

Max Weber and the Reinvention of Popular Power*

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Abstract

Political scientists are not generally accustomed to treating Max Weber's unusual account of democracy – *plebiscitary leader democracy* – as a genuine democratic theory. The typical objection is that Weber's account of democracy in terms of the generation of charismatic leadership is not really a democratic theory at all, because it contains no positive account of popular power: specifically, that it presents democracy in such a fashion that there is no capacity for the People to participate in the articulation and ratification of the norms, laws and policies governing the conduct of public life. This essay argues that Weber's theory of plebiscitary leader democracy ought to be interpreted as rejecting, not *any* account of popular power, but only a traditional and still dominant *vocal paradigm of popular power*: one which assumes that popular power must refer to an authorial power to self-legislate the norms and conditions of public life, or at least to express substantive opinions, values and preferences about what kinds of decisions political leaders ought to be making. Properly understood, plebiscitary leader democracy embodies a novel, *ocular paradigm* of popular power according to which the object of popular power is the leader (not the law), the organ of popular power is the People's gaze (not its voice), and the critical ideal associated with popular empowerment is the candor of leaders (not the autonomous authorship of laws). Thus, rather than abandon the concept of popular power, Weber's theory of democracy reinvents its meaning under conditions of mass society.

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Although almost a century has passed since his death, Max Weber's contribution to political science continues to exert a profound, and

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indeed discipline-shaping, influence. Weber's definition of the state as the monopoly of legitimate violence, his distinction between three forms of legitimate domination (traditional, legal-rational and charismatic), his analysis of the vocational politician in terms of the distinction between an ethic of conviction and an ethic of responsibility, and his diagnosis of modernity as a process of disenchantment grounded in the unchecked spread of bureaucracy and instrumental reason are just some of the most notable examples of Weberian concepts that continue to inform and stimulate ongoing empirical and theoretical research in contemporary political science.

Yet, if Weber's global relevance to present-day political science is certain, what is less clear is the specific relevance of Weber's contribution to the contemporary study and pursuit of democracy. The problem is not simply that, as many scholars have noted, Weber's writings on democracy lack the clarity and systematic structure one would expect to find from a proper democratic theory (e.g., Breiner 1996; Mommsen 1989: 31; Tucker 1968: 753;). Rather, what is most preventative of the serious treatment of Weber as a democratic theorist is that the account of democracy he did in fact sketch in both his sociological and partisan writings — *plebiscitary leader democracy* — has not generally been treated as a genuine democratic theory at all, but on the contrary has been seen as hostile to the very spirit of democracy as a regime uniquely committed to the empowerment of the People.

By 'leader democracy' ('Führerdemokratie'), Weber meant a form of democracy whose rationale was not its ability to realize traditional democratic values such as inclusiveness, equality, popular sovereignty, or the cultivation of the intellectual and moral capacities of the citizenry, but rather its capacity to produce *charismatic* leaders capable of providing strong, independent and creative direction to the modern, industrial nation-state.¹ Charisma is a technical sociological term for Weber. It designates one of three grounds upon which hierarchical power relations ('Herrschaft') might be found legitimate. Unlike the other two grounds, traditional and legal/rational authority, charismatic authority is based on the enigmatic power of individual personalities to instil trust and confidence, usually in the service of some higher purpose or mission. In its pure

1. For Weber's understanding of plebiscitary leader democracy as a modern way to revive charisma, albeit in an adulterated rather than pure form, see, e.g., Weber (1978: 268).

form, charisma is an entirely individual quality which, highly rare and extraordinary, fades from the world as soon as its bearer dies or loses his or her special powers. It is, as Weber (1978: 241) says,

a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a 'leader'.

Weber found in Jesus' 'Although it is written, I say unto you...' and Luther's 'Here I stand, I can do no other' classic statements of pure charisma, illustrating both the individual grounds of charismatic authority and its revolutionary function as a creator of new norms and values. Importantly, the charismatic leadership Weber expected to see cultivated by democratic institutions was not of this pure type. Whereas pure bearers of charisma – such as founders of religion like Moses, Jesus and Mohamed, the biblical prophets, magicians offering healing through occult powers, and political geniuses like Pericles, Caesar, or Napoleon – appeared only rarely in world history, and were unlikely to reappear within the highly rationalized, secularized and disenchanting conditions of modern mass society, Weber believed that twentieth-century mass democracy offered a way to manufacture a kind of leadership that, while not purely charismatic, nonetheless took on charismatic traits and could be regularized into a routine feature of the modern political landscape.

How precisely would democratization engender quasi-charismatic leaders? For one thing, the highest offices of mass democracies, such as the Prime Minister in parliamentary states, the Reich President in the Weimar Republic and the President in the United States, were themselves invested with a certain aura – what Weber called 'office charisma' – that meant whoever filled them would be treated with a special authority that exceeded the office's legal function. In addition, mass elections would recreate the acclamatory moment typical of ancient forms of pure charisma, in which the mass following of the charismatic leader affirmed his or her special merit. But neither of these fully explains how democratization would facilitate the rise of quasi-charismatic leaders. The charisma of democratic leaders would not be altogether depersonalized so that anyone who held the highest offices would *ipso facto* be charismatic. Rather, it was Weber's expectation that democratic institutions, like universal suffrage, mass parties and frequent elections, would *train*

and *cultivate* charismatic qualities among those who sought popular support. Specifically, democratization would empower *politicians* capable of winning a mass following—as opposed to bureaucrats with technical expertise, plutocrats with great wealth, or aristocrats or monarchs with a claim to blood lineage. And it was distinctive of successful politicians in mass democracy, Weber thought, that they would tend to have three qualities that approximated those of the pure charismatic leader.

First, they would be experts in *struggle*: their power would depend on their own capacity to beat out rivals in competition, rather than on any claim to expert knowledge or right of inheritance. Like the bearer of pure charisma, the modern, democratic politician would possess an authority stemming from his or her own manifest strength, proved in continual contest with rivals and enemies.² Second, the democratically elected leader would have, in the support of the People, an independent ground of authority from which to articulate and defend *new values and direction* for the polity—especially in the sense of national purposes and aspirations beyond those of mere technical efficiency—and would thereby resemble the pure bearer of charisma who, as Weber (1978: 243) explains, ‘demands *new obligations*’. Third, democratically elected leaders would be *personally responsible* for their decisions. Whereas the bureaucrat could disclaim responsibility—pointing either to the dictate of a superior or to the impersonal requirements of a specialized expertise—the successful politician in mass democracy would make decisions that were not only public, but inseparable from his or her own personal judgment. Such a situation would resemble that of ancient magicians, prophets and warlords—pure bearers of charisma whose fates were inextricably tied to the success of the enterprises they led.³

By ‘plebiscitary’, Weber meant, first of all, a democratic politics in which leaders would be selected directly by popular election, rather than indirectly by a parliament or from party lists. Thus, for example, it is commonplace among Weber scholars to speak of a shift in Weber’s

2. As Weber (1946: 248) explains, ‘Pure charisma does not know any “legitimacy” other than that flowing from personal strength, that is, one which is constantly being proved’.

3. As Weber (1978: 242) writes of the charismatic leader, ‘If proof and success elude the leader for long, if he appears deserted by his god or his magical or heroic powers, above all, if his leadership fails to benefit his followers, it is likely that his charismatic authority will disappear. This is the true meaning of the divine right of kings’ (‘Gottesgnadentum’).

thinking from a parliamentary phase (when he expected leaders to be generated from the competition of rival members within parliament) to a plebiscitary phase (when he considered mass elections be the most effective means of generating charismatic leadership). Yet it would be a mistake to limit the meaning of plebiscitarianism simply to direct elections for leadership. Weber also intended an additional meaning: namely, that plebiscitary politics would be those in which popular decision-making took on a superficial, merely formal and, hence, fictive character.⁴ If the most drastic example of plebiscitary politics was the referendum by which an uncontested single ruler legitimated his or her rule or reforms – such as the plebiscites used by both Napoleons – Weber did not think the superficial character of popular decision-making was necessarily obviated by the introduction of a few additional choices. For one thing, to the extent electoral contests in mass democracy were fought, *not* over substantive issues, but rather over emotional and intangible appeals, then the results could not be said to indicate a clear meaning for how the polity should be governed.⁵ For another, the plebiscitary character of mass democracy also inhered in the fact that electoral victory for Weber (1994a: 228) usually indicated, not the revelation of the popular will in a certain direction, but the superior initiative of the successful politician and his or her party machine. Under plebiscitary conditions, ‘it is not the politically passive “mass” which gives birth to the leader; rather the political leader recruits his following and wins over the mass by “demagogy”. That is the case even in the most democratic form of state.’ Here it is important to point out that Weber (1994b: 304–305) defended his proposal for plebiscitary leader democracy via appeal to the highly ambiguous terminology of the

4. Thus, Weber (1978: 268) could speak of plebiscitary leadership democracy in terms of a *merely apparent* element of popular self-rule: ‘“Plebiscitary democracy” – the most important type of leadership democracy (‘Führerdemokratie’) – is in its genuine sense a kind of charismatic domination which conceals itself under the form of legitimacy which is derived from the will of the ruled and only sustained by them’.

