

DISENCHANTED CHARISMA: ON THE COMPATIBILITY BETWEEN CHARISMATIC LEGITIMACY AND MODERN DISENCHANTED SOCIETY

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Abstract: Drawing on Max Weber's idea of disenchantment and the concept of charismatic legitimacy, this article examines a paradox: charismatic legitimacy persists in modern, disenchanted societies even though disenchantment should erode the passionate emotional loyalty that makes such legitimacy possible. Using Carl Schmitt's distinction between friends and enemies as a central framework, the argument states that charismatic legitimacy can be compatible with disenchanted societies by deliberately creating common enemies. By establishing an opposing "enemy," in-group solidarity is promoted, and followers' emotional devotion to the charismatic leader is strengthened. This process works whether or not the enemies represent real-world threats or are mainly narrative in nature. The paper illustrates this dynamic through two political case studies: Nayib Bukele in El Salvador and Javier Milei in Argentina. The same friend-enemy mechanism also operates in fan culture, where celebrities and key opinion leaders within the fan community invent adversaries to maintain their idols' charismatic legitimacy. Yet this kind of charisma, which depends so much on an image of an enemy, is inherently weak. When the adversarial narrative disappears, the legitimacy breaks down. Thus, charisma based on creating enemies cannot provide long-term stable rule in Weberian, disenchanted modern societies.

Keywords: Charismatic legitimacy; Max Weber; Carl Schmitt; Disenchantment

1 INTRODUCTION

Disenchantment is a theory proposed by Max Weber. It states that in today's society, where various laws and regulations are increasingly established and everything becomes more bureaucratic, people are living a meaningless life and become emotionally numb, resulting in a society lacking passion where everything operates like a machine. One of the signs of disenchantment is reflected in secularism, where fewer people today are following religions, and people rarely go to church. The second sign is that people often feel that everything in life is meaningless. People follow procedures to reach a goal without thinking about the reason behind. They simply accept rather than think. The third is that the emotions people invest in and the emotions they receive from the public sphere are decreasing. Cultural inheritance is becoming increasingly scarce, and people mostly focus on their private lives, while the concept of the individual is more prominent than ever in the modern disenchantment world. The fourth is rationalization, also known as specialization. People nowadays believe in science and use it to measure everything in the world and our society. Meanwhile, Max Weber proposed a theory about different types of legitimacy. This essay will take on the concept of charismatic legitimacy. The formation of legitimacy is based on the core premise of having a special leader, being powerful, attractive, but not necessarily moral. This special leader will attract a bunch of dedicated followers willing to sacrifice for them due to their personal charisma [1]. In Weber's view, disenchantment shattered the sacredness and traditional authority of pre-modern societies, giving rise to the modern plebiscitary charismatic legitimacy. Such leaders no longer derive legitimacy from hereditary status; instead, they gain it directly from the public's emotional loyalty. In national elections and other public elections, they shape the legitimacy of their authority.

Charismatic legitimacy typically does not persist, and it's really difficult for the charismatic legitimacy to remain stable because it relies entirely on the leader's personal extraordinary appeal rather than fixed rules or long-standing traditions. It lacks formal institutional constraints, relying on passion and narratives to sustain support. Once the leader fails, crises will arise, or public passion fades away, the fragile emotional bond will backlash quickly, making this authority type inherently unstable. However, a disenchanted modern society and a charismatic legitimacy seem to be mutually exclusive, forming a paradox. When people live in a very bureaucratic atmosphere, it is often difficult to inspire passion and cohesion, which is the essential components of a charismatic legitimacy. Hence, it raises a question: why does there still exist so many types of charismatic legitimacy or things that are similar to charismatic legitimacy in terms of a special leader attracting a bunch of loyal followers who are willing to sacrifice everything for them in this disenchanted modern society. And, more specifically, why are there still so many pop stars with so many followers even while religions are starting to diminish?

2 METHODS

The paper uses a qualitative theoretical-case-study method, and its main theoretical framework is based on Max Weber's theory of disenchantment and his idea of charismatic legitimacy, together with Carl Schmitt's distinction between friends and enemies as a means of analysis.

For political case selection, two contemporary populist leaders, Nayib Bukele (El Salvador) and Javier Milei (Argentina), are chosen according to two criteria: (1) both exercise prominent plebiscitary-charismatic authority within modern disenchanted contexts; (2) they deploy enemy-centred narrative strategies, with one case featuring objectively real threats and the other primarily narrative-constructed adversaries, enabling controlled comparative analysis

The study uses qualitative discourse analysis on public speeches, campaign rhetoric and later scholarly interpretations in order to identify the binary friend-enemy framework and the way in which it serves to consolidate charismatic loyalty. It then applies the theoretical mechanism, which had previously been considered in the context of high-level political elites, to the area of non-political fan-celebrity relationships as an analogous illustrative example, looking at the rhetoric of fan-community KOLs and the dynamics of online fan culture.

