

Charisma: power, authority, and devotion in the Middle East and North Africa¹

Carisma: poder, autoridade e devoção no Oriente Médio e Norte da África

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ABSTRACT

Since the publication of Max Weber's foundational work on the conceptualization of charisma, the concept has been subject to a wide range of interpretations, often marked by contradictions. Acknowledging the fragmentary nature of Weber's framework, this special issue examines the concept of charisma from an anthropological perspective, engaging with Weber's theoretical model to explore the diverse forms and manifestations through which charisma is created and legitimized. Ethnographies conducted in religious contexts across the Middle East and North Africa have shed light on the various configurations of charismatic communities, movements, and relations, which produce multiple forms of emotional expression and religious experience. In order to contribute to the anthropological debate on the applicability of Weber's concept to different forms of charisma in distinct social and religious contexts, this collection features five ethnographic accounts from Turkey, Morocco, Lebanon, and Iraq. These studies explore the processes through which charisma is constructed, maintained, and transmitted across different religious, political, and institutional contexts. By integrating Weberian theory with ethnographic perspectives, this issue seeks to advance our understanding of charisma as a dynamic, relational, and culturally embedded phenomenon. The contributions to this issue deepen our insight into diverse forms of religious and political commitment, belonging, and emotional attachment to a religious leader, community, or movement, fostering a productive dialogue between different analytical perspectives and ethnographic contexts.

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RESUMO

Desde a publicação do trabalho fundante de Max Weber sobre a conceitualização do carisma, o conceito tem sido objeto de uma vasta gama de interpretações, muitas vezes marcadas por contradições. Reconhecendo a natureza fragmentária do modelo teórico proposto por Weber, este dossiê examina o conceito de carisma a partir de uma perspectiva antropológica e visa explorar as diversas formas e manifestações através das quais o carisma é criado e legitimado. Etnografias realizadas em contextos religiosos no Oriente Médio e Norte de África lançaram luz sobre as várias configurações de comunidades, movimentos e relações carismáticas que produzem múltiplas formas de expressão emocional e de experiência religiosa. Com o objetivo de contribuir para o debate antropológico sobre a aplicabilidade do conceito de Weber a diferentes formas de carisma, este dossiê apresenta cinco relatos etnográficos a partir de trabalhos de campo na Turquia, Marrocos, Líbano e Iraque. Estes estudos exploram os processos pelos quais carisma é construído, mantido e transmitido em diferentes contextos religiosos, políticos e institucionais. Ao integrar a teoria weberiana com perspectivas etnográficas, este dossiê procura avançar a nossa compreensão do carisma como um fenômeno dinâmico, relacional e culturalmente enraizado. As contribuições que seguem aprofundam a nossa compreensão das diversas formas de engajamento religioso e político, de pertencimento e de ligação emocional a um líder religioso, comunidade ou movimento, promovendo um diálogo produtivo entre diferentes perspectivas analíticas e contextos etnográficos.

Palavras-chave: Max Weber, Carisma, Etnografia, Oriente Médio e Norte da África.

This special issue explores the concept of charisma from an anthropological perspective. It originates from a panel discussion convened by the Center for Middle East Studies at Universidade Federal Fluminense (NEOM/UFF) during the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES) Commission on the Anthropology of the Middle East 2023 meeting, where scholars engaged the topic of religious charisma in the Middle East and North Africa and its diasporas.

Since the publication of Max Weber's (1922) foundational work on the conceptualization of charisma, it has been subject to a wide range of interpretations, often marked by contradictions. Anthropologists have debated its applicability to all forms of charisma and in specific social and religious contexts (Riesebrodt, 1999). Some scholars have built upon Weber's framework (Lindholm, 1990; 2013; Chagas, 2013; Pinto, 2013; 2016; Tee, 2019), while others have

critiqued it (Bourdieu, 1987; Douglas, 1996; Werbner; Basu, 1998). Riesebrodt (1999) argued that contradictory interpretations of Weber's concept of charisma are caused by inconsistencies in Weber's own conceptualizations of charisma and charismatic authority, which differ in their context, scope, and levels of abstraction.