5. For Weber (1978: 1129–30), the emotional element political rhetoric – or what in more recent times has been called ‘issueless politics’ – was a distinguishing feature of plebiscitary democracy: ‘The more mass effects are intended and the tighter the bureaucratic organization of the parties becomes, the less significant is the content of the rhetoric. For its effect is purely emotional, insofar as simple class situations and other economic interests do not prevail which must be rationally calculated and manipulated. The rhetoric has the same meaning as the street parades and the festivals: to imbue the masses with the notion of the party’s power and confidence in victory and, above all, to convince them of the leader’s charismatic qualification.’

'self-elected leader of the masses' ('selbstgewählten Vertrauensmann der Massen')—a term that could mean either the People's right to elect their own leaders, or, what is more clearly in keeping with Weber's account of plebiscitary democracy, that the leader would be someone who was self-elected: in the sense of being someone who, unlike the bureaucrat or aristocrat, would achieve office by virtue of his or her own machinations, initiative, effort, and capacity to lead and direct a political machine.

So defined, the Weberian notion of the 'plebiscitary' has little in common with conventional representative democracy (which sees the People as exercising an indirect but powerful control over the substantive decisions shaping public life), nor with Roman plebiscitary democracy (which engaged the People directly in legislation through frequent plebiscites).⁶ Weber's rendering of 'plebiscitary' does closely resemble, however, that of subsequent democratic theorists, for whom 'plebiscitary' is shorthand for a sham or fictive democracy in which the propaganda and spectacles of mass leaders and their political machines undermine deliberation and genuinely participatory contributions from the wider citizenry (e.g., Ackerman and Fishkin 2002: 151; Habermas 1989: 66-67, 201, 207, 217-18; Ranney 1946: 350; Wilhelm 2000: 45;). Indeed, a consequence of plebiscitary politics (in the Weberian sense) is that leaders are free of constraints upon their actions from their constituents—or at least much more free than democratic idealists from the nineteenth century had contemplated. A plebiscitary leader pursues a substantive agenda that is his or her own, not that of the People, and thus possesses an extraordinary degree of independent decision-making authority. The plebiscitary leader 'will act according to his own judgment as long as he can successfully claim [the People's] confidence and will not [act] like an [elected] official, i.e. in conformity to the expressed or suspected will of the electors' (Weber 1956: 558; translated in Mommsen 1984: 184). Although Weber did not think the democratic leader would be entirely unaccountable, the People was not a source of this constraint.⁷ Against the dominant trend in democratic theory

6. While Weber's proposals for plebiscitary leader democracy did contemplate referenda and recalls, he did not think these would play more than a minor role, both because of their infrequency and their tendency toward irrationality. See, e.g., Weber (1994a: 226-27).

7. Rather, such constraint would be supplied by Parliament, an independent judiciary, the administrative bureaucracy, and a political culture that accepted basic liberal rights.

to see elections, along with public opinion, as key devices whereby the People, with varying degrees of exactness, controls and directs the representatives who actually hold office, within Weber's plebiscitary model both public opinion and elections are seen as the effects of successful leadership, rather than their causes and justifications.

Taking both the 'leader' and 'plebiscitary' elements together, then, Weber's concept of plebiscitary leader democracy is a theory of democracy oriented around the cultivation of charismatic leaders who fulfil their political tasks with only ostensible attention to the values, concerns and opinions of the mass populace that formally elects them.⁸ It is hardly surprising that this theory, so conceived, has received scant attention from contemporary democratic theorists and has been almost universally criticized by Weber scholars. If the most virulent form of criticism – that Weber's theory of democracy is proto-totalitarian and actually facilitative of the emergence of National Socialism in Germany (e.g., Becker 1988; Mommsen 1984) – is excessive and unfair for a variety of reasons,⁹ much more understandable is the very common complaint that plebiscitary leader democracy, while not necessarily fascist or illiberal, is not really a democratic theory at all. One finds repeated from numerous commentators the objection that Weber's political theory lacks any positive account of popular power: specifically, that it presents

8. While Weber occasionally supported democratization for a variety of local, contingent reasons – for example, that it would be unseemly and impolitic for the mass of German citizens fighting and dying in World War I to be denied the vote, or that universal suffrage, and the mass parties it engendered, would weaken the political power of the Prussian aristocracy whose ineffective hegemony in Germany Weber despised – at the heart of Weber's justification of plebiscitary leader democracy was the expectation that this regime would produce charismatic leaders with strength, vision, and a sense of responsibility. See, e.g., Weber (1978: 1449-53; 1994b: 304; 1946: 113-14).

9. Not only did Weber precede the rise of fascism, but he was a continual defender of liberal ideas and human rights. This has been argued by a variety of commentators including Bendix (1960); Beetham (1989); Giddens (1972); Hennis (1988: 166); and Marianne Weber (1975). It is substantiated, moreover, by Weber's own identification as a liberal (e.g., Weber 1964: 85). And it is further documented by Weber's (1971: 312; translated Loewenstein 1966: 23) important observation that 'it is primitive self-deception to imagine that we today (even the most conservative among us) would be able to live without these achievements dating from the period of "the rights of man"'. And yet Mommsen (1989: 30) certainly has a point when he argues that for Weber 'liberal constitutional rights had become either truisms or empty formulas which as such could not offer any orientation although, like daily bread, one could not do without them'.

democracy in such a fashion that there is no capacity for the People to participate in the articulation and ratification of the norms, laws and policies governing the conduct of public life. Beetham, whose study of Weber is still one of the most authoritative, sums up the conventional wisdom when he writes: 'What is distinctive about this account of democracy...is that it makes no reference to democratic *values*, much less regards them as worth striving for'. Despite Weber's support of basic democratic institutions like Parliament and direct election for leadership, his theory of government 'cannot be called a *democratic* theory, since it did not seek to justify such government in terms of recognizably democratic values, such as increasing the influence of the people on policies pursued by those who governed'. Accordingly, Beetham can say of Weber: 'his strong leader was legitimated by a conception of democracy that was anything but democratic' (Beetham 1974: 101-102, 239).

This conventional wisdom about Weber—that his account of democracy in terms of the generation of charismatic leadership is not really a democratic theory at all, because it contains no positive account of popular power—finds expression among both defenders and critics of Weber's overall contribution to democratic theory. Among the defenders, the standard procedure is to render Weber's concept of charisma innocuous to the traditional democratic ideal of a self-ruling People. Either charismatic leadership is seen as a universalizable goal (the point is for *all* citizens to become more charismatic and capable of effective political action), or the selection of charismatic leaders is understood as proceeding in non-plebiscitary fashion (charismatic leaders are chosen in an election that reflects the popular will), or the charismatic leader is seen as something extraneous to Weber's true democratic *ethos* (Weber was committed to popular sovereignty *despite* his support of plebiscitary leader democracy).¹⁰ Such arguments apply a great deal of pressure to the actual texts and it is not surprising, therefore, that the leading scholar of this interpretation has recently distanced himself from such views (Scaff 1989).¹¹ Among the critics, what is objectionable about Weber is precisely that his fixation on charismatic leadership would appear

10. Scaff (1973) makes all three arguments.

11. The notion that Weber's political theory is concerned with the traditional value of popular autonomy has also been critiqued by Turner and Factor (1984: 87-89). For most commentators, it is a basic premise that Weber rejects the ideal of popular autonomy as both impossible and undesirable under the conditions of mass society.

to relegate the institutions of democracy, such as suffrage, elections and mass parties, to no more than an instrumental device by which to cultivate an oligarchy adapted to realizing German imperial designs on the world stage. Thus, Lukács, a contemporary of Weber, could accuse Weber's support of democratization as being only a 'technical measure to help achieve a better functioning imperialism' (1954: 488). And likewise Mommsen, probably the single-most exhaustive student of Weber, can write of plebiscitary leader democracy that it is only

a functionalist system that gives the people no more and no less than the guarantee that the direction of governmental affairs is always in the hands of leaders who, at least formally, are optimally qualified for the task...[so that] there will no longer be any question of active participation by the people, in any form, in the material formulation of the political objectives to be pursued by the community (1984: 395).

Defenders and critics of Weber are agreed, then, that an account of democratization in terms of the generation of a few select charismatic leaders, in possession of great decision-making authority and radical independence from the electorate, cannot really be a theory of democracy because there would appear to be no meaningful place for the People.

Against this prevailing and dismissive view, I will argue that we need to understand plebiscitary leader democracy as a democratic theory that stands, *not* for the abandonment of popular power, but for its *reinvention*. The prevailing interpretation that plebiscitary leader democracy has no positive account of popular power only makes sense so long as one operates within a familiar *vocal paradigm of popular power*: one which assumes that popular power must refer to an authorial power to self-legislate the norms and conditions of public life, or at least to express substantive opinions, values and preferences about what kinds of decisions political leaders ought to be making. If popular power is conceived according to this vocal, legislative model, then Weber's plebiscitary leader democracy will surely appear disqualified as a genuine democratic theory, since it obviously undermines the People's capacity to express opinions, legislate norms and, in short, engage in substantive decision-making about the fate of the polity.

