

The disconcerting twists and turns in America's political landscape have stimulated important debate surrounding the crisis of democracy. Indeed, the masochist certainly revels in the number of thorny albeit interesting questions that have emerged. One way of making sense of the political chaos that we find ourselves in, and its attendant political figures, is to draw upon the explanatory power of certain analytical concepts.

Max Weber, a 20th century social theorist, advanced three ideal-types of political authority: traditional, charismatic and legal-rational. Political authority that derives from charismatic grounds sees "devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him". Admittedly, Donald Trump *is* a charismatic leader. Thankfully, this admission comes with a number of caveats. Trump is charismatic in the sense that he commands the trust and loyalty of significant swathes of the American population without having to be specific about his policies or be qualified to pursue them.

Decisively, charisma is a contextual phenomenon rather than something that is *sui generis* due to the leader's characteristics: it is usually a turbulent epoch, riddled with socioeconomic and political anxiety, which deposits fertile soil for the emergence of charismatic leaders and the populist search for magic in leadership.

We have been given many reasons why we should be distressed by Trump's victory. Lamentably, unpacking the concept of charismatic authority gives us another reason. By committing ourselves to the idea that Trump's charisma is inseparable from the distressed epoch that facilitated his ascendancy, we can recognise the ways in which the emotional potency that underlies a personalised system of politics results in the creation of power irrespective of the personal abilities of the leader. This is an uncomfortable prospect: an entire system can arise from little more than a matrix of reductive slogans and views that are shockingly ignorant. What, however, is this system capable of? Several historical studies have identified that, in the absence of coherent command, political systems become more susceptible to radicalisation. Even though these studies are not justifiably transposable to the Trump administration, we have already seen the unfolding chaos as our rules-based system becomes superseded by an unpredictable, ad hoc approach to domestic and international politics.

Even though Weber leads us to think that a charismatic leader commands a system that prioritises emotional loyalty and discounts organisational efficiency, we do not need to turn the pages of history too many times to see that there is an uncanny way that charismatic power coexists with bureaucratic efficiency. Indeed, Trump's victory shatters the assumption that, given its emphasis on emotion over rationality, charismatic authority is precluded from democracies, whereby a system of checks and balances stamps out

that which is hostile to procedural and bureaucratic niceties. Zygmunt Bauman, a 20th century sociologist, argued in 1989 that the perpetrators of one of the most heinous crimes against humanity were all in varying degrees "civilised, rational and cultured". He proceeded to argue that modernity – and the bureaucratic systems that express it – does not exclude mass human suffering. We can invoke Bauman's powerful thesis when thinking about how Trump, and the charismatic paradigm he signifies, has emerged victorious in what should be a reputable 'legal-rational' political system. The global spread of charisma-driven politics, as evidenced by China, Russia, Turkey and now the U.S., renders it an equaliser amongst seemingly disparate political systems. Here, Hannah Arendt's *A Report on the Banality of Evil* can be modulated to *the banality of charismatic authority*: we should not treat the rise of charismatic leaders, and the growing normalisation of personality-driven leadership, as a historical aberration but rather a political force to be reckoned with.

Just as our emotions can be destructive if they dictate the management of our time, finances and relationships, they can be devastating if we yield to them in the political realm. If the winds of change are to blow in the right direction, we must innovate the ways that the preference for rationality over emotion can appeal to all members of all social strata – not just those who we would expect to already hold such a preference. What is interesting is that the appeal to emotion has become an increasingly favoured tactic for proponents on both sides of the political spectrum. We have seen, for example, the eruption of college-educated anti-Trump students who refuse to listen to persons who offend their values. Here is an instance where reasoning, which enables us to interact with those with whom we disagree, is hijacked by, *emotional* reasoning, whereby the desire to preserve our emotional integrity by refusing to be offended, shuts down the types of discussions imperative to truth-seeking and dispelling the myth of charismatic leaders.

The one redeeming aspect of charismatic authority is that because it emerges in an unstable epoch, it is inherently unstable. Given the certainty that Trump's fallibility will continue to ablaze with light, it is our responsibility to treat each of these moments as critical junctures to break any prevailing emotional bonds with Trump. Yet, we should not fight fire with fire – it is inconsistent to deploy emotive strategies when engaging those that are emotionally invested in Trump. Our goal must be to *open* the conversation, rather than to close it. This will involve putting our emotions aside, even if temporarily, in order to show a willingness to listen and engage with unpopular opinions: this is the necessary first step in reforming them. ♥



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due.aaschool.ac.uk

For submissions,
due@aaschool.ac.uk

Editors, Sofia Pia Belenky
Tobias Hentzer Dausgaard
Design, technofle.sh
Print, hatopress.net