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### **The dangers and hopes in charisma**

Chapter 11 in Responsibility and its Avoidance.

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## ***11. Three fellows who lunch keep a wary eye on Obama; the dangers and hopes in charisma***

The seasons change. In our Northern hemisphere, as inversely in the Southern, the days lengthen and shorten. Yet, what were once the reassurances of nature these days often fail to reassure. Serious uncertainties assault us:

In the environment:

- an 'unseasonable' cold spell in "Britain" a sign of the slowing Gulf Stream\$
- a time without rain" evidence of "global warming"\$
- normal 'grey' a sign that grey will forever prevail &..\$

Serious economic disruption" the banking crisis:

- management failure
- or systems failure within the global financial institutional set(up
- or, end to capitalism as we 'know it\$

Serious noise in the world of politics:

- the 'war on terror', what is this\$

No, on this one we 'know' a self-fulfilling prophecy. " Hate breeds hate" the only question is why\$ In whose interest is it to stimulate this socially reproductive process\$ What power is protected by its pursuit\$ What weakness or fear is thereby perpetuated\$

And most disturbing of all" the understandings that have sustained normal behaviour no longer exist, plain" no longer enable. " We look for change. Where will it come from\$

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### **Three fellows who lunch: a report**

Long experience in the real worlds of advertising, the law or the odd byways of academe, incline a fellow to wariness if not weariness. All is never as it seems, even when the signs are positive. So when three persons of a certain age - defined by the orange coated card that does wonders at London's ticket barriers - meet to discuss the state of the world over lunch we were of course wary; even about President Obama.



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I doubt if we were alone in enjoying a strange feeling of disbelief - that did not yield to the usually normalising effects of a glass or two of red - that the American public had chosen an apparently sensible man to lead their nation. The normal expectation of democratic processes after all is that if there are two or more candidates for high office Joe Public will choose the dud. Yet here we are with a man of apparently moderate views working his way into the White House and issuing his first words - press releases and so on - and they too are of moderation.

Not that the dud always turns out bad. When Ronald Reagan was elected, we remembered, such was the despair of the rest of the World (we claim to be competent representatives) that we had to grasp at the slightest whiff of hope. A contemporary spoof film poster had adorned a colleague's office wall. Reagan had Maggie Thatcher in his arms as if in a scene from *Gone with the Wind*; text reading "She promised to follow him to the end of the earth; He promised to organise it". It captured the mood. This screen cowboy had stomped the electoral stage, rhetorical six guns blazing. We took refuge in the wisdom of a contemporary wit: the rest of the world would take note and 'load blanks'. As things turned out they did. Or perhaps it was simply the coincidence of the emergence of an apparently sensible Soviet leader on the side of the 'Indians' - not by election of course - Mr Mikhail Gorbachev. And the rest is history. At least we have been allowed a continuation of that messy process.

Serious contemplation of an Obama era had also to overcome a second level of suspicion if not disbelief. The man is so eloquent and handsome. Our discussion became a bit difficult at this point. We confessed without problem that it was the universal view of our wives that this man had what it takes. (Note that, as a matter of equity, we grant our three wives a higher status in representative-ness that we claim for ourselves - they the universe, we just the globe ...).

But we allowed the suspicion that superior appearance and way with words is a dangerous adjunct to those who hold the reins of power in America. Some election analyst may yet demonstrate that what tipped the balance in America were the votes of women, abandoning prejudice and responding to deep urges to associate with alpha male power. A touch jealous perhaps, we put aside such suspicion and thought instead of the nurturing and safeguarding wisdom of women in choosing one who uses words with sincerity and moderation.

For me the big problem is how to respond to apparent charisma. I may now be deviating from the conversation of the three - the third glass, as Shakespeare might have said, increases eloquence but decreases the effectiveness of memory. But it is a worrying issue. A certain seniority - indicated in travel passes

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- allows us to have rather vivid memories of the last American charismatic, JFK. Not just his end - an end that had clearly been exercising the minds of America's security officials as well as the reflective public over the election - but his reckless postures in relation to America's foes. "Ich bin ein Berliner" was a great line for use at the Brandenburg Gate but did not add one jot to a fellow's sense of security. Heading for the moon was fine, but has allowed successive American Presidents to dream of Star Wars. And the more we have learned about how John F carried on in his public-private affairs the less sense of retrospective well-being we live with. Will the charismatic Obama do better? [The evidently sensible Michelle may see to one aspect of it]. Or is there something inevitably dangerous in charisma?