But there are three reasons for considering plebiscitary leader democracy as challenging this vocal paradigm and pointing, instead, to a reconceived conception of popular power specific to the conditions of modern, mass representative democracy. First, Weber (1994c:

75) drew explicit attention to the moral distinctiveness of twentieth-century mass democracy relative to earlier forms of smaller-scale democracy, arguing that the former 'have different obligations and therefore other cultural possibilities'. Although Weber obviously thought that part of these new obligations and possibilities would relate to the figure of the leader and the generation of a powerful nation-state capable of world-historical action on the global stage, his description (1994b: 308) of his proposals for plebiscitary leader democracy in such *popular* terms as the 'the palladium of genuine democracy' and as 'the *magna carta* of democracy' suggest that the People would also be party to the reformulated political ethics Weber contemplated. Second, even if Weber supported democratization as but a means to select leaders with charismatic qualities, the very instrumentality of popular power implied in such a gesture points to a real, if unelaborated and unorthodox, conception of the People. That is to say, if the People were an entirely ineffectual actor, there would be no reason for Weber to have supported the very institutions that brought the masses, at least formally, into political life.¹² What is needed is an understanding of the nature of popular power in plebiscitary leader democracy, not an insistence that such power does not exist simply because it violates expectations of what it should be.

Finally, and indeed most importantly, it is a mistake to interpret the goal Weber linked to plebiscitary leader democracy – the generation of *charismatic* leadership – as something altogether antithetical to popular power. Critics of Weber's relevance as a democratic theorist

12. By the last decade of his life, Weber was an adamant supporter of democratic institutions such as universal suffrage, a democratically elected and free parliament, and direct elections for executive leadership in the state. In his occasional writings as a political advocate, Weber argued forcefully for these institutions as ethical and pragmatic necessities for Germany. Moreover, Weber contributed as a framer of the Weimar Constitution, which institutionalized democratic institutions within postwar Germany, and Weber was himself allied with the Democratic Party on behalf of which he very nearly served as a representative in Parliament. The critics who downplay these commitments as mere instruments in the service of Weber's true goals (charismatic leadership and world power for Germany) run the risk of conflating the question of how Weber justified democracy with the question of whether and in what way the People would be empowered. That Weber expressed little explicit interest in the political lives of ordinary individuals – and that, on the contrary, he viewed democratization as a means by which to select leaders with charismatic qualities – is clear. But this fact does not by itself mean that plebiscitary leader democracy contains no notion of popular power.

have failed to recognize that the charisma around which Weber oriented his consideration of democracy is not a strictly individual or personal quality as is often thought, but in fact is a *relational* concept that refers to a mode of interaction between the charismatic leader and the *charismatic community* before which the leader must appear and through which the charisma is both tested and generated.¹³ Unlike other forms of authority, charismatic authority depends on the attainment and maintenance of a mass following that, at the very least, beholds and receives the charismatic individual. The possibility of a charismatic individual without a mass following is rejected by Weber as sociologically meaningless. Hence, whenever Weber considers the charisma of an individual, the capacity to achieve popular recognition is a key criterion:

[A leader's] charismatic claim breaks down if his mission is not recognized by those to whom he feels he has been sent. If they recognize him, he is their master – so long as he knows how to maintain recognition through 'proving' himself (Weber 1946: 246).

This requirement about charismatic authority – namely, that it depends on the *recognition* by the People (or charismatic community) of the leader – indicates that there is, after all, a norm of popular power implicit in the concept of charisma. Of course, any effort to specify just what kind of power this is must face the immediate objection that Weber always insists on the purely formal or fictive nature of popular support for charismatic leaders – a fact which would appear to strip the norm of popular recognition of any of its critical bite. After all, as has already been said, the People does not *choose* the charismatic leader so much as acknowledge him or her. In the case of the pure charisma of religious founders and biblical prophets, this is because the phenomenology of charisma is such that it strikes the mass of everyday onlookers as something wondrous and magical – hence something already deserving of their attention.

13. Lindholm (1990: 7), however, does appreciate this relational aspect of charisma: '[U]nlike physical characteristics, charisma appears only in interaction with others who lack it. In other words, even though charisma is thought of as something intrinsic to the individual, a person cannot reveal this quality in isolation. It is only evident in interaction with those who are affected by it. Charisma is, above all, a *relationship*, a mutual mingling of the inner selves of leader and follower... Understanding charisma thus implies not only a study of the character of the charismatic and the attributes that make any particular individual susceptible to the charismatic appeal, but an analysis as well of the dynamic of the group itself in which the leader and follower interact.'

Thus Weber (1946: 246-47) can write of the pure bearer of charisma that 'he does not derive his right from [the charismatic community's] will, in the manner of an election. Rather, the reverse holds: it is the *duty* of those to whom he addresses his mission to recognize him as their charismatically qualified leader.'¹⁴ In the case of the manufactured charisma of the modern democratic leader in plebiscitary leader democracy, the People's recognition, even though now constitutive and not just reflective of the leader's charismatic authority, is likewise not an autonomous choice—not because popular support of the leader is a duty, but because the plebiscitary conditions by which this support is extracted mean precisely that the leader's electoral success is not grounded in any genuine popular judgment and, instead, stems from propaganda and the effective working of a political machine.¹⁵

But the recognition which the charismatic community bestows upon the charismatic leader does not only (or primarily) take this active form of an actual display of support. Weber (1946: 249) distinguishes between active and passive forms of recognition, the latter characterized, *not* by a vocal expression of a certain choice or decision, but by a passive receptivity in the manner of an audience. And it turns out that it is this passive form of recognition—the *attention* an audience pays to an individual appearing on the public stage—that is most constitutive of the charismatic authority of the leader and, also, the key dynamic by which the People (or charismatic community) exerts a real power over the leader. The requirement of popular recognition is not a requirement that charismatic leaders listen to and obey the popular *voice*; rather it is a requirement that they attain, undergo and endure the public *gaze*. As Weber makes clear in his analysis of both the pure charisma of the biblical prophets and the manufactured charisma of democratic leaders in plebiscitary leader democracy, and as I will detail below, the charismatic

14. Also see Weber (1978: 242) where Weber writes of pure charisma: 'It is recognition on the part of the those subject to [charismatic] authority which is decisive for the validity of charisma. This recognition is freely given and guaranteed by what is held to be a proof, originally always a miracle, and consists in devotion to the corresponding revelation, hero worship, or absolute trust in the leader. But where charisma is genuine, it is not that which is the basis of the claim to legitimacy.'

15. Thus, even in Weber's discussion of the routinization of charisma in a democratic direction, charisma stands to a large extent opposed to elections. If the People engage in elections that really reflect its will, then the charismatic element drops out and the authority in question approaches legal/rational authority (1978: 218, 267, 293).

status of the individual leader depends on an ability to *sustain an audience*: understood in the threefold sense of having the audience prosper under the leader's direction; doing what is necessary to win and maintain the audience's attention; and, most critically, enduring the surveillance of the public gaze through making candid appearances that are unscripted and unrehearsed. If the first of these suggests a familiar, vocal, legislative ontology of popular power (the People conceived as possessor of substantive needs that leaders try to fulfill in the legislative output of governmental policies), the other two point to a novel conception of popular power as an *ocular* force that realizes itself – *not* in the achievement of certain legal or policy outcomes – but rather in the control of the conditions according to which leaders with immense power appear before the public gaze.

Taken together, these points – that Weber occasionally presented mass democracy in highly idealized terms, that he did after all support political institutions that would bring the People into politics, and that his notion of charisma indicates a novel conceptualization of popular power modelled on the *ocular* power of the charismatic community – suggest that plebiscitary leader democracy needs to be understood, not as violating *any* acceptable notion of popular power, but rather as transgressing a *particular*, traditional norm of popular power (the vocal, legislative one) in the name of a novel account of popular power modelled on the power that the charismatic community exerts vis-à-vis the charismatic leader. I shall argue, in other words, that Weber's democratic theory is an invitation to rethink the nature of popular power under the conditions of mass democracy.

In making this claim – that is, in interpreting Weber as a theorist who reinvents the meaning of popular power – I do not mean to deny that Weber's primary interest in democracy was leadership as opposed to the People. What I do suggest, however, is that latent within Weber's novel conceptualization of democracy as a charisma-generating regime is an equally novel theory of popular empowerment which, even if it remained underdeveloped in Weber's writings, nonetheless is a worthwhile and fecund feature of his thought that has the promise of making Weber relevant for progressive democratic reformers today. What follows here, therefore, is as much my own development of an ethical promise largely concealed within the Weberian corpus as it is a presentation of Weber's transparent arguments about the meaning of mass democracy.

In order to appreciate the innovative conceptualization of popular power embedded in Weber's theory of plebiscitary leader

democracy, I shall discuss this theory not simply in its own terms, but in comparison to the traditional, vocal model. My claim will be that plebiscitary leader democracy is best understood in terms of three *shifts* vis-à-vis familiar accounts of the People's power in representative democracy. First, whereas traditionally the *object* of popular power is understood ultimately to reside in law (in the substantive decisions about the norms, policies and statutes governing public life), for plebiscitary leader democracy the object of popular power relocates to the personal characteristics and behaviour of the leader. Second, if the traditional *organ* of popular power is voice (the People's capacity as a *decisional* entity to express itself via elections and public opinion), under plebiscitary leader democracy the key device of popular power is the public gaze, which exerts a disciplinary function on leaders compelled to appear before it. Finally, if the *critical ideal* most commonly linked to familiar conceptions of popular power is the ideal of autonomy – the People's capacity to be the author, and not just the subject, of the laws – the critical ideal implied by Weber's democratic theory is the ideal of *candor*: that leaders in possession of massive and disproportionate power nonetheless expose themselves constantly to the rigorous demands of genuine publicity. In what follows, I elaborate each of these three dimensions of popular power – *object*, *organ* and *critical ideal* – with the aim of presenting the positive account of popular power that is an enduringly relevant feature of Weber's theory of plebiscitary leader democracy.