In his political sociology, Weber built on Rudolf Sohm's work on ecclesiastical law (1892), which outlined charisma as a personal gift that creates authority based on divine inspiration. Weber defined the ideal type of charismatic authority as

[...] 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 (sic) 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, 1968, p. 241-242).

In Weber's formulation of the three pure types of legitimate domination, rational-legal authority is based on the belief in the legality of enacted rules, while traditional authority is grounded in long-established beliefs in traditions and customs. In contrast, charismatic authority "is sharply opposed to rational, and particularly bureaucratic, authority, and to traditional authority, whether in its patriarchal, patrimonial, or estate variants, all of which are everyday forms of domination; while the charismatic type is the direct antithesis of this" (Weber 1968, 244). According to Weber's typology, charismatic authority is a specific type of structured social relationship that is an anti-traditionalist and anti-rational, even revolutionary, force that can disrupt established norms and traditional authority systems (Riesebrodt, 1999; Breuer, 2019).

Differently, in his sociology of religion, Weber developed a broader conceptualization of charisma relying on the anthropological debate on religious and magical traditions. He wrote:

[...] not every stone can serve as a fetish, a source of magical power. Nor does every person have the capacity to achieve the ecstatic states which are viewed, in accordance with primitive experience, as the pre-conditions for producing certain effects in meteorology, healing, divination, and telepathy. It is primarily, though not exclusively, these extraordinary powers that have been designated by such special terms as "mana," "orenda," and the Iranian "maga" (the term from which our word "magic" is derived). We shall henceforth employ the term "charisma" for such extraordinary powers. (Weber, 1968, p. 400).

This more general concept of charisma extends beyond personal authority or leadership to include depersonalized powers believed to reside in objects, rituals, or magical forces. It is better understood as a phenomenon recognized as extraordinary and, therefore, given a special status (Miyahara 1983). In addition, not all types of charisma can be used to establish authority

and become anti-traditionalist or revolutionary. It may function within or even reinforce existing traditions. Moreover, charismatic objects usually do not exert authority or gather a following (Riesebrodt, 1999).

Building on this understanding, Weber further articulates:

Charisma may be either of two types. Where this appellation is fully merited, charisma is a gift that inheres in an object or person simply by virtue of natural endowment. Such primary charisma cannot be acquired by any means. But charisma of the other type may be produced artificially in an object or person through some extraordinary means. Even then, it is assumed that charismatic powers can be developed only in people or objects in which the germ already existed but would have remained dormant unless evoked by some ascetic or other regimen. (Weber, 1968, p. 400).

Therefore, unlike charismatic authority, the notion of charisma as conceptualized by Weber is not inherently linked to leadership or institutional power but captures a wider range of extraordinary phenomena. It is the emphasis on a pre-existing “charismatic power” in people or objects that prompted Pierre Bourdieu (1987) to dismiss his conceptualization of charisma. Bourdieu (1987), like others who have commented on Weber’s work on charisma (e.g. Werbner; Basu, 1998; Breuer, 2019), criticized Weber for characterizing charisma as an esoteric quality and for overestimating the charismatic personality. Instead, Bourdieu proposed that the sociological investigation should focus on the activities, values, and beliefs endorsed by the charismatic leader.

Echoing Bourdieu, Mary Douglas (1996) suggested that Weber’s focus on charisma overly psychologizes what should be understood through the lens of shared social structures and practices. She contended that Weber’s notion of charisma lacks sufficient investigation into the macro-level structural factors such as social, political, economic, and material contexts. This narrow focus, she suggested, results in a psycho-sociological approach that reduces complex phenomena to individual psychological attributes rather than situating them within broader societal structures. Redirecting the inquiry to the socially generated legitimation would reveal the reasons why individuals follow a charismatic leader. It would also explain why a certain message appeals to one specific community and seems irrelevant to another (Hutt, 2007).

Alternatively, some scholars have emphasized the relational nature (Lindholm, 1993; Pinto, 2016) and adaptability of Weber’s concept of charisma to contemporary contexts (Chagas, 2013; Tee, 2019). Charles Lindholm (1993) proposed a theoretical model that engages the charismatic relationship as a phenomenon rooted in deep emotional connections that serve as the basis for human action and social dynamics. According to him, the feelings of ecstasy and loss of identity that followers experience in relation to their charismatic leader parallel the

idealization of romantic love.