An aside here; we in Britain have had our own, not very encouraging, ten year long brush with charisma: our Tony Blair. New Labour promised a new land. Its wordsmiths coined new slogans. Tony emerged as a dexterous manipulator of the media: nothing quite as simple as "yes we can", but a touch of the same charm nevertheless. But it did not take very long before sound-bites, spin, 'quick on the feet repartee' and undoubted rhetorical powers ceased to disguise quite normal leaden feet and a sadly blinkered vision when it came to war or peace, or other real-world vexations.

We have to ask then, was it charisma that Americans were looking for in the recent elections or was the outcome simply a result of the binary nature of modern electoral politics? People perhaps thought, 'whatever he is inclined to say or how he is inclined to say it, he cannot be worse than what went before'. Or was it indeed what he said during the seemingly endless electoral process? What in the words of the man - as selectively reported of course - could have encouraged us to hope?

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A digression here to link this discussion of charisma back to my overall focus upon processes of governance and responsibility. How do we locate charisma within the formal structures and processes of government, or within the processes of identity and collectivity, or within the competitive individualist thrust in public life? What kind of authority comes from or results in charisma?

These were questions for classical sociology. I am groping here; back to the intellectual giants, those who commanded the heights in the great contests of '60s' sociological disputation. I need some reminding and find on line a very



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helpful essay by a Professor Charles Lindholm.<sup>1</sup> Max Weber and Emile Durkheim were the two early 20th Century thinkers, one German, one French, representing contrasting perspectives and methods around whose standards 60s Sociologists tended to rally - Weber to some degree sanitising Marx for those nervous of Marxian polemic. Both Weber and Durkheim were interested in kinds of thought and kinds of action as these define kinds of society.

Weber was much taken up with what he saw or perhaps hoped for as the increasing rationality of early 20th Century society in which scientific thinking and law would progressively guide behaviour and traditional thinking would wither away. The charismatic for Weber was a unique character, not altogether rational, not followed because of apparent clarity of ideas or vision but because of personal magnetism.<sup>2</sup> Such beings he thought have an authority that does not fit within traditional leadership, or rational or bureaucratic authority patterns but could be instrumental in achieving change from one state to another; he hoped positively. Of course he did not live to see or hear Hitler do his bit to damage the reputation of charisma.

For Durkheim, father of the 'social construction of reality' school of thinking, and I would guess for his follower, Mary Douglas - of whose ideas more below - charisma would be much less problematic, because the processes through which societies of different kinds generate ideas are not assumed to be entirely rational anyway; hence Professor Lindholm's interest in analysis of crowd behaviour or the emergence of religious or other sects under the guidance of an apparent charismatic. To sway a crowd or inspire a group of people and lead them out into the wilds of the American mid-West - which seems to happen quite often - makes for an interesting social phenomenon but it not does not transform society as a whole. Indeed, the resultant sects can probably be seen as reactions against dominant social values. We have incipient crowd swayers in London. Tourists and a few native Brits go by bus or tube to Hyde Park Corner weekly to hear them. The speakers' licence to say what they like how they like is widely regarded as some kind of safety valve, defusing forms of social tension; when not simply allowing an egotist an opportunity to be egotistical.

For Weber the role of the charismatic in social transformation fascinated but his analytic powers were largely focused upon world religions or trends in the history of far places [such as India], assuming that contemporary transformation

1 Charisma, Crowd Psychology and Altered States of Consciousness'  
[https://open.bu.edu/bitstream/.../lindholm\\_cultmedpsych16\\_preprint.doc](https://open.bu.edu/bitstream/.../lindholm_cultmedpsych16_preprint.doc)

2 S.N. Eisenstadt, Introduction in S.N Eisenstadt, ed. Max Weber, On Charisma and Institution Building, Selected Papers (1968)



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in Europe would follow the path laid down by the Enlightenment thinkers. For Durkheim and more significantly for followers in the Durkheimian tradition such as Talcott Parsons or Edward Shills, social transformation came to be seen as a self-correcting process of differentiation and re-integration that - surprise, surprise - would lead with apparent inevitability towards a condition called modernity. In this process there is no apparent need for charisma at all.

Interestingly, much sociological analysis has moved on from considering the individual qualities of the charismatic to pondering the social or economic or political circumstances in which such qualities are called for. Crudely; the old question; was Hitler an outcome of conditions or a cause of another mind-set?

So where does charismatic leadership or follower-ship fit into contemporary political processes?

We should note that there are two parts to any political equation; the part of the governor and the part of the governed. Both halves display matching mind-sets. Let me set that out in terms of the types of governance that have been outlined elsewhere; the hierarchical, the groupist and the individualist approaches to maintaining order and, at the same time, expand upon the framework to include an element so far neglected, namely the isolate, the alienated, the sufferer from 'atomised subordination'; an individualist culture that is so because its adherents feel themselves misfits, a category into which most of us, at some time or another, may feel we fall. <sup>3</sup>

The hierarchical mind-set matches an assumption of the virtues of superordination with an equal assumption of the benefits that stem from willing subordination; disguised in industry as a legal-rational contract, in politics as a rather vaguer social contract between state and individual. The social contract leaves the subject (even if called citizen) free to take solace in whatever "lies, flattery and entertainment" the authorities deign to dish out; and to grumble when perceived entitlements under the contract are not delivered to acceptable standards.