The shift in the object of popular power: From law to leader

The first shift I want to trace relates to the *object* of popular power. Whereas the customary approach in democratic theory is to see the election of leaders (the one formal moment of decision-making among everyday citizens in their collective capacity) as translatable into a determination about the content of governmental norms, laws and policies, Weber denied that universal suffrage, mass elections, or public opinion would bestow upon the People a sovereign power to determine, even indirectly, the norms and conditions of public life.¹⁶ Yet, if Weber's objection to the People's capacity to meaning-

16. The tendency to see the elections of representatives as but a tool to the ratification of laws and policies runs deep in democratic theory. It can be found in J.S. Mill's (1991: 354-55) classic work of representative democracy from the nineteenth century and is an assumption of the leading paradigms of contemporary democratic

fully influence substantive laws and policies made him similar to so-called elite theorists—Pareto, Mosca and Michels—who denied the possibility of the unelected many to control the decision-making of political elites, Weber differed from the elite theorists by insisting that popular power would nonetheless play a meaningful role in mass democracy: that it would determine the *character* of the very elites empowered to make political decisions, even if it could not determine the content of their decisions. Popular power would have its object in the leader, not the law.

For Weber, the People's incapacity to seriously influence the content of a polity's laws, policies and overall direction was an inescapable sociological fact of mass democracy. For one thing, Weber's intense sensitivity to bureaucratization made him very aware of the degree to which the complexities of the modern, industrial, administrative state meant that many norms would be determined by specialized bureaucrats with expert training and not by democratic processes of opinion and will formation.¹⁷ Further, Weber argued that in the modern context of fast-paced changes and developments—of sudden economic crises, unpredicted wars and conflicts, internal instabilities requiring immediate response, the rise of new technologies requiring regulation—political decision-making would always have to confront a large number of issues that were new and unexpected, for which there would not be a prior popular will. And in any case, Weber thought that, by themselves, elections were too rare and too limited in the choices they offered to link the decision-making of the elected to the underlying values, preferences and opinions of the

thought: deliberative democracy, aggregation and pluralism. It can also be found in the theory of retrospective voting, which even as it recognizes the way electoral decisions are limited to occasional verdicts on elite performance nonetheless attributes to such voting first and foremost a law-making function (see, e.g., Fiorina 1981; Key 1966; Manin 1997: 218-35). Those who have questioned this legalistic focus of elections—like Joseph Schumpeter's elite model of democracy (1942: 232-302)—are not at the forefront of normative democratic theory, if only because it has not been clarified what critical ideals, if any, an elite-based model might possess. The recovery of Weber I pursue here is meant to address this gap and show that it is possible to think of democracy in terms of the selection of elites, rather than laws, without sacrificing critical norms of democratization.

17. See Weber (1994a: 225-26): 'In a mass state the specific instrument of purely plebiscitary democracy, namely direct popular elections and referenda, and above all the referendum on removal from office, are completely unsuited to the task of selecting *specialist* officials or of criticizing their performance... The selection of *specialist* officials and the selection of *political leaders* are simply *two quite different things*.'

electors in anything but a highly superficial sense (1978: 1128). More ambitious devices for accountability were too rarely used (as in the case of recall) or too prone to manipulation and irrationality (as in the case of referenda) to bestow upon the populace genuine mechanisms of self-legislation (Weber 1978: 1128). Moreover, on Weber's account most everyday citizens were passive, without clear political commitments, and thus highly receptive to the way political elites defined the agenda and framed issues (1946: 83-84). The rise of mass parties only accentuated the disconnectedness of the People from legislative decision-making, since parties placed even most political activists into situations in which their first priority was to serve the machine for which they worked rather than to engage in free and independent decision-making.¹⁸

For these reasons, Weber did not share the dominant perspective in democratic theory, according to which elections, along with public opinion, are key devices whereby the People, with varying degrees of exactness, control and direct the representatives who actually hold office. On Weber's model the People do not have a legislative power over the candidates.¹⁹ Given such views and analyses it is tempting to see Weber as an elite theorist, equivalent to Pareto, Mosca or Michels, who understood all political regimes as divided between an organized elite minority with decision-making power and an unorganized mass without any real political power. But whereas for the elite theorists, the necessity of this division led to

18. Drawing on the seminal studies of Ostrogorski, Weber believed that mass parties made it so that even large segments of the politically active (party functionaries, campaign volunteers, less prominent members of parliament) were bereft of any meaningful role in the actual formulation of laws and policies, but were instead asked only to follow the party line. As opposed to an earlier form of parliamentary government centered on what Weber (1978: 1414, cf. 289-92, 1128) called the 'rule of notables', in mass democracy, the great majority of political operatives would merely serve the realization of a predecided political agenda, rather than engage in actual deliberation and decision-making about what ought to be done. Thus Weber could claim, 'Nowhere in the world, not even in England, can the parliamentary body as such govern and determine policies. The broad mass of deputies functions only as a following for the leader or the few leaders who form the government, and it blindly follows them *as long as they are successful. This is the way it should be.*'

19. Weber (1956: 558) thus juxtaposes the leader (the quasi-charismatic politician who wins power in plebiscitary democracy and is free to act according to his or her own convictions) to the elected official or representative (who is autonomously elected by the People and supposed to act according to the expressed or supposed will of the electorate).

two assertions – that democracy was more fictive than real²⁰ and that the People were destined to have no constructive impact on political life²¹ – for Weber, the subtlety of his political sociology as well as the democratic progressivism of his proposals for Weimar led him to resist such conclusions.²²

Weber distinguished between three fundamentally different kinds of elites – aristocrats, bureaucrats and politicians – and was concerned to find a workable balance between them within the conditions of modern society. Although an admirer of vibrant aristocracies, such as those in England and Germany prior to the nineteenth century, Weber

20. Thus there is Michels' famous 'iron law of oligarchy', according to which the logic of organization is such that it necessarily divides a group into leaders and followers, providing the former with disproportionate prestige, latitude for decision-making, and a sense of power. Michels' study (1978: viii) of revolutionary and socialist parties – parties which one might expect to be most committed to a broadly egalitarian sharing of political power – demonstrated how the very effort of mass-based parties to seek democratic ends produced organizations that reinforced hierarchical political structures. The leaders of the mass parties not only enjoyed power and prestige distinct from their rank-and-file, but had interests *qua* political elites that separated them from their constituents and led them to identify with leaders from supposedly opposing ideological positions. Likewise Mosca, especially in his earlier writings, downplayed any distinctiveness of democracy: 'What happens in other forms of government – namely, that an organized minority imposes its will on the disorganized majority – happens also and to perfection, whatever the appearances to the contrary, under the representative system' (1967: 154). Pareto (1935: 1422-32), too, minimized the difference that democratic institutions made and could therefore liken modern democracy to the very feudal order it supposedly supplanted: ' "Democratic" countries might be defined as a sort of feudalism that is primarily economic and in which the principal instrument of governing is the manipulation of political followings, whereas the military feudalism of the Middle Ages used force primarily as embodied in vassalage'.

21. For Mosca and Pareto especially, there is a notion of natural elite types, possessing superior amounts of talent and political expertise. On this view, the People – the non-governing, non-elite majority – are little more than material for the ruling stratum. As Mosca (1967: 50) put it: 'In all societies...two classes of people appear – a class that rules and a class that is ruled. The first class, always less numerous performs all political functions, monopolizes power and enjoys the advantages that power brings, whereas the second, the more numerous class, is directed and controlled by the first, in a manner that is now more or less legal, now more or less arbitrary and violent, and supplies the first, in appearance at least, with the material means of subsistence and with the instrumentalities that are essential to the vitality of the political organization.'

22. In the last years of his life Weber was a firm supporter of democratization: universal suffrage, mass parties and frequent elections. See, e.g., Weber (1994b: 304-308; 1994e: 80-129). Also see Mommsen (1984: 283-310, 332-89).

thought the possibilities for genuine aristocracy had exhausted themselves by the twentieth century, especially in Germany where leaders who owed their authority to tradition had behaved irresponsibly and ineptly during World War I. And although Weber recognized that bureaucracy was a potent administrative device and an essential and permanent feature of modern politics, he believed that it had leapt beyond its proper bounds and imposed its own hegemony within the modern state. Thus Weber turned to the *politician* as the one kind of elite that could take effective responsibility and tame the overgrown bureaucratic apparatus. Under political leadership, the bureaucracy would be *enlisted* in the service of national projects, substantive values and higher goals.