This is interpretive research based on theory rather than causal-quantitative testing; the cases show examples of theoretical mechanisms rather than prove universal causal laws.

3 RESULTS

Today's politics has two leaders who have created a common set of problems and the associated storytelling to reinforce their own personal charismatic legitimacy. The first leader is Nayib Bukele, president of El Salvador: Bukele constructs domestic and international difficulties in analogical narrative methods and metaphorical narrative forms, confirming his own charisma. Amid long-term social unrest and institutional issues, he crafts Manichean plotlines with entrenched political elite groups at home and local gangs depicted as the main national troublemakers. In addition, it raises questions about the nation's sovereignty, exaggerating other states' imposition of external influences. On one side, Bukele highlights people's worry over their lives being secure on a societal level as well as seeing their country improve; from the opposite end of this spectrum, Bukele portrays himself as an important man full of strength, someone able to meet these challenges head-on and lead El Salvador toward recovery and development. Rather than taking away those feelings of instability, they give an interpretive framework for which we can direct public discomfort toward some kind of matter at home or something outside. When people associate themselves with this type of leadership while comparing it to Bukele's predecessors that he deems corrupt, and to the gang that I mentioned previously, it gives Nayib Bukele very strong individual authority as well as charismatic legitimacy [3]. Criminal gangs from El Salvador actually represent real threats to social security. Gang leaders' own charismatic legitimacy stems mainly from facing and solving peoples' survival crisis personally and creating fake stories so that people know how much the leaders work hard and love them making people trust and respect their leader. This sort of charismatic legitimacy requires genuine external dangers so that society may be divided into friends and foes

And also, Javier Milei, leader of Argentina, mainly gains his charismatic legitimacy through constructing an enemy-hater in the concept of "casta" (clan) as well. He depicted Argentine establishment politicians, trade unions, some business groups, and media organizations as part of a long-standing political-economic order, blaming that order for major social and economic challenges such as inflation and poverty. In his campaign, he often made use of peculiar labels to describe political parties and opposing figures, making for a very clear distinction between elites and normal citizens: Within this narrative structure, he positioned those established elite individuals as representatives of a standard political system, while presenting himself as someone who is most closely related to ordinary people and change in politics. On the other hand, he constantly presents himself as being persecuted by the elites on social media, which builds up a picture of him as the lone warrior. By creating a common enemy, Milei stirs social contradictions, leading voters' discontent to be directed at the establishment class, thereby enhancing his own extraordinary charisma and consolidating blind faith from voters towards himself [4]. The enemy image of the "privileged bureaucratic class" created by Milei in Argentina does not actually present a survival threat. Social contradictions are shifted around and political factions divided quickly achieving public consensus gaining emotion.

This paper will show how charismatic legitimacy can exist in today's society without enchantment, since Schmitt said politics is about friends and enemies [2], which forces the emergence of rivalries from leaders with charisma. Schmitt believes that the essence of politics is the division between foes and allies. Carl Schmitt thought people/states separate themselves into friends/enemies, which is political. This essay argues that what he has to say regarding what constitutes the political is something that might prove extremely useful towards making the charismatic legitimate. The basic logic depends not on cooperation and agreement but rather on how a state or organization regards others and sets itself apart from the enemy. Generally speaking, external opposition serves as the main source for group cohesiveness, decreasing inner disputes, bringing all individuals to fight together against a common opponent, while also giving rise to an exclusive identity within such groups. In theoretical terms too, this could be utilized by leaders to strengthen their own charisma-based legitimacy, crafting pictures of public enemies that form the operating logic for how these sorts of charismatics bring followers around them.

Today's entertainment industry is highly industrialized and homogenized. Idols lack concrete talents, and natural personal charm from within is scarce, representing a typical result of the disenchantment modern society. The core competitiveness of an idol does not lie in his or her capability, but in the emotional contract with fans and group loyalty, which is highly consistent with the operational logic of political charisma. In today's fan communities, many fans will deliberately create the enemies of the idol, especially those who debuted as a group. Their imaginary enemies are more

easily found, who are generally selected from among their teammates because the competitions will be conducted more naturally. By fabricating rumors about their favorite idols being bullied by teammates, they will portray their own idols as determined, kind figures embodying the victim. Anti-culture is a long-standing subculture phenomenon within the fan culture, which has become increasingly prevalent in recent years. While watching the performances of artists through online platforms, people will post or shout out aggressive and insulting remarks against the artists they dislike, or those who have competitive or opposing relationships with the artists they support. In many cases, the volume of such negative remarks and the online “dislikes” regarding these opposing artists can even exceed the positive support and affection expressed by their genuine fans.

