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Does Max Weber's Notion of Authority Still Hold in the 21st Century?*

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Does Max Weber's Notion of Authority Still Hold in the 21st Century?

Abstract

Purpose - The purpose of this brief commentary is to provide a brief overview of Max Weber's life, work, and contributions to management thought before addressing the question of whether his notion of authority still holds in the 21st century.

Design/methodology/approach - The commentary begins with a brief biographical sketch followed by an examination of Weber's conceptualization of authority, its influence on the field of management and its relevancy in the 21st century.

Findings - Weber's writings on charismatic authority have been and continue to be instrumental in shaping modern leadership theory, that the charismatic form of authority may be particularly applicable and effective in today's chaotic and rapidly changing environments, and that the empowered and self-managing organizational forms of the 21st century may represent merely a different incarnation of Weber's iron cage of legal/rational authority.

Originality/value – This commentary makes an important contribution to the management history literature by examining an important aspect of Weber's influence on management thought, theory, and practice.

Keywords Max Weber, Authority, Charismatic Leadership

Paper type Conceptual Paper

Does Max Weber's Notion of Authority Still Hold in the 21st Century?

The writings of Max Weber have had a profound and perhaps even unrivaled influence on management thought and organizational theory over the past century (Greenwood & Lawrence, 2005). Recently, however, some organizational theorists have questioned the current relevancy of Weber's theories in today's late-modern knowledge-based information age characterized by a very different set of economic, social and technological realities from the time in which Weber's ideas were born (e.g., Greenwood & Lawrence, 2005; Lounsbury & Carberry, 2005). A complete examination of the enduring influence of the entire breadth of Weber's writings in the current context is well beyond the scope of this brief commentary. However, after a brief biographical sketch and overview of Weber's work, I will focus specifically on Weber's conceptualization of authority and its relevancy in the 21st century. In short, I will suggest that Weber's writings on authority are still material in modern organizations and are still helping to shape the thinking of today's management scholars.

Max Weber was born in 1864 in Erfurt, Germany, the oldest of eight children. Weber studied law at the University of Heidelberg, but his educational experiences and subsequent academic career would span a remarkably broad number of disciplines including law, history, economics, philosophy, political science, and sociology. After completing his doctoral dissertation and habilitation (the highest level of academic qualification in certain European countries), Weber obtained his first university appointment in 1892 at the University of Freiburg. He would also hold professorships at the University of Heidelberg, the University of Vienna, and the University of Munich during an academic career marked by periods of intense writing productivity but punctuated with bouts of neurosis resulting in periods of scholarly inactivity and long leaves of absence from any teaching responsibilities. As Greenwood and Lawrence (2005)

have noted, it is doubtful that Weber could have followed such a career path in today's intense "publish or perish" academic culture. In 1904, after a five-year period during which he published virtually nothing, Weber began publishing some of his most influential essays. These essays were later collected to comprise his most influential book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which included Weber's famous metaphor of the iron cage (Weber, 1930). Subsequently, Weber presented his fully developed ideas on bureaucracy, political leadership, domination and authority in his three-volume masterpiece, *Economy and Society* (Weber, 1968), which was first published posthumously in 1922. Weber had died of pneumonia in 1920 after contracting Spanish influenza. The influence of Weber's writings on management thought following his death was slowed somewhat by a lack of English translations of his work. Although *The Protestant Ethic* was first translated into English in 1930, Weber's essays on bureaucracy and authority were not widely available until the late 1940s. Yet despite the slow start, Weber's influence on management and organizational theory in the middle decades of the 20th century was tremendous (Greenwood & Lawrence, 2005). Interested readers may refer to Käsler (1979) for a more detailed discussion of Weber's life and work.

Without question, Max Weber's ideas have had a broad and far-reaching influence on the development of the fields of management and organizational theory and his writings on authority certainly rank among his most influential. Weber forwarded three basic types of authority: traditional, rational-legal, and charismatic (Weber, 1968). Traditional authority, such as that of tribal chiefs, feudal lords and monarchs, is based on customs and traditions that are passed down from one generation to the next. Rational-legal authority, in contrast, is founded upon laws, rules and the power stemming from a legitimate position or office. Weber felt that the bureaucracy was a primary example of rational-legal authority. Finally, charismatic authority

results from extraordinary personal characteristics of a leader that have the capacity to inspire others.

Weber saw these three types of authority essentially as forces that would bring either stability and order (traditional/legal rational) or change and disorder (charismatic) to institutions and society (Conger, 1993). Thus for Weber, traditional authority was viewed as stable, impersonal and nonrational; rational/legal authority was seen as stable, impersonal and rational; and charismatic authority was considered unstable, personal and nonrational (Blau, 1963; Conger; 1993). Weber painted a distinct contrast between the act of following a personal yet transitory charismatic leader as opposed to submitting to the more stable and impersonal traditional and rational/legal forms of authority. He further saw both legal/rational and charismatic authority as forms of rebellion against the stagnant status quo of traditional authority, the former through principles and procedures based on consensus and rationality and the latter through an emotional reaction to a heroic leader. Weber also suggested that charismatic authority is inherently transitory and unstable, and is therefore most effective in times of crisis and change, serving primarily to facilitate the transition from one order to another (Conger, 1993). Having accomplished this transition, charismatic authority is either “routinized” or simply fades away as charismatic leadership is replaced by the rules, tradition and institutionalized bureaucracy. Hence, the irony of charismatic authority is that it is often replaced by the very forms of authority that it originally sought to overturn (Conger, 1993).