This diagnosis not only prevented Weber from employing a simplistic dichotomy between elite and mass, but led him to assert an enduringly relevant, if unorthodox, notion of popular power within mass democracy.²³ Weber liked to say that governmental forms mattered little to him and that he would support whichever set of political institutions produced the *politicians* he hoped to see cultivated.²⁴ But the fact remains that Weber never contemplated any other method for generating the charismatic leadership of politicians besides the institutions of democracy. The introduction of the wider populace into political life—through elections, universal voting rights and mass parties—was uniquely capable of empowering and cultivating politicians who could inject a charismatic element into political life.

Thus whereas the elite theorists considered the People disempowered because they had no legislative power, Weber recognizes an instrumental (yet indispensable) power in the People to generate the charismatic leadership of democratic politicians. This means that Weber affirms popular power as a real force in mass democracy—only now its locus has shifted: it no longer realizes itself in the domain of law, as traditional democratic ideology assumes, but rather takes as its object the character of the elites empowered to govern. A democratic regime produces one kind of leader—a quasi-charismatic one—whereas other types of regime produce other

23. Thus Weber could criticize Michels, writing to him: 'The concept of "domination" is not clarified in your work. Your analysis [of it] is too *simple*' (cited in Scaff 1989: 155).

24. Thus, Weber could write in a private letter: 'The governmental form is all the same to me, if only politicians govern the country and not dilettantish fops like Wilhelm II and his kind... As far as I'm concerned, forms of government are techniques like any other machinery' (cited in Mommsen 1984: 396).

variants. The suggestion, in other words, is that popular power is something that primarily disciplines and determines the personal traits of those who hold power, rather than voices and specifies which interests, opinions and values ought to be represented in the output of governmental decision-making.

The shift in the organ of popular power: From voice to sight

The relocation of the object of popular power in the leader rather than the law is unusual, but not altogether unprecedented in political theory. There is an important tradition of republican thought, running through Aristotle, Machiavelli, Guicciardini, Harrington and Montesquieu, that emphasizes the People's special capacity for judgment—especially the judgment regarding the merit of individuals as potential leaders (Guicciardini 1932: 178-79; Harrington 1977: 172, 477; Montesquieu 1989: 12). Within this tradition, one of the alleged benefits of including the People in a polity is that more capable and deserving leaders tend to be selected. Moreover, with Montesquieu, whose affirmation of popular judgment regarding leadership was paralleled by disparagement of the People's competence for legislation, we find something that roughly resembles Weber's understanding of popular power as a force that disciplines leadership rather than determines laws.²⁵ Yet the weakness of this historical linkage needs to be recognized. Most of all, there is a key difference about the nature of the *organ* by which the People generates exemplary leadership. For the republican theorists, it was the collective *judgment* of the People—the popular *voice* that expressed itself in an autonomous *choice* about who should lead—that effected leadership selection. According to this tradition, the People, in its collective capacity, possessed an *insight* about the merit of leaders. As Machiavelli (1998: 4) put it: 'To know well the nature of peoples one needs to be a prince, and to know well the nature of princes one needs to be of the people'.

By contrast, Weber's analysis of mass democracy continually undermines any conception of popular power in terms of the organ of *voice* (or in terms of such parallel concepts as deliberate judgment,

25. Montesquieu (1989: 160): 'A great vice in most ancient republics was that the people had the right to make resolutions for action, resolutions which required some execution, which altogether exceeds the people's capacity. *The people should not enter the government except to choose their representatives; this is quite within their reach*' (emphasis added).

choice, expressivity, or insight). Weber challenged the traditional democratic tenet of the articulation of the People: namely, that the People could use elections, public opinion and other devices to communicate a coherent and clear view about particular political decisions. Against this traditional view, Weber did not simply object to the capacity of the People's preferences, opinions and values to determine the decision-making of government leaders, but also raised the question of whether it even made sense to understand the People, conceived in its collective capacity as a mass electorate, as something which took the form of articulate views. That is to say, Weber objected to the age-old maxim—*vox populi, vox dei*—not simply because he recognized that in mass democracy the power of the People was anything but divine (but deferred in most respects to the political decision-making of political elites and the organizations they controlled), but additionally because he called into doubt the vocal ontology of popular power, which defined popular power, to whatever extent it might exist, as an expressive force realizing itself in substantive decisions about what should be done or who should rule.²⁶ We have already seen that the one decision the People regularly do make in modern, mass representative democracy—leadership selection—was something that Weber deconstructed in such a way to deny it of initiative, autonomy and true choice on the part of the People. This was but the most provocative feature of a more general rejection of modelling popular power in terms of *will*: that is, in terms of an expressive voice calling for a particular course of action to be undertaken in reference to specific issues and questions.²⁷ It was not simply that the People too rarely engaged in formal

26. Among otherwise diverse approaches within democratic theory there is a pronounced tendency to theorize democracy from the perspective of the People's voice. Deliberative democrats look at how politicians, advocates, jurists, and other public figures ought to talk with each other and how their deliberations can refine and enlarge the People's voice. Pluralists insist that there is no single sovereign voice in modern democracy, but a multiplicity of voices that compete and cooperate to produce the harmony that prevails within stable democratic systems. And aggregationists, who focus on the mechanics of voting, choose for their analyses the one moment when the People formally expresses itself through voicing a preference about who should hold power.

27. Thus, in an oft-quoted letter to Michels, Weber dismissed Michels' worries about how the popular will might somehow be recovered: 'But, oh, how much resignation you will still have to face! Such notions as the "will of the people", the true will of the people, ceased to exist for me years ago; they are fictions' (cited in Mommsen 1984: 395).

decision-making for popular power to be interpreted in decisional terms, but that those decisions the People did in fact make were usually highly limited in their expressivity. Both the binary structure restricting the articulacy of most popular decisions and the fact that the terms and conditions of such decisions were usually shaped from above meant, for Weber, that it was a mistake to see in the occasional manifestations of popular decision-making a true indication of the People's voice as an expressive and autonomous agent.²⁸ Difficulties such as these led Weber to posit as a general paradox that the very devices whereby the People supposedly expressed its decisions—recall, elections, referenda—proceeded in such a fashion that they only solidified the influence of organized political groups (such as interest groups and mass parties) vis-à-vis everyday citizens in their condition as a mass electorate. Or, as Weber (1978: 1128) put it:

All attempts at subordinating the representative to the will of the voters have in the long run only one effect: They reinforce the ascendancy of the party organization over him, which alone can mobilize the people. Both the pragmatic interest in the flexibility of the parliamentary apparatus and the power interest of the representatives and the party functionaries converge on one point: They tend to treat the representative not as the servant but as the chosen 'master' of his voters.

28. Crucial to Weber's critique of the vocal ontology of popular power was his insistence that most instances of popular expression—such as occasional referenda and recalls—would be confined by a binary, yes-no structure that limited their articulacy, rationality, and usefulness. Thus, for example, Weber could write: 'Both as an electoral and a legislative instrument, the popular referendum has inner limits which follow from its technical peculiarity. The only answers it gives are "Yes" or "No". In none of the mass states has it been assigned the most important function of parliament, namely the determination of the budget. In a large mass state it would also be a most worrying obstacle to the creation of any laws which rested on a compromise between conflicting interests. The most conflicting reasons can give rise to a "no" if there is no means of settling conflicts of interest through a process of negotiation. The referendum knows nothing of compromise, and yet it is inevitable that the majority of laws must be based on compromise in a mass state with an internal structure characterized by powerful regional, social, religious and other oppositions'. Given this limited expressivity—and also because of their tendency to be controlled by organized vested interests—Weber thought referenda ought to be limited to rare situations, when they could function as the *ultima ratio* in otherwise deadlocked situations (1994a: 226-27; cf. Weber 1978: 1455). If Weber's overall critique of the vocal ontology of popular power has not been shared by most political scientists working in the century since his death, Weber's suspicion of the referendum is in fact repeated from many contemporary observers, including those otherwise committed to the notion of popular autonomy (e.g. Broder 2000; Ellis 2002).

Weber's rejection of a vocal ontology of popular power – according to which popular power is a *decisional* force that realizes itself in the autonomous selection of leaders and, through this, substantive laws, norms and policies shaping the nation's fate – raises a fundamental question about the organ of popular power in plebiscitary leader democracy. If the People is essential to the generation of charismatic leaders, but does not contribute to this process through an expressive electoral decision, wherein does the instrumental power of the People to generate charismatic leadership lie? If not through their choice as electors on election day, what was it about the introduction of the People into mass politics that made it such an indispensable source for the generation of charismatic leadership?

The answer that emerges from a close examination of Weber's theory of democratically-manufactured charisma is that the People contribute to the generation of charismatic authority primarily through the disciplinary power of the *public gaze*, rather than through the expressive, decisional, command-based power of the public voice. In invoking the disciplinary power of the public gaze, I mean something roughly similar to Foucault's notion of disciplinary power as an ocular force whose chief function is to *train and form individuals* rather than to make decisions or levy taxes or lead armies. As Foucault explains, 'The exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation; an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power, and in which, conversely, the means of coercion make those on whom they are applied clearly visible'. Through such devices as hierarchical observation (in which the observers are hidden from the subject of surveillance) and the examination (in which subjects are probed and experimented on while under observation), disciplinary power objectifies, trains and forms individuals. Disciplinary power is effected neither by commands nor by drawing attention to itself in ostentatious displays of its potency, but rather is 'a power...manifested only by its gaze'. The key mechanism of disciplinary power is 'compulsory visibility' of the subject. As Foucault explains, 'It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection' (Foucault 1977: 170-71, 187, 188).