Caroline Tee (2019) posited that charisma is not an innate quality but rather a dynamic interaction between a leader and her followers, contingent upon the continuous endorsement of the latter. This tenet remains valid even in the virtual realm, where interactions are mediated through digital platforms. Tee investigated the ways in which charisma can be materialized and sustained through physical symbols and spaces associated with the leader. Her work enhanced Weber's framework by demonstrating the mechanisms through which charismatic authority persists and adapts in changing cultural and societal landscapes, offering insights into its resilience and transformative potential.

Regarding ethnographic research in the Middle Eastern context, Paulo Gabriel Pinto (2016) built on Weber's framework by integrating personality-centered charisma (*baraka*) and relational charisma (embodied rituals, communal practices, and religious experiences) in his analysis of a collective Sufi ritual in a Syrian *zawiya* (Sufi lodge). He showed that charisma is not only a sociological phenomenon but also an experiential and corporeal one, rooted in the individuals' physical practices and sensory engagements. Pinto expanded the Weberian concept into a more nuanced, experiential, and ritualistic framework, relevant for understanding power and religious authority in Syrian Sufism and beyond. In addition, he highlighted the dual potential of charisma not only to reinforce but also to disrupt religious hierarchies.

Additionally, also in the Syrian context, Gisele Chagas (2013) approached charisma from a gendered perspective in an ethnography with a female branch of a Damascene Sufi order centered around Shaykh Ahmed Kuftaru (d. 2004), who was a Sufi *shaykh* (religious leader) and the Grand Mufti of Syria for 40 years (1964-2004). Her analysis focused on the charismatic and bureaucratic structure that organized this Sufi order, in general, and the women's *halaqa* (religious circle), in particular, with which she conducted fieldwork. Building on Weber's theoretical model, the study showed that the charismatic framework and stability of the *halaqa* are underpinned by the emotional bond that connects the disciples to the leader and to the *halaqa* as a whole. Love and praise for the female charismatic leader were perceived as both personal and spiritual achievements.

Rather than suggesting that these varying perspectives stem mainly from misinterpretations of Weber's work (Lash; Whimster, 1987; Breuer, 2019) or from inherent inconsistencies in his own conceptual framework (Riesebrodt, 1999), this special issue acknowledges the relevance of Weber's theoretical model for recognizing different forms and manifestations of charisma and for understanding the processes by which it is created and endorsed. Mindful of the fragmentary aspects of Weber's theory of charisma (Tee, 2019), this collection contributes to the ongoing

debate by presenting five ethnographic accounts that examine the ways in which charisma is constructed, maintained, and transmitted in different national and religious contexts in the Middle East and North Africa.

In the opening article, Markus Dressler investigates the concept of charisma within Islamic traditions, emphasizing its relevance in shaping Islamic discourse. Engaging with Talal Asad's notion of Islam as a "discursive tradition" and the critiques advanced by Shahab Ahmed and Zeynep Oktay, Dressler advocates broadening the sources of Islamic normativity beyond the Qur'an and Hadith. The analysis highlights the significance of charisma, particularly in the Alevi tradition, where it manifests itself in the sanctity of individuals, objects, and practices. It shows that these elements reflect embodied and material expressions of the sacred that challenge scriptural-centered frameworks. The article further scrutinizes the notion of continuous revelation, underscoring its roots in Sufi and Shiite discourses, where divine interaction is seen as ongoing and not confined to textual revelation. By situating Alevism within a genealogical and anthropological framework, Dressler critiques the marginalization of charismatic traditions in Islamic studies and champions the acknowledgment of charisma as an anchor in Islamic discourses, thus contributing to a more inclusive understanding of Islam's normative structures and spiritual practices.

