

**Max Weber:  
Traditional, Legal-Rational, and Charismatic Authority**

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## **Outline of Weber's Theory of Authority**

The influential sociologist Max Weber proposed a theory of authority that included three types. He pioneered a path towards understanding how authority is legitimated as a belief system. His essay "The three types of legitimate rule", translated in English and published posthumously in 1958<sup>1</sup>, is the clearest explanation of his theory.

Spencer interpreted Weber's theory to say that legitimate order and authority stems from "different aspects of a single phenomenon – the forms that underlie all instances of ordered human interaction". There are two fundamental components of order, norms and authority. Spencer explained that "authority and norms represent polar principles of social organization: In the one case organization rests upon orientation to a rule or a principle; in the other instance it is based upon compliance to commands" (Spencer 1970, 124).

Weber's three types of authority are traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational authority. Coser points out that Weber wrote about "pure" types of authority, and that "he was aware that in empirical reality mixtures will be found in the legitimation of authority" (Coser 1971, 227). As such, many examples of the following authority types may overlap.

### **Authority Types**

Traditional authority is legitimated by the sanctity of tradition. The ability and right to rule is passed down, often through heredity. It does not change overtime, does not facilitate social change, tends to be irrational and inconsistent,

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<sup>1</sup> First published in 1922 in Preussische Jahrbuecher, 187: 1-12.

and perpetuates the status quo. In fact, Weber states: “The creation of new law opposite traditional norms is deemed impossible in principle.” Traditional authority is typically embodied in feudalism or patrimonialism. In a purely patriarchal structure, “the servants are completely and personally dependent upon the lord”, while in an estate system (i.e. feudalism), “the servants are not personal servants of the lord but independent men” (Weber 1958, 4). But, in both cases the system of authority does not change or evolve.

Charismatic authority is found in a leader whose mission and vision inspire others. It is based upon the perceived extraordinary characteristics of an individual. Weber saw a charismatic leader as the head of a new social movement, and one instilled with divine or supernatural powers, such as a religious prophet. Weber seemed to favor charismatic authority, and spent a good deal of time discussing it. In a study of charisma and religion, Riesebrodt (1999) argues that Weber also thought charisma played a strong – if not integral – role in traditional authority systems. Thus, Weber’s favor for charismatic authority was particularly strong, especially in focusing on what happened to it with the death or decline of a charismatic leader. Charismatic authority is “routinized” in a number of ways according to Weber: orders are traditionalized, the staff or followers change into legal or “estate-like” (traditional) staff, or the meaning of charisma itself may undergo change.

Legal-rational authority is empowered by a formalistic belief in the content of the law (legal) or natural law (rationality). Obedience is not given to a specific individual leader – whether traditional or charismatic – but a set of uniform

principles. Weber thought the best example of legal-rational authority was a bureaucracy (political or economic). This form of authority is frequently found in the modern state, city governments, private and public corporations, and various voluntary associations. In fact, Weber stated that the “development of the modern state is identical indeed with that of modern officialdom and bureaucratic organizations just as the development of modern capitalism is identical with the increasing bureaucratization of economic enterprise (Weber 1958, 3).

However, no authority structure, Weber wrote, could actually be exclusively bureaucratic, because some positions would be held by a variety of charismatic leaders. He also stated that non-bureaucratic legal authority could be found in organizations that have rotating office holders, such as “Parliamentary and committee administration and all sorts of collegiate and administrative bodies” (Weber 1958, 3). Weber’s feelings about bureaucracies sometimes came through in his writing and he tended to view the move towards legal-rational authority as a move into an “iron cage”.

### **Inter-relationships**

Weber’s theory of authority is very rich and intricate. Weber and others have detailed many interesting relationships and processes occurring between the types. Blau’s “Critical Remarks on Weber’s Theory of Authority” (1963) explains two of these in particular, components that either strengthen or weaken an authority type in regards to another.