Weber developed his theory of authority in the early 20th century and in that context his ideas make a great deal of sense. The industrial age was creating larger and more complex bureaucratic organizations and Weber observed that traditional authority structures were being replaced by legal/rational based authority systems often aided by larger-than-life charismatic

leaders whose entrepreneurial vision and energy were being transformed into the great corporations of the 20th century. Weber, however, lived and wrote in a simpler and arguably less dynamic context in which pace of change was slower and less frenetic than today (Greenwood & Lawrence, 2005). Modern organizations are increasingly characterized by new, decentralized network-based structures that are quite different from the large, complex bureaucracies of Weber's day. Today, knowledge-based work and cutting-edge technologies are creating new organizational realities centered on concepts such as telecommuting, empowerment, and self-managing teams that may potentially undermine the traditional and legal/rational forms of authority. Given these new organizational forms and practices, does Weber's notion of authority still hold in 21st century? In the remainder of this commentary, I will suggest that Weber's ideas on authority are just as relevant today as they were a hundred years ago, but in different ways and for different reasons. In short, I will propose that Weber's writings on charismatic authority have been and continue to be instrumental in shaping modern leadership theory, that the charismatic form of authority may be particularly applicable and effective in today's chaotic and rapidly changing environments, and that the empowered and self-managing organizational forms of the 21st century may simply represent a different embodiment of Weber's iron cage of legal/rational authority.

When Weber redefined the term "charisma" from its original ecclesiastical meaning of "divinely bestowed power or talent" to mean "a special quality of an individual capable of inspiring and influencing others," he laid the foundation for the concept of charismatic leadership. As Conger (1993) points out, Weber "is essentially the 'father of the field'—responsible for the introduction of the concept as both a lay and scientific term" (p. 277). Thus, beginning in the 1970s and continuing to the present, Weber's writings on charismatic authority

have served as the conceptual basis for the development of theoretical models of charismatic leadership as well as for empirical research on the subject (Conger, 1988; 1993). Moreover, Weber's writings have done more than serve as the seminal works for one of the most popular concepts in modern leadership theory; they have also continued to move the field forward as various nuances of charismatic leadership have been identified and explored. For instance, nearly two decades ago following the initial development of the charismatic leadership theory, Conger (1993) called for researchers to examine two previously neglected aspects of Weber's theory: the routinization of charismatic leadership and the role of context in charismatic leadership. In response, researchers have carefully examined the extent to which the emergence and maintenance of charismatic leadership depends on the presence of a dynamic context and/or crisis situation (e.g., Bligh, Kohles, & Meindl, 2004; de Hoogh, den Hartog, & Koopman, 2005; Pillai, 1996; Shamir & Howell, 1999). Indeed, these concepts along with other aspects of Weber's theory of charismatic authority recently prompted a lively debate among leadership scholars within the pages of *Leadership Quarterly* (i.e., Bass, 1999; Beyer, 1999; House, 1999; Shamir, 1999). The point is that Max Weber's ideas are still informing and inspiring research, debate, and theory building in one of the most popular areas of organizational research today.

Leadership theorists have generally suggested that times of stress, turbulence, and rapid change are more conducive to a charismatic leadership approach because the transforming vision of a charismatic leader is more appealing in times of uncertainty (e.g., Bryman, 1993; Conger, 1999). Weber (1968) himself focused specifically on times of crisis as a primary facilitating environment for charismatic authority. It seems reasonable then to suggest that charismatic leadership may have even greater applicability and relevance in today's turbulent and rapidly

changing organizational environments than the concept of charismatic authority did in Weber's day.

Finally, as Barker (1993) suggested in his highly influential ethnographic study, new participatory organizational forms and practices such as self-managing teams and employee empowerment may not represent an escape from the iron cage of legal/rational authority and bureaucratic control. Quite to the contrary, these practices may simply represent a shift in the locus of control from managers in traditional bureaucratic structures to the workers themselves (Barker, 1993). Workers become accountable to their teammates and to themselves rather than to a relatively distant manager. Ironically then, empowerment and self-management practices may serve to tighten Weber's iron cage of rational control as organizational members effectively police themselves and their co-workers more closely than would be possible in the strictest bureaucracy. Once again, Weber's notion of authority informs our modern understanding of complex organizational phenomena.

In conclusion, Hunt (1999) has suggested that the development of charismatic leadership was in part responsible for rejuvenating the study of leadership by creating "a paradigm shift that has attracted numerous new scholars and moved the field as a whole out of its doldrums" (p. 129). If this is true, then the field of leadership was to a large extent rejuvenated by the influence of Max Weber as leadership scholars looked to the ideas of the past to create the leadership theory and practice of the present and future. Clearly, Max Weber's writings have been shaping the thinking of management scholars for more than a century and his influence will likely continue into the foreseeable future.

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