The function of popular power within Weber's model of plebiscitary leader democracy resembles this Foucauldian concept of disciplinary power in a number of respects.²⁹ Weber repeatedly

29. The main difference is that whereas Foucault understands the state as the

stresses that democratization generates charismatic authority above all through the *training* of leadership—the actual formation and cultivation of individual characteristics—as opposed to selecting an already deserving candidate or setting up an office (such as the presidency) whose aura would automatically bestow charismatic status upon the person who occupied it.³⁰ Moreover, if one considers once more the three specific charisma-like characteristics Weber expected to see realized by the politician in mass democracy—constant proof of merit through struggle, articulation of new norms and values, and responsibility—one finds that the People contribute to the generation of these qualities, not via vocal processes of decision-making, but precisely in its capacity as a spectator, or mass audience, that watches and listens to political candidates appearing on the public stage.

First, as has been said, the plebiscitary democratic leader is someone who is constantly proving him/herself in struggle. But how do the People contribute to this education in struggle? Of course, as possessors of the vote—the prize to be won in electoral contests—the People are the enabling condition of the competition for power in mass democracy. Yet it would be a mistake to understand the distinctive contribution of the People in terms of the vote. After all,

observer of disciplinary power, under the Weberian model, the state—or at least individual political leaders and officials of great power—are the *observed*. For Weber, it is the People—and not the doctor, teacher, or prison warden—who monitors and surveys with a disciplinary gaze. This alternate disciplinary process—whereby Foucault's own emphasis on the capacity of the few to see the many is paralleled by an attunement to the capacity of the many to see the few—is pursued in Mathiesen (1997).

30. The precise nature of the charisma of the modern democratic political leader—and specifically its relation to other forms of routinized charisma—is one of the most complex features of Weber's theory of charisma. On the one hand, the charisma of the democratically elected leader is not pure charisma, but manufactured. Yet, on the other hand, unlike other forms of manufactured charisma which entirely displace charisma from the individual to the office he or she occupies, the charisma of the democratic leader is still tied to personal qualities and characteristics. Of the various forms of routinized charisma that Weber treats in a systematic way, it is not office charisma, but *charismatic education*, that best typifies how charismatic authority is produced in the democratic leader within mass democracy. While it is true of charisma that it cannot be taught in the manner of rational or empirical instruction, it can be awakened or tested: 'the real purpose of charismatic education is regeneration, hence the development of the charismatic quality, and the testing, confirmation and selection of the qualified person' (Weber 1978: 1143; cf. 249).

it was also characteristic of the parliamentary system Weber initially favoured but then came to reject—in which the competition of parliamentarians for positions of primacy *within parliament* would be the training ground for charismatic leadership—that would-be leaders would have to struggle for votes and other vocal affirmations of support. By the last years of his life, Weber turned against this parliamentary system, claiming that it did not sufficiently test and train would-be leaders, and he instead put forward his proposals for plebiscitary leader democracy in which politicians would compete directly for the support of a mass electorate. What made the competition for popular support more truly a struggle, and hence more educative for leadership, than the competition for parliamentary support was not the ultimate object of the competition (as in both cases the goal for would-be leaders was the same: win the most votes), but that the drive to win popular support would have to be accompanied by a massive campaign effort. This was not just a difference in scale (as the number of votes required by successful leaders in plebiscitary democracy dwarfed the few hundred needed within parliamentary democracy) but in kind. In order to mobilize the People on election day, the political leader and the machine he or she led first needed to win and sustain popular attention. The great majority of political activity in plebiscitary campaigns—canvassing, propaganda, rallies—is an effort to secure the passive recognition of the People’s attention without which the active recognition of the People’s explicit support is impossible. Within Parliament, the attention of the members to an impending election is a matter of course. Hence, electoral struggle—and also compromise and bargaining—can proceed in accordance with fairly rational and transparent interests. But when it is the support of the People that is in question, there must also be a struggle for the People’s passive attention. It is indicative of Weber’s ocular, disciplinary conception of popular power that he did not see election day—the one formal moment of popular voice and decision in mass democracy—as the key event of the electoral process. Indeed, the reprioritization of the campaign over the election is one of the central developments of Weber’s late political thinking. The formal support of the People in the form of actual election results was merely the premise of the political contest which was itself the real generator of charisma. It was not the actual election but the *campaign* for popular attention and support *prior* to election day and the active maintenance of these things *following* victory that most contributed to the formation and validation

of the leader's charismatic authority.³¹ It needs to be stressed that during the campaign process, the People contributes, *not* by exercising its voice, but rather by remaining a silent and passive audience of political events, appeals, debates and so forth.

Second, the charismatic leader in mass democracy would be someone who articulated and defended higher goals, beyond the mere administration of things, such as those connected to a world-historical mission, the defence of culture and substantive forms of justice. The charismatic leader would inject a passionate element into politics, yet at the same time would have this passion tamed by both inner balance and a pragmatic desire to see the mission realized.³² Both elements—the passion and the restraint—would be fostered by the norm that successful politicians would need to make frequent public appearances. On the one hand, the necessity of attaining and maintaining the People's attention would encourage successful politicians in mass democracy to articulate and pursue national projects that transcended mere administrative efficiency and were thus capable of inspiring a sense of higher purpose—a quality which the first President Bush aptly referred to as 'the vision thing'. Yet, on the other hand, the unpredictability and pressure of mass appearances—the fact that they would not merely be acclamatory celebrations of the leader's triumph but also tests and proving

31. Accordingly, Weber was less concerned about which candidate might win a greater share of the votes than he was that political leaders with the experience and talent to wage mass campaigns, rather than aristocrats and technocrats, be empowered within a polity. There is nothing in Weber's analysis of democracy that suggests the winner of elections would be superior to the loser simply for having received more votes. On the one hand, such an understanding of democracy obviously demoralizes the electoral process, since it undercuts the meaning and importance of the sole occasion on which the People exercises a formal decision-making power: the casting of votes about who should lead. Yet, on the other hand, it needs to be appreciated that in another respect Weber invests democratic elections with much *more* of a potency and significance. Whereas the republican tradition upheld elections for correctly recognizing a superior leader—suggesting that if this leader could be selected by other means, the electoral process would thereby be obviated—for Weber, the leader only comes to inhabit the position of charismatic authority by virtue of successfully engaging with the mass in a democratic polity. The superiority of the victorious leader—i.e., his or her *charisma*—is not acknowledged, but *formed*, through the electoral process. That is to say, democracy on Weber's account does not select, but rather produces, the charismatic leader.

32. Weber (1946: 115) writes: 'This is the decisive psychological quality of the politician: his ability to let realities work upon him with inner concentration and calmness. Hence his *distance* to things and men.'

grounds of the leader's merit—meant that only individuals with a modicum of self-control, poise and perspicacity could possibly be considered for positions of leadership.³³

Finally, the People would render politicians in mass democracy *responsible*—not by holding their decisions accountable to the People's own preferences and opinions about how issues should be resolved—but by subjecting leaders to an unprecedented level of surveillance such that it would be impossible for the leaders to disclaim their actions and deny complicity in events in which they were involved. To be sure, Weber supported policies that would enable political leaders to be removed, whether by Parliament or by recall. But he did not think this would be a common procedure. What would be normalized, however, was the rise of leaders who were responsible because they were being watched. Leaders could not hide like bureaucrats in obscure hierarchies and opaque technical knowledge. Nor could they conceal themselves behind the traditional pomp of monarchs or aristocrats. Unlike these other types, the politician in mass democracy would feel him/herself as being under intense surveillance. The People's gaze, in effect, creates a stage—and the stage is a device whereby leaders would be both elevated

33. Some might doubt the internal relation between a leader's capacity to strike a good appearance (what in recent times is well expressed by the notion of 'the telegenic') and the leader's sense of proportion and realism in carrying out actual designs. But it needs to be remembered that, counter to contemporary caricatures of plebiscitary politics, the plebiscitary leader under Weber's scheme would not be in full control of the conditions of his or her publicity. Rather, as I discuss more fully below, the leader would have to appear under conditions of publicity which challenged, probed, or otherwise questioned the leader's claims to authority. Within such circumstances, striking a good image would bear some connection to pursuing policies which were not insane, suicidal, or utterly unrealistic. We can see in the British practice of 'question period' a good example of the way democratization cultivates both passion and restraint in the Prime Minister. On the one hand, the fact that question-time is broadcast to a mass audience impels the Prime Minister to speak not just to the particular question but to the wider populace—a tendency which encourages the affirmation of higher purposes for the nation typical of plebiscitary rhetoric. On the other hand, the fact that such instances of publicity are not entirely under the control of the Prime Minister—but dependent as well on the spontaneous and often hostile probing of the opposition—means that the successful prime minister will be restrained and realistic. The People contribute to this training, not by vocalizing any substantive determination of what ought to be done, but by watching and listening and, hence, forming a mass public before which the leader might appear: both literally in the sense of crowds and in abstract terms as a spectator of political events in the mass media.