When this theory is applied to fan culture, two practical approaches emerge. First, as rulers of charismatic legitimacy in the pseudo-political environment of fan culture, these pop stars convey this enemy-friend ideology to fans themselves. A relatively direct approach, I think, often occurs in Europe and America: the celebrities express their aversion to another directly, thereby guiding fans to attack them. Another situation, more common in the cultural background of East Asia and China that I am familiar with, is that a member of a group expresses through implicit words that they only like their own fans, or he/she is bullied or unfairly treated by his/her agent compared to other group members, thereby indirectly disuniting their own fans from those of other members of the same group and achieving the stability of their own charismatic legitimacy[5]. This approach is more closely associated with political contexts in which the perceived opponent is presented as a concrete and identifiable entity.

Of course, the first situation is relatively rare. Most pop stars meet the public through their work, and a single sentence can often have a very huge influence; they usually have less time to express their opinions than politicians and are less free. Then, because the information directly conveyed to fans is limited and infrequent, several active KOLs in fan circles usually step in to convey and interpret it on their behalf, like secretaries and civil servants in the political system. These KOLs will also deliberately establish and stabilize the charismatic regime by fabricating enemies. These KOLs sometimes even attack an artist who has almost nothing to do with the artist they like because of a similar clothing color, or fabricate fake news saying their idols are treated unfriendly by other team members, creating contradictions.[6]

In order to make sure that every fan in an idol's fan circle dislikes his or her teammates, the fans will become better mobilized, and they will try their best to outperform other teammates' fans in all aspects. In the process of confrontation, protection, and competition, the fans feel a strong sense of identity, which in turn reinforces the legitimacy of the idol's personality charm, promoting the long-term charismatic legitimacy of this idol while also enhancing the unity and of the fan community. So, it is not just a simple fan conflict, but a charismatic legitimacy operation jointly completed by the entertainment industry and the fan group. It is a replication of the political logic in pop culture.[7]

4 DISCUSSION

The artificially constructed charisma has extreme vulnerability[8]: once the opposition disappears, the charm aura immediately collapses. The long-term process of deliberate enemy creation will trigger extreme backlash and group polarization. And this is the reason why a lot of charismatic leaders - including both pop stars and political figures - finally backlashed. Too much reliance on making enemies to build up a charismatic legitimacy makes modern governance weak. When we talk about this type of leader with charisma from plebiscitary/election, they do not rely upon something stable like institution/laws/tradition; they depend instead on emotion and storytelling. Enemy building could have some short-term political mobilizing effect, which can be achieved very quickly, but it is hard to manage in the long run, and will face backlash. The conflict becomes less severe, or when what the “enemy” does no longer fits the tale the leader wants to spin, nor what the people themselves would think. The narrative fails, public excitement and loyalty fall rapidly, and the leaders' charm fades. Moreover, continued dependence on division between friends and foes further deepens social polarization, making it more difficult to establish a strong and reasonable system of government. According to Weber's theory on legitimacy, that sort of charismatic legitimacy that arises in times of disenchantment isn't very stable itself, so it can't obtain sustainable political governance. These characteristics make such kinds of political models harmful regarding the goal of long-term development.

In the modern disenchanted world of Weber, the traditional charismatic authority has completely disappeared. Schmidt's politics of enemies is adopted as a way of creating fake charismatic legitimacy, and these sorts of phenomena exist everywhere nowadays. In modern times, it mainly relies on forming an enemy and unity through symbolic identity in order to gain charismatic legitimacy.

5 CONCLUSION

In a more bureaucratic modern society, traditional forms of charismatic authority have declined. This article shows that the political approach Carl Schmitt developed—based on the distinction between friends and enemies—has become an important tool for creating modern artificial charisma, as seen in both populist politics and industrial fan culture. In such disenchantment, charismatic legitimacy can persist mainly through the symbolic creation of common enemies, which in turn strengthens group identity and emotional loyalty. Yet charisma based on enemies has an inherent weakness: it drives short-term mobilization but cannot provide lasting, stable governance. The continued use of a strict friend-enemy dichotomy deepens social polarisation and hinders the development of rational institutions. Future research could further examine how institutional constraints might reduce the risks associated with enemy-driven charismatic mobilization in disenchanted societies.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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