experiencing fear). In all these instances (i.e., Weber’s “repeatedly”), Jesus attributes miraculous success (or lack thereof) to the amount of faith displayed by disciples or onlookers.
9. That is, feelings of inadequacy and inauthenticity resulting in a denial of “the virtual self that is implied in the role” (Goffman 1961:108).
10. My observations of de Ruiter and his group took place over a period of 10 years; I attended 30 of the group’s formal meetings, or *satsangs*, and more social events within the group. In addition, I conducted multistage interviews with nine people, all of whom had spent a minimum of two years in the group. The interviews ranged from 1.5 to 3 hours in length. Importantly for present purposes, three participants were high-ranking members originating from the very small group that had been involved with him since the late 1980s to early 1990s, when de Ruiter was emerging as a spiritual leader. As such, each was witness to and instrumental in the early stages of the development of his charismatic style. All interviewees are presented in this piece with pseudonyms; because the group is small (and increasingly so in earlier years), I have done my best to preserve their anonymity by removing identifying features.

I also decided to use what McDonnell (2014) terms “productive methods”—asking participants to use their creativity to produce drawings, timelines, or other creative representations of their experiences in the group. This allowed for a nonverbal method of accessing experiences, something that was especially important in this case because so much of their time at meetings would involve dwelling in subjective interiority and shared silence (Joose 2006; Pagis 2010). I supplemented these data with over 100 hours of audio- and video-recorded meetings, court files, media accounts, and artwork produced by followers. For methodological considerations on using remembered accounts in qualitative research, see Keightley (2010) and Orbuch (1997). For cautions on the use of former members in new religious movements research, see Bromley, Shupe, and Ventimiglia (1979).

11. All interviewee names are pseudonyms.
12. As described in his book, de Ruiter (1999:xii) assessed “each doctrine, each teacher, and each technique [he] encountered, only to discover that they were all less than absolutely true.”
13. Weber (1922 [1978]:242; see also pp. 1113–14) strongly emphasizes the autarky of the charismatic leadership and staff, maintaining that “followers to whom the charisma is addressed [would] provide honorific gifts, donations or other voluntary contributions” to the leader and noting that a distinct honor enjoyed by close disciples would be the ability to “claim to be fed at the common table” with the leader (p. 1119). Since the earliest days, de Ruiter’s closest followers had been tithing to him, allowing de Ruiter to eventually quit his job and devote himself full-time to his ministry. For more on this voluntarism within the de Ruiter group, see Joosse (2006: 359–360).
14. *Kephas* is the Greek word for Rock and Peter, the disciple of Jesus who was “first among equals.”
15. A post-defection lyric to a subsequent song shows that Horsley continued to struggle to understand his relationship with de Ruiter: “You took me in, or so it seemed; Riding around in your 4 × 4; Prince of Peace or Lord of War?; My Clint Eastwood man, my perfect dad; You were the father that I never had.”
16. One interesting aspect for further exploration would be the extent to which this relative anonymity may be important for enabling a generalized fantastical identification among a diverse audience.
17. In a discussion of his scholarly sources, Weber ([1922] 1978:1112) distinguished his own aspirations for “charisma” from those of Lutheran Jurist Rudolph Sohm: Sohm was the first to have “worked out the sociological character of this kind of domination,” but the applicability of Sohm’s “treatment was bound to be one-sided from the viewpoint of historical diversity” because “he developed the category with regard to one historically important case—the rise of ecclesiastic authority of the early Christian church” (also Smith 1998).

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