(empowered to speak in the name of the People or at least directly to the People) yet constrained by the very condition of this publicity. Even though Weber expected leaders to make their own decisions – and to direct the government and shape the political agenda from the top down – he nonetheless called for a government’s administration to be subjected to rigorous processes of public surveillance (*‘Verwaltungsöffentlichkeit’*) and inspection (*‘Verwaltungskontrolle’*). The People’s most distinctive and important role was not to decide, but to engage in a continuous observation (*‘die ständige Verfolgung’*) of the government (Weber 1978: 1456). Just as Weber expected leaders to lead, in the sense of providing creative and independent direction to the polity, he expected followers to follow, in the sense of ceaselessly trying to throw light on the goings-on of political leaders and high officials. Although the values of popular autonomy and the surveillance of leaders are not mutually exclusive, Weber emphasized the way in which the two were different and, in particular, the way in which mass democracy satisfied the latter much more than the former.

In each of these respects—expertise in struggle, articulation of new obligations and responsibility—the People contributes to the education of charismatic leadership by its sight, not by its voice.

The shift in the critical ideal of popular power: From autonomy to candor

By themselves, these first two aspects of popular power in plebiscitary leader democracy – that it takes the leader as its object and that it disciplines the leader via the public gaze – raise as many questions as they answer. Most of all, there is the question: what do the People *get* as a result of its ocular power? How are the People served by the felt compulsion of successful politicians in mass democracy to appear before the public? This question is similar to another: does plebiscitary leader democracy contain any critical standard according to which idealistic democrats, already living in a democracy, might seek the continual moral and political development of the nation? Does Weber leave any place for democratic progressivism once the basic institutional features of liberal democracy, universal suffrage, elections and mass parties, have been met? What emerges from an analysis of Weber’s theory of charisma is that while Weber rejects the traditional answer to these questions – that the People ‘get’ autonomy from democracy and that democratic progressivism within a democracy is therefore defined as an effort to make

democratic institutions ever more responsive to the needs, interests and preferences of the electorate—Weber’s actual case studies of charismatic authority suggest a novel critical ideal: the *candor* of leaders as they appear on the public stage. By *candor*, I mean not so much the psychological norm of sincerity, but the *institutional* norm that leaders be not in control of the conditions of their publicity.

Before addressing this notion of *candor*, it should first be made clear that Weber objected to the modern-day applicability of the traditional democratic ideal of popular *autonomy*: the ideal that the law’s addressees might also understand themselves as the law’s authors—and with it, the related ideal that democratic institutions afford everyday citizens with opportunities for political participation that developed their moral and intellectual capacities.³⁴ Whether autonomy was an ideal achievable even in small, face-to-face, direct democracies is something about which Weber wavered.³⁵ What is

34. Although democracy has been defended for reasons other than autonomy, it is still the case that autonomy is the dominant ideal in modern democratic thought. It is of foundational importance to deliberative (e.g., Bohman and Rehg 1997: ix), pluralist (e.g., Dahl 1956: 131), and aggregative (e.g., Downs 1957) models. While numerous political scientists question how much autonomy can be secured in modern mass democracy, in general such concerns do not question that popular self-legislation is the ideal to be pursued (e.g., Przeworski, Stokes and Manin 1999).

35. On the one hand, Weber often presented direct democracy as a form of regime that, though highly rare, was nonetheless one in which the People ruled over themselves, controlling with a meaningful degree of precision the decision-making of the state. Indeed, Weber appears even to have contemplated adding democracy in this sense as a fourth ground of legitimacy, supplementing his famous tripartite division between traditional, rational-legalistic, and charismatic forms of legitimate authority. Whereas the latter three were grounds by which domination, or *Herrschaft* (the hierarchical power relation between the few and the many), might be deemed acceptable within a society and a basis for obedience, democracy would stand for a kind of legitimacy without domination. (See Breuer 1998: 3). Yet, on the other hand, Weber never followed through on fully conceptualizing this fourth notion of legitimacy. And, in fact, he frequently asserted the opposite claim: that direct democracies such as Athens were subject to the same division between an organized and active few that effectively ruled and a disorganized and passive many that played a negligible role in giving direction to the fate of polity. Indeed, even Periclean Athens, on Weber’s reading, was subjected to a kind of mass politics that deferred to the mostly autonomous decision-making of a few select leaders (Weber 1978: 1452-53). Thus Weber (1978: 1414) could assert: ‘Political action is always determined by the “principle of small numbers”, that means, the superior political maneuverability of small leading groups’. And he could write to Michels: ‘Any thought...of removing the rule of men over men through even the most sophisticated forms of “democracy” is utopian’ (Letter to Michels 4 August 1908; cited and translated in Mommsen 1984:

certain, however, is that Weber's analysis of modern mass representative democracy explicitly rejected the applicability of the traditional ideal of authorship. If the dominant trend among theorists of representative democracy is to assert the *fundamental moral continuity* between representative democracy and direct democracy, so that the same basic ideal of an autonomous People can be achieved by both, Weber took the opposite perspective and insisted on the degree to which the authorship available under direct democracy was not exportable to the conditions of mass democracy. Counter to the Madisonian assertion that a nation's size did not threaten its capacity for self-rule—but if anything facilitated this capacity—Weber (1994c: 75) argued that mass states, especially those heavily engaged in geopolitics, had to forego the ideal of popular autonomy: 'Any numerically "large" nation organized as a *Machtstaat* finds that, thanks to these very characteristics, it is confronted by tasks of a quite different order from those devolving on other nations such as the Swiss, the Danes, the Dutch or the Norwegians.' Weber (1994c: 76) argued that 'the simple, bourgeois virtues (*Bürgertugenden*) of citizenship and true democracy...have never yet been realized in any great *Machtstaat*'. Weber also took aim at the ideal of civic education—the traditional expectation, found throughout democratic and republican thought, that politics might afford everyday citizens with a means of intellectual and moral development.³⁶ Against this ideal, Weber's analysis of mass democracy—characterized by insuperable power hierarchies between the organized few and the unorganized many, political rhetoric oriented around emotions rather than substantive issues, elections which were insufficient to supply more than an occasional and superficial form of popular control, and mass parties that depended on conformity to a pre-selected platform and ticket rather than engaged debate from the rank-and-file—led him to assert that mass democracy fostered the 'intellectual proletarianization of the masses'.³⁷ Rather than seek popular autonomy and civic

394). For the most part, then, Weber expected democracy to exist side by side with domination—not in opposition to it (see Weber 1978: 269).

36. While it is true that in his inaugural lecture Weber (1994d: 1-28) speaks of political education for the bourgeois, this is still an exclusive class differentiated from the mass of everyday citizens. Moreover, Weber developed the idea of political education in an increasingly elitist way, as it came to refer to educating a few select leaders for political power, rather than a whole class or group (see Turner and Factor 1984: 87-89).

37. In 'Politics as a Vocation', Weber (1946: 113, 125; 1971: 532, 545) refers to the 'geistige Proletarisierung' and the 'seelische Proletarisierung' of the masses.

education, then, the modern mass democracies, especially those of enormous size, would have, as has already been mentioned, 'different obligations and therefore other cultural possibilities' (Weber 1994c: 75).

But what were these different obligations and possibilities? One answer, common among commentators, is to stress Weber's support of the ideal of national power, so that the *Machtstaat* forgoes popular autonomy, but it gains a degree of world-historical influence on the global stage. While this ideal of national strength can indeed be located in Weber's writings (and in the very name 'Machtstaat'), it is hardly a democratic one. It does not embody a critical standard by which one state might be deemed more or less democratic than another—or by which a state already in possession of democratic institutions might seek further progress in a democratic direction.³⁸

The question needs to be posed, then: if not autonomy, is there a critical democratic ideal consistent with Weber's understanding of the People as a mass spectator of political elites that disciplines these elites by virtue of its gaze rather than through its voice? Once the basic institutions of democracy are set up, how do we judge how democratic a state is? Put differently, how do we assess to what degree charismatic leaders are being trained or cultivated? Is there, in short, an ideal of democratic progress consistent with spectatorship?

Given that political power in plebiscitary leader democracy realizes itself upon (i.e., takes as its object) the individual leader, it follows that any critical ideal will itself refer to the quality of leadership and seek to regulate the way in which leaders make their public appearances before the People. Of course, political theory is not accustomed to investing political spectatorship with any positive power over the actor who appears on the public stage. From Plato's allegory of the cave to Rousseau's critique of the theatre to Habermas' opposition to a contemporary politics of the spectacle, there is strong aversion in political theory to understanding the audience as anything but a passive, if not manipulated and dominated, entity. The most important suggestion to come out of Weber's analysis of

38. Moreover, Weber's most adamant support of the ideal of a nation possessing world-historical power precedes his proposals for plebiscitary leader democracy—as they do Germany's defeat in World War I. As Beetham (1974: 237) points out, 'Weber's strongest insistence on a plebiscitary type of leadership came after the point of Germany's defeat, when Weber himself recognized that a world-political role was no longer possible for his country'. Indeed, Weber (1971: 443) argued that the Weimar Constitution must presuppose a 'clear renunciation of imperialist dreams'.

charismatic authority, however, is that *sight* is not without a critical function: not only because being forced to appear before the People does discipline leaders (training and cultivating charismatic qualities), but also because there is a critical standard implicit in such appearances. This is the standard of *candor*, defined, as I have said, as the institutional norm that the conditions under which a leader appears in public are not entirely under the control of the leader him/herself. In other words, politicians are candid to the extent that their public appearances are not entirely self-produced, but on the contrary carry with them a certain amount of risk, such that it is possible, in the course of a given appearance, for the candidate to be contradicted, opposed, and even humbled.