The three authority types may be *re-enforced* by traits that differentiate them from other types. Traditional authority is impersonal (unlike charisma) and non-rational (unlike legal-rational). Charismatic authority is dynamic (unlike tradition) and non-rational (again, unlike legal-rational). Finally, legal-rational authority is dynamic (unlike tradition) and impersonal (unlike charisma). Conversely, Blau means to say that traditional is un-dynamic, charisma is personal, and legal-rational is rational. The likelihood of retaining a particular type of authority may depend on the ability of that authority system to retain the traits that make it unique and reject the traits that make it more conducive to another authority type.

To elaborate, particular authority types can *lose their power* to – and thus transition into – other types by some of the following ways. Revolutionary ideals can be advocated by a charismatic leader or the rational pursuit of ends via abstract formal principles can both weaken traditional authority. Revolutionary charismatic movements can be crystallized into a traditional order or bureaucratized into a rational formal organization. Finally, the irrational forces and powers of tradition or charisma can weaken legal-rational authority.

Collins observes that, for Weber, these categories of authority “do not exist merely for the sake of labeling and classifying history; they are embedded in a larger network of concepts and in an image of how they work” (Collins 1986, 6). As such, Weber’s three types of authority match up to his three categories of inequality: class, status groups, and parties. Traditional authority is the basis for status groups. Charismatic authority lends itself to a market scheme (such as the

potential for life chances), and Weber considered it to be the outcome of class. Finally, parties are the codification of legal-rational authority, especially in the case of bureaucracies.

### **Present-Day Examples and Application**

How can this theory be applied to present-day phenomenon? Here are two contemporary examples of dynamic forces in the US: the recent (and seasonal) push for the US to invade Iraq and the North American anarchist movement, which played a sizable role in organizing against the push.

#### *Example 1: The push in the US to go to war against Iraq*

Weber's various authority types help to explain the US, pre-March 2003, in regards to invading Iraq. If Weber were alive to analyze it, he would likely say that the strongest of the types was charismatic authority, embodied by US President George W. Bush. Although he has little military experience, he was able to project a sense of urgency to much of the American populace about the need to attack Iraq. His "folksy" demeanor and the continual media attention to his threats towards Iraq were likely the only messages most Americans received. According to many polls, a good number of Americans were willing to simply trust Bush in whatever he did on the matter, a sentiment repeated again during and after the US invasion.

Weber would also point towards traditional authority as the basis for the pro-invasion sentiment of the country. The nation has a long tradition of foreign

military invasion, many hundreds of episodes since its founding, and the philosophy, means, and “necessity” to invade other countries are entrenched in American institutions. The Pentagon and its corporate partners (sometimes called the “military-industrial-complex”) have widespread and relatively consistent powers over the government. Further, the institution of the presidency is what also gave Bush so much persuasive ability – the executive branch is highly influential (possibly the most influential of the three “branches of government”).

The tentative and dissident portions of the country relied on legal and rational authority for their power and influence. Legal authority would require a mandate from the US Congress to go to war (putting aside the War Power Act); but the charisma of Bush was great enough to push aside this requirement for much of the pre-invasion debate (discussion should have originated in a deliberative body, not from the Commander in Chief), and later enough to influence Congress to permit it. Legal authority also conflicted with charismatic authority internationally, as Bush flaunted international law and the United Nations by moving towards a clearly illegal act. Even though it was illegal, the legal authority of the UN (and international community) was not enough to enforce international law or to stop a US invasion.

Perhaps the most relevant authority for the anti-war constituency was a popular authority – one part charismatic in that it attempted to be a movement for social change and one part legal-rational in its attempts to use the legal system (nationally and internationally). This popular authority can be viewed as an attempt to 1) force the US and Bush to adhere to the law, and 2) use the political

system as a mechanism for lobbying, as legally defined. But, in the background of the anti-war movement, is an attempt to forge a truly popular authority, where the public consensus would be one of peace—a perspective not derived from any of Weber’s types of authority, but a perspective gained through public debate and political intervention (i.e. value-rational authority).

*Example 2: North American anarchist movement*

Max Weber wrote during a high point for anarchism, in both the US and Europe. Although he surely would have known about it – the press ran well-funded propaganda campaigns against it for decades (Hong 1992) – he doesn’t seem to have taken it into account in his scheme. Had he, it might have caused him to create another category of authority.