Groupism is sustained by locating virtue in the values of the group and vice in the values of 'other', all others. The groupist mind-set in politics allows every individual to balance the delights of mutuality - the sense of belonging to community, political party, tribe or nation - with the acrimony, rancour and spitefulness that follows when 'group' fails to

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3 Not the 'Ring the bell conductor, I'm on the bus' of the ME generation but 'Stop the bus; stop the World I want to get off', sad but it happens.



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deliver. Card carrying political party loyalists will identify with the 'ferrets in a sack' picture that I paint here. To group together is a comforting way of distancing difference but has its costs.

The individualist mind-set in politics is a rather easier animal to deal with - except perhaps by aspirant leaders [herding cats being the possible metaphor here]. Each individualist is only looking for individual advantage, his/her alignment with others a pragmatic deal to achieve a mutually convenient objective, her/his commitment confined to a handshake, his/her need for belief or ideology happily limited to metaphor - 'level playing field' or a vaguely inclusive, 'turn to in time of need' religion - such as is provided perhaps by the Church of England.

To be outside each or any of the above three types defines a condition of marginality that generates a fourth type of culture. Mary Douglas, who started this game, herself a committed Catholic, often ignored this logically necessary category, as I have done heretofore. She was herself inclined to see hierarchy and its associated rituals as the norm from which 'other' cultural types deviate, abandonment of hierarchy and ritual leading towards inward looking religious sects, abandonment of both ritual and group loyalties, to the individualist culture of the opportunist network or market. But this left a range of behaviours that are evidence of a response to dominant ideas or regimes that she initially saw as fatalist, only later, as it emerged from her continuous re-workings of key texts <sup>5</sup> variously adding the notions of 'atomised subordination', or 'insulated' individualism, or 'backwater isolation'. <sup>6</sup> As other writers took an interest in her Grid/Group matrix the words alienation - linking to Marx or to Weber and anomie - normlessness - linking back to Durkheim became associated with this box. The evident behaviours that she and others see as outcomes of this cultural type included student protest, dropping out of society, Millenarian movements, and - back to our theme - a tendency to follow charismatic leaders.

It is satisfactory in any framework of thought to be reasonably consistent and I think that Mary Douglas eventually got there. <sup>7</sup> But this last category is admittedly a bit of a catch-all. The least satisfactory aspect of such exercises in typology is that they identify but do not explain. Why the culture of alienation or

5 'Natural Symbols' editions in 1970 and 1973, *Essays in the Sociology of Perception* (1982), *How Institutions Think*, 1986/7.

6 see Richard Fardon's analytic biography *Mary Douglas* (London and New York, Routledge 1999) page 224



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anomie? Marx and Weber provided a rationale, something to do with forces in history, or with spread of scientific thinking. Durkheim and Douglas stick with the essentially circular model of causality in which societies produce mind-sets and mind-sets reinforce societies. All we can take from the Grid/Group framework as such is that charisma is associated with the least well defined and perhaps least stable social configuration. This will not do. Let us go back to the beginning of this little piece.

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The thing which the environment, the economy and the international polity share at the present time is that the understandings that have sustained our use of natural resources, or the international as well as domestic and personal flows of funds, incomes and expenditures, or international relationships have suddenly - perhaps not so suddenly but nevertheless disturbingly quickly - become untenable. What were reasonable sureties for many of us are now alien. In Grid/Group terms, huge numbers of us will have moved from comfort zones in a state-centric hierarchy box [welfare state], or in a collective zone of Greenpeace membership, or in an 'I look after myself and subscribe to charity' box, to say 'This no longer adds up'.

The sociological underpinning of this shift is rather complex and is not quite captured in either of the classical interpretative approaches that we have been considering. There is a relationship between ways of thinking, the ways in which social agents have behaved and outcomes for society, but, as far as I can see, in each of these spheres the implicit behavioural models that make these linkages have to be supplemented by a good dose of Chaos Theory, before they make sense. Something 'out there' takes hold:

Thinking about the environment - in the Christian tradition in any case - has been dominated by the biblical assumption of man's dominion over nature, resulting in extractive property rights, uninhibited consumption, random disposal of waste and painfully slow adjustments to the growing evidence of feedback links in global warming, declining soil fertility, oceanic pollution and acidity .....