The ideal of candor is the great unelaborated ethical commitment of Weber's theory of plebiscitary democracy. Although Weber does not directly thematize it, within his theory it is nonetheless the necessary concomitant of any attempt by a leader to generate charismatic authority. The biblical prophets, Weber's prototype of charismatic authority, made public appearances in which they lacked control, behaved unpredictably, and subjected themselves to contestation, risk and even physical abuse (Weber 1952: 267-96). Likewise, Weber (1994a: 218-19) argues that what distinguishes the modern democratic politician (the inheritor of the charismatic, prophetic legacy) from other types of political elites (like monarchs and bureaucrats) is precisely a willingness and capacity to enter into candid forms of publicity. True, the politician in mass democracy, according to Weber, was supposed to engage in demagoguery – in mass appeals to the People characterized by a manipulative use of emotion and propaganda. But importantly, Weber distinguished between good and bad demagoguery. At the most basic level this distinction referred to whether demagoguery was organized within a constitutional system – in which the People participate through elections rather than violence and the parliament remains free and independent and capable of checking the demagogue – or whether it took the form of the 'politics of the street' and its reliance upon putsches, sham parliaments, intimidation and the denial of legitimate opposition (Weber: 1994a: 218-22, 228-32). Beyond this, however, Weber also distinguished what was specific about the demagoguery of the politician in mass democracy, which he applauded, from the demagoguery that was increasingly being employed by bureaucrats, monarchs and other high officials. Weber thought that demagogic means were on the rise everywhere and that *all* political figures had begun

to engage in conscious public relations activities. 'In their own way, modern monarchies, too, have gone down the road to demagoguery. They employ speeches, telegrams, all kinds of emotive devices in order to enhance their prestige.' During World War I, German naval commanders made public their conflicts over strategy in the hope of enlisting popular displays of support (Weber 1994a: 220). Although the democratic politician was obviously no stranger to such practices, what made the politician's brand of demagoguery special was that it was *dynamic* in the sense that it involved an interaction between audience and leader rather than unidirectional manipulation. Gladstone—whose Home Rule campaign in 1885–1886 was Weber's prototype for plebiscitary democracy—marked a break from British political tradition not just in the degree to which his appeals went over the heads of Parliament and spoke to the People directly, but in the extent to which Gladstone's public addresses were extemporaneous speeches before popular crowds that often heckled and disrupted him.³⁹ Likewise, in the United States, what was innovative about Andrew Johnson's tumultuous presidency—often criticized for its demagogic elements and seen as a harbinger of twentieth-century mass democracy—was not only that he made a great number of public speeches (for Lincoln had done this too), but that his speeches were interactive occasions that threatened, rather than cemented, his elevated status.⁴⁰ Tulis (1987: 88, 90) describes Johnson's brand of demagoguery as 'an interplay with hecklers, and the spiritedness and vitality characteristic of effective extemporaneous talk...Johnson relied more and more upon the novelty produced by audience interaction rather than upon alternative sets of arguments'. It is important to point out in this regard that one of the impeachment charges drawn up against Johnson was the charge of improper rhetoric that 'brought the high office of the President of the United States into contempt, ridicule, and disgrace, to the great scandal of all good citizens'.⁴¹

When Weber celebrated 'the craft of demagoguery' as uniquely capable of disciplining charismatic leaders within mass democracy,

39. It is said of Gladstone: 'Mr. Gladstone never wrote a line of his speeches, and some of his most successful ones have been made in the heat of debate and necessarily without preparation' (cited in Hardwicke 1896: 289).

40. In public appeals, Johnson would disclaim any interest in his dignity. See McKittrick (1960: 438); Sefton (1980: 140); Stryker (1929: 341-72); Tulis (1987: 90).

41. US Senate, *Proceedings in the Trial of Andrew Johnson* (Washington, DC, 1869: 5-6).

it was this kind of dynamic demagoguery that he had in mind.⁴² The public appeals of democratic politicians would be distinguished not merely by a struggle for the public attention, but a struggle *before* the public's attention. Parliamentary leaders might struggle without publicity (in closed committee meetings within parliament) and monarchs might seek publicity without struggle (in unidirectional and insulated appeals to the People), but only the politician in mass democracy would routinely be engaged in a *public struggle* in the sense of public appearances characterized by risk, uncertainty and potential challenges. 'The *politician* who achieves public power, and especially the party leader, is exposed to the glare of criticism from enemies and rivals in the press, and he can be sure that the motives and means underlying his rise will be ruthlessly exposed in the fight against him' (Weber 1994a: 218-19). The simultaneous experience of publicity and struggle is what distinguished the demagoguery of the democratic politician and made it so productive of charismatic qualities. Democratic politicians are trained and tried on the very stage that empowers them.

Weber, then, did not rely on a single definition of demagoguery. There was a specifically democratic form of demagoguery that was not only safe and orderly, but also characterized by candid public appearances on the part of politicians.⁴³ Relevant here is the fact that included in Weber's proposals for plebiscitary leader democracy was the call for a much expanded capacity of *public inquiry* in which leaders would be brought before the public gaze under conditions of intense investigation. As an architect of the Weimar Constitution, for example, Weber sought that the right of public inquiry not be limited to parliamentary majorities and proposed, instead, that only one-fifth of the Reichstag be sufficient to undertake investigations. He proposed that the proceedings of such investigations be published in their entirety – the most publicity that could be expected in a time before the full development of radio, let alone television

42. See, e.g., Weber (1978: 1450): 'The decisive point is that for the tasks of national leadership only such men are prepared who have been selected in the course of political struggle, since the essence of all politics is struggle. It simply happens to be a fact that such preparation is, on the average, accomplished better by the much-maligned "craft of demagoguery" than by the clerk's office, which in turn provides an infinitely superior training for efficient administration. Of course, political demagoguery can lead to striking misuses...'

43. Thus Weber (1994a: 220) argued that democracy could be made to improve demagoguery.

and internet. And he sought to extend the right of inquiry to local governments, which could call for a national investigatory committee if one-fifth of the local parliament made such an appeal, or on the initiative of one-tenth of the local voters (Mommssen 1984: 361, cf. 360-70). Such proposals sought to dramatically increase the frequency of occasions on which leaders would appear in conditions of candor on the public stage. They reflected Weber's implicit suggestion that popular power in mass democracy was primarily an ocular force, rather than a vocal one.

Weber envisioned plebiscitary democracy as a politics of spectacles, but not in the derogatory sense that this term is often used. While plebiscitary politics certainly would have its share of fabricated and purely manipulative public appearances, it would also have moments of *candor*—of dynamic demagoguery when leaders were forced to appear before the public gaze under conditions of relative spontaneity and contestation. Whereas the pure charisma of the ancient prophets occurred within a pre-existing circumstance of distress, it can be said of modern, democratically manufactured charismatic authority that it induces moments of distress by placing leaders into unprecedented situations of public struggle.⁴⁴ Likewise, if pure charisma tended to arise in response to a situation that was already out of the ordinary—such as war, pestilence, or famine—mass democracy would itself transcend the everyday by producing and broadcasting images of otherwise powerful individuals subjected to confrontation, abuse and even humiliation. This was the 'miracle' of democratically manufactured charisma—not the performance of some magical act, but the forced candor of otherwise reticent or manipulative powerful personalities.

What matters is not whether a discursive politics of popular autonomy is superior to a plebiscitary politics of mass spectatorship, but whether spectatorship is utterly bereft of critical standards. Close examination of the importance of candor to Weber's concept of charismatic authority indicates that there are in fact democratic ideals—*norms of popular empowerment*—consistent with the People's lack of autonomy. It is here in his suggestions about candor that Weber makes his most important, albeit indirect, contribution to contemporary democratic theory and, specifically, to a palatable and progressive

44. Aberbach (1996: 5, 7) gestures towards this recognition when he observes: 'Does crisis create charisma? Is it not also true that charisma provokes crisis?... Charisma and crisis are dynamic, interlocking forces, feeding on and manipulating each other.'

conception of plebiscitary democracy. As I have tried to demonstrate, the relation between charismatic leader and charismatic community can be analyzed from one of two directions. Whereas Weber primarily opted to favor the figure of the leader and examine ideals that flowed in and through leadership (namely, the ideal of strong, responsible, creative politicians), it is also possible to flip this privileging and approach charismatic authority from the perspective of the charismatic community which, as has been said, is no less essential to the generation of charismatic legitimacy than the leader him/herself. If the leader's goal is the validation of a claim to charisma, Weber suggests that the charismatic community's interest is that any validation process occur through candid appearances on the part of the would-be leader. Thus, what makes candor important is not simply that it is an under-explored yet fundamental feature of the Weberian model of charismatic authority, but that unlike charisma itself candor has clear applicability as a distinctly democratic ideal. That is to say, while the wish for strong and independent leadership betrays a political ethics confined to the select few, the insistence that leaders be candid recovers something popular within an otherwise elitist framework.

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