The anarchist *reaction* to various kinds of authority is fundamental. Simply, anarchism opposes any authority that is placed above the individual and collective interest. More specifically, anarchism rejects the authority of any idea or institution that supports itself merely on the merit of being “tradition”. As such, anarchists were early critics of industrial capitalism and advocates of women’s rights (including suffrage). Anarchism likewise rejects charismatic leadership as the kind that frequently leads to despotism or reformism (various “socialist” and liberal leaders are usually the primary examples offered). However, anarchism has an ambiguous understanding of “leadership” itself. For instance, Crass (2003) points towards leaders who work to create “group-centered leadership”, as opposed to “individual-centered leadership”, thus circumventing the potential

of manipulation and power-grab of individuals and thus diffusing power. Finally, anarchists reject legal-rational authority since its power is lodged within the confines of the State, which is bureaucratic (as Weber pointed out) and hierarchical. Anarchism claims that laws are made and enforced to protect the few and the expense of the many. Like Marx, they view the legal and political system as a tool of the bourgeoisie class.

By mere definition, the North American anarchist movement itself adheres to none of Weber's authority types. At its core, anarchism is explicitly anti-authoritarian. According to George, "The fundamental principle of Anarchism is the rejection of authority, with the possible exception of 'natural authority'" (George 1997, 55). Or, as the anarcho-punk band Crass put it: "there is no authority but yourself" – a sentiment that obviously contradicts authority, which must be over *others*.

Although anarchism itself does not possess any of Weber's three authority types, it is not immune from norms. In fact, Spencer seems to suggest that norms are rather compatible to anarchism, albeit informal norms: "Norms are rules of conduct towards which actors orient their behaviour" (Spencer 1970, 124). As such, there are many unwritten rules or norms that anarchists follow, norms which do closely sync with Weber's authority types.

"Traditionally-legitimated norms" – rules with historic legitimacy and precedent – are found in anarchist predilection for specific types of organizing, such as the use of affinity groups, a practice common since its popularized usage in the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s. Customs, such as the use of the "circle-A"

symbol as an identifier, and parlance (words like “liberatory” and “mutual aid” in particular) have been used for a long period in anarchist culture.

Individual anarchists also have quite a swaying power, an influence that approaches charismatic authority, but still falls short – partially due to a general repulsion of leadership and partially due to a rejection by these individuals of being used as idols. Noam Chomsky is a very influential individual to many activists on the political Left, Murray Bookchin is a political force in the New England states with his theories of social ecology and libertarian municipalism, and John Zerzan is greatly admired in the Pacific-Northwest for his writings about primitivism. Thus, it is an anarchist “norm” to read these charismatic writers, but not necessarily to be compelled to agree with all they write or advocate.

The only sense in which Weberian authority *might* intersect with anarchism is with legal-rational. Although anarchists oppose the hierarchically-ordered modern state, they do practice a form of legal-rational authority within small organizations. In collectives, for instance, there are often rules or guidelines that must be followed, or else sanctions are lobbied. This is a voluntary reverence to authority, though, since any member of the collective can leave at any point. Also, it differs from most other forms of legal-rational authority in that individuals make a conscious effort to accept these rules, or even are involved in the rule formation themselves.

Even though it seems plausible to place some anarchist organizational structures within the legal-rational framework, Weber’s work suggests otherwise. He writes that although “legal rule” can be found in voluntary associations (such

as anarchist collectives), it needs “an extensive and hierarchically organized staff of functionaries” (Weber 1958, 2). Since there is no hierarchy present in a collective, nor permanent functionaries, Weber’s own criteria discounts this possibility.

Yet, as Spencer points out, there is a difference between Weber’s *legal-rational* authority and an under-discussed fourth type, *value-rational* authority. The latter is “subordination to a principle” (Spencer 1970, n. 2). In this respect, anarchist frequently submit to value-rational authority, such as in consensus decision-making processes; decisions are made through a formalized process and assisted by one or more facilitators who are empowered to help the group reach a shared decision, but also enforce the rules of consensus. Thus, anarchists submit to the authority of the *values* of consensus and direct democracy, but not necessarily the *legality* of it.

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