Thinking about the international economy over recent years has been dominated by a neo-libertarian philosophy granting precedence to market forces over state controls, encouraging developing country governments to increase their exposure to foreign investment that would ensure the benefits of

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7 Many others think that her erudition ran away with her, but there are still many scholars in quite different fields who have made use of her basic framework.



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trade; making the poor think 'micro-credit' without always thinking 'micro-savings'; allowing the marketisation of 'financial products' that fuelled spirals of expansion but are now deemed toxic; forgetting that bubbles burst.....

Thinking about international relations? Well this is a bit different. American Neo-Con pre-eminence in international relations under George W Bush was of short enough duration for many of us to have known a time when it could be presumed that national interest would be the motive force in international relations and that the powerful would exercise their power. *But we did not assume* that naked greed and belligerence would be their favoured strategy; that peace agreements could be scrapped with impunity, or that weapons of mass destruction were OK for America but bad for anyone else. So when this appeared to be the creed of the Neo Cons we were shocked.

The War on Terror followed, providing a way of thinking that pervades international relations at all levels to this day; encouraging the Sri Lankan government in the view that the Tamil Tigers can be eliminated; demanding of the Pakistan government that the Pakistan Taliban be eliminated .... No, we did not believe in that way of thinking but are still looking for something better to turn up. <sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> I was working in Bangladesh at the time and penned the following:  
Subdued

The mighty leaders of the West  
with powers of rhetoric are blest  
to set the World to moral right  
a right supported by their might.

They quite disguise material gain  
for which they're quite prepared for pain  
to fall on others.

                                others who  
if wise enough, will then subdue

their shame and self-disparagement.  
But naturally will soon resent  
the pious claim that betterment  
can come battle blasted.

That leaves the little likes of me  
to face covert hostility.



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Which brings us back, I think, to some musings on the likely outcome of the election of President Obama.

Actually we had learned very little of Barack Hussain Obama's intentions on any specific policy area while he was at the hustings. On matters of international import; the things that concerned us most out here in the big wide world, there was only a word or two. What we did pick up was a few simple things that encouraged a hope of moderation. He would talk to ....., have open conversations with ....., hold out his hand towards, .... all indicative of a reasonable man. Sure: a contrast with what went before. But can he stick to it?

A few days later, as Obama was getting himself established we had further evidence. He had avoided triumphal gestures; no transformation of the White House - as a French email joke had it - into its negative, a Black House. Time has freed me from any attempt to faithfully represent the discourse of my friends over some Arabic Mezze and a bottle or two of modest red, so now I can voice my own hopes and fears without contradiction. Put it another way. I am free to contemplate what I see as the contradictory demands of and on leadership at the present time: which are these:

- what we call the world order is in disarray and its supportive economic and political logics and doctrines are proved false. We need some dynamic leadership to bring new vision and help shake us out of old understandings and into new. That might sound like a demand for charisma;
- but a charismatic - as argued above - is a dangerous being unless open to challenge and possessed of a willingness to modify her/his views and opinions in exchange with others. A 'lets talk' posture might be a good start.

Can he stick to it? We don't know. I find myself encouraged by the modesty of his beginnings in office. He, like the rest of us, can "screw up", and acknowledges the same. On the other hand, I note with mild alarm the transformation of what appeared to be an unconditional 'talk to' into "if they unclench their fist first". That is an old game and does not equate with either secular or religious approaches to peace.

The secular formula for cooperation is called 'tit for tat'.<sup>9</sup> Game theory players arrived at the formula through repetitive simulations of a conflict and cooperation scenario. It turns out that a successful, stable, formula is simple.

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9 <http://brembs.net/ipd/tft.html-3k->



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Cooperate with your opponent on the first move then follow your opponent's last move for all subsequent moves. The success of the strategy is attributed to the fact that it combines, as the blurb says, 'nice' (cooperating on the first move), 'retaliatory' (in following punishment with punishment) as well as 'forgiving' (immediate return to cooperation after one cooperative gesture by your opponent). So, Mr Obama, please be the first to stick out your hand.

And, Mr Obama, if you need encouragement to follow a secular directive don't forget the religious dicta. The American religious right probably would swallow hard - perhaps preferring the thunderous front end of the Good Book - but 'Turn the other cheek' is in there somewhere. And if an Islamic text could be useful at some stage try the Surat-al-Anfal (8), ayah 61, which the web assures me translates as "But if they incline to peace, you also incline to peace and trust in Allah".

This is a topic that will not go away and it is not the only ailment that besets the world. As fellows who lunch our aim, in a modest way, is to help to right some wrongs. More monitoring will be necessary in the near future requiring my colleagues to get out their bus passes again. But, Mr Obama, we are not asking for charisma. Charm yes. Extraordinary powers, no. Just a bit of common sense and decency please. The signs are good. On this one we stick with 'hope'.