

Charismatic Leadership in Singapore

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Three Extraordinary People

 Springer

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Preface

This book offers a narrative of the unusually transformative lives of three extraordinary Singaporeans: community work volunteer Sister Prema, dramatist Kuo Pao Kun, and architect Tay Kheng Soon. With a few exceptions, sociological studies have neglected the concept of charisma, and the idea has never been incorporated into other major theoretical sociological discussions. Although Weber's definition of charisma¹ forged what is for many writers the starting point for any appreciation of the concept, his conceptualization of charisma has not been very useful to sociology because it deals with charisma more as a psychological than a social phenomenon.² Even the growing interest in leadership and charisma within organizational behavior studies³ is mainly oriented to meso level analysis and is still principally concerned with psychological concerns rather than sociological ones. With the exception of Edward Shils and Smuel Eisenstadt who employ charisma as a concept to analyze power in terms of the symbolic social order, the interest of mainstream sociology in charisma studies ended before the end of the 1960s.⁴

In contrast to the prevailing attitude of sociologists, the basic assumption of our book is that the study of charisma can make a significant contribution to several central sociological topics because, in the real world, charismatic leadership is closely related to important sociological concerns such as action, power, and influence and to social symbolic meaning, the social construction of reality, and transformation. But, by way of its nature, the concept takes in the individual, small groups, various social institutions and organizations, and the macro social system. That means aspects and agents from different social levels. Because of this, it has the

¹ Writing in 1924, reprinted in 1947.

² See Friedland (1964, p. 18), Moscovici (1993, p. 125 and 221–222).

³ House (1977); Bass (1985); Conger and Kanungo (1988); Sashkin (1988); Avolio (1995); and others.

⁴ Even the subsequent sociological studies are based either on Weber (Friedland 1964; Fabian 1969; Tucker 1970) or on Shils's approaches (Geertz 1977; Willner 1984) and do not offer major theoretical reformulation.

potential to enable meaningful discussions with regard to the intricate and complex intersections between these various agents and with regard to the interplay within the various levels of society.

It is our intention to pick up the sociological study of charisma right from the point where it was left off – with Shils’s symbolic reformulation and Eisenstadt’s inclusion of institutionalizational dimensions in the process of the agency of charisma.⁵ This book will offer a framework that deals with the symbolic and institutionalized aspects of charisma (thus incorporating the approaches of both Shils and Eisenstadt),⁶ yet that still retains Weber’s distinct micro-level and “revolutionary” aspect of charisma. In the process, we will attempt to clarify the revolutionary aspect of charisma, both conceptually and empirically, by linking it to the realm of ideas, perceptions, and underlying basic social assumptions. From the conceptual point of view, this attempt can be seen as trying to synthesize⁷ the core arguments of the writings we have mentioned – of Shils, Eisenstadt, and Weber – with the additional application of structural conceptualizations of basic social assumptions.⁸ In addition, this book will attend to micro–macro relations – the relations that occur through and with charisma – and will thus explore an area that has been severely neglected: the intersections between context and charisma. Indeed, both the traditional sociological as well as the recent organizational behavior treatments of charisma require a more dialectical approach to unravel or explicitly demonstrate the dual interactions between charisma and structure.

While the traditional sociological approaches typically tend to place greater emphasis on the structural constraints (and less on the subjective, intentional nature of micro-level agents and the ways that they can shape structure),⁹ recent approaches in organizational behavior seem to emphasize the “omnipotent,” individual nature of such leadership and neglect possible macro contextual¹⁰ impacts on such agency’s nature, form, and process.¹¹ This book will make a case for treating charisma and social structure as both influencing and being influenced by each other.

⁵ See Shils (1965) and Eisenstadt (1968).

⁶ Their theories still require theoretical reformulation in order to apply to the analysis of change, and in that respect, they significantly depart from Weber’s initial formulation of charisma as a revolutionary force.

⁷ Admittedly, we think that Eisenstadt’s (1968) approach also tried to offer a possible synthesis between Weber ([1924] 1947) and Shils (1965) (through an institutional perspective on the process of charisma and social change). However, this reconceptualization “lost,” as it happened, the revolutionary notion of charisma and is less applicable for the analysis of social changes of a revolutionary kind.

⁸ See the writings of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961).

⁹ With the exception of Weber, who indeed emphasized the individual subjective aspect yet neglected the other side of the dialectics.

¹⁰ Not in the meso, situational, or organizational confines, but particularly when referring to macro contextual factors such as history, culture, politics, society, and others.

¹¹ There is indeed an inconclusive, ongoing dispute and treatment of the relation between crises and the emergence of charisma (see Chap. 6), but other possible dimensions and interactions are severely neglected.

The conceptual synthesis between the micro and macro aspects of charisma will rely on sociological approaches that deal with the way social reality is constructed.¹² An underlying assumption for such an analysis of charisma is that, since reality is not predetermined¹³ but (to use Weber's concept) a matter of "elective affinities," it posits the quest and the challenge for its social construction. Charismatic leadership can therefore be seen as a social mechanism that constructs social reality by negotiating the macro structure.

The approaches of both Berger and Giddens may benefit from their incorporation into the analysis of charisma as they are not clear with regard to revolutionary types of reality construction, a point that will be pursued in this book. There have been sociological treatments that have dealt with charisma's revolutionary agency, but whether it is implicit (as by Weber) or explicit (as by others),¹⁴ they all seem to argue that such changes are intrinsically correlated with mass social movements. We will review such argumentation both conceptually and empirically because there may be particular cases of charismatic revolutionary changes that do not engage mass social movements nor large-scale transformations, yet still play a major role in the construction of social reality.

Strategically, this book will make a case for presenting charisma as a useful idea and concept in the study of a number of social processes, namely, the social construction of reality and meaning (and its interrelation with social transformation), and the ongoing dialectics between macro-level structure and micro-level agency. For such an understanding to develop, the conceptualization of charisma should move from the traditional orientation of the discipline (whether that be a macro- or a micro-type of analysis) and venture into the zone where macrosociology and social psychology intersect. This conceptual intersection, which engages both micro and macro approaches to the analysis of the phenomenon at hand, seems a fruitful ground for the proper treatment of the dialectical nature of charisma.

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¹² See Berger (1966, 1981) and Giddens (1984).

¹³ As was pointed out by several sociologists (Berger 1967, 1981; Eisenstadt 1968; Giddens 1984), reality is not predetermined because macro-level factors, although posing substantial constraints, do not totally determine micro-level action.

¹⁴ For an example of explicit treatment, see Friedland (1964), Fabian (1969), Tucker (1970).

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