The second article shifts the focus from Islam to Christianity. Rodrigo Ayupe Bueno da Cruz analyzes the concept of charisma through the lens of the life of and devotion to Bshara Abou Mourad, a Salvatorian monk whose ongoing canonization process underscores his role in shaping the Greek Catholic community in Lebanon. Drawing on Weber's classical definition and subsequent anthropological expansions, the study highlights how charisma operates within both personal and material dimensions, manifesting in sacred spaces, rituals, and objects associated with Abou Mourad. The article introduces the concept of "arenas of charisma" to describe the spatial and social contexts where the monk's spiritual influence is mobilized. It demonstrates how charisma is not limited to the extraordinary traits of a person but extends to material culture, communal memory, and devotional practices that transcend local boundaries to shape collective identity. By integrating Weberian and post-Weberian frameworks, the study illustrates how Abou Mourad's charisma serves as both a marker of religious distinctiveness and a source of cohesion for the Greek Catholic community amidst Lebanon's competitive sectarian dynamics. The analysis thus contributes to a nuanced understanding of charisma as a dynamic force that bridges individual, communal, and political dimensions.

Bruno Ferraz Bartel's piece examines the interplay of authority, legitimacy, and charisma within the context of Moroccan Sufism, focusing on the reorganization of the ritual center

of the Hamdouchiya brotherhood in Safi. It explores how leadership within a *zawiya* (Sufi lodge) is shaped not only by traditional hierarchies but also by institutional charisma. The study highlights the efforts of three key individuals to revitalize devotional practices, blending traditional authority with a modern reinterpretation of ritual and ethical norms. It demonstrates how, in this Sufi context, charisma operates within institutional frameworks, emphasizing collective performances, affective bonds, and localized agency. This hybridization of traditional and charismatic domination underscores the adaptability of Moroccan Sufism in navigating both historical continuity and contemporary challenges. Bartel's study contributes to the anthropological understanding of charisma as a dynamic force that integrates ethical practice, ritual performance, and institutional innovation. While the focus remains on the religious domain, the study recognizes the sociopolitical dimensions of authority within the *zawiya*'s organizational and cultural context.

The following article investigates Ayatollah Sistani's charismatic authority in post-2003 Iraq, offering an innovative perspective through the concept of "affective bond." Based on interviews with Sistani's followers, Ali Alsayegh's study highlights the emotional and cognitive dimensions of charisma as perceived by his supporters. It examines Sistani's leadership as rooted in three interrelated perceptions: legitimacy, political hope, and authenticity. These factors combine to form an absolute trust that enables Sistani to mobilize his followers in response to key events such as elections, protests, and his 2014 *fatwa* (edict) against ISIS. The paper contributes to the anthropological understanding of charisma by demonstrating how Sistani's authority operates at the intersection of the Weberian framework and cultural-religious practices in Shi'i communities. It underscores the dynamic interplay between followers' perceptions and socio-political conditions, enriching discussions of how charismatic authority adapts and fluctuates in varying contexts of political and social upheaval. The article discusses charismatic authority primarily as religious charisma embedded in the Shi'i theological and cultural framework, where Sistani is viewed as a spiritual leader and representative of divine authority. However, it also extends to political charisma, as Sistani's influence on political mobilization and national crises is a central theme. Thus, his charisma straddles both categories, with a stronger foundation in religious charisma but significant implications for political authority.

In the final article, Montassir Sakhi examines the formation of politico-religious charisma in post-Baathist Iraq, focusing on the transformations that occurred after the Gulf War in 1991 and subsequent U.S. interventions. The author traces the evolution from the nationalist charisma embodied by Saddam Hussein to the fragmented struggles for religious charisma that emerged in the context of sectarianism, war, and colonial aggression. The analysis highlights

how Weber's notion of "routinization" helps explain the transition from charismatic nationalist leadership to sectarian-based religious leadership. However, it also challenges Weber's model by arguing that the persistence of violence and instability in Iraq defies the typical rationalization of charisma seen in modern political systems. It integrates Weber's insights with a postcolonial critique, shedding light on the intersections of charisma, religion, and state-building in a fragmented society. It advances anthropological discussions on charisma by providing a critical reevaluation of Weber's theory and its applicability to non-Western societies.

The contributions in this issue illustrate a multitude of configurations of charismatic communities, movements, and relations, and the diverse ways in which they produce a range of contemporary political manifestations and religious experiences in the daily lives of individuals in the Middle Eastern and North African contexts. The analyses underscore the value of the concept of charisma as a powerful tool for anthropological investigation and the potential of the ethnographic perspective to grasp the nuances of charisma as a lived reality.

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