Charisma, Leadership, and Historiography


Charisma is a social phenomenon, not an individual trait, but using the concept loosely (as we all do) as a catch-all analytical description for magnetism, fame, heroism, or celebrity status is both misleading and confusing. Loose usage obscures the significance of the interactions between genuinely charismatic men or women—usually political and organizational leaders and gifted mobilizers rather than movie stars and athletic giants—and their believers and followers. Adulation is not necessarily indicative of charisma, nor is popular appeal. Charismatic leaders and their devotees together move barriers and overcome obstacles in order to achieve transformative goals. Notwithstanding Weber’s analysis of charisma for spiritual purposes, charisma is best understood as the inspirational component of the bond between leaders and their political and organizational followers that allows them to act as if they are genuinely inspired to maximize what they presume, or are led to believe, are their own interests.1

“Charismatic leaders provide their followers with . . . purpose and meaning—they lend excitement as well. By holding out hope for a perfect world . . . they capture our hearts as well as our minds.”2 As Weber rightly wrote, charismatic belief “revolution-


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izes men 'from within.'"3 Fame alone does not work in the same manner; imperial heroes do not usually have the power to captivate and transform those who glimpse them from afar, applaud them, or even worship them in a secular fashion.

The term charisma has its greatest utility in explaining the rare, overwhelming influence that gifted people can exercise on the actions of followers. The quality of charisma helps us to appreciate exactly how such exceptional leaders are able to transform societies, persuade soldiers to fight for them, overcome complicated corporate or organizational challenges, mobilize otherwise inchoate persons and groups for good and evil, and push aside the kinds of everyday impediments that usually inhibit revolutions. But the notion of charisma does not lend any insight into why happy, enthusiastic crowds welcomed the explorer Henry Morton Stanley's return from Africa to London or why the explorer Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza received a triumphant reception in Paris after returning from long months in Equatorial Africa. The absence of television and, as Berenson carefully indicates, the mighty role of the new penny press contributed powerfully to the robust manner in which the explorers, and men like them, were received when they concluded their overseas missions. Despite the title and contents of Berenson's book, however, charisma was not involved. Nor should we use fame, charisma, and celebrity interchangeably—as the opening pages of the Berenson and Gilo collection make clear (1–6).

Stanley, Brazza, General Charles Gordon, Captain Jean-Baptiste Marchand, and General Hubert Lyautey—the men whose methods and receptions are epitomized by Berenson—had vastly different nineteenth-century accomplishments. After striking journalistic exploits in Ethiopia and in Tanzania ("finding" Livingstone when few knew that he was lost), Stanley helped King Léopold of Belgium "acquire" the vast lands on the left bank of the Congo River from the Atlantic Ocean past Kisangani (née Stanleyville) to Lakes Kivu and Tanganyika and south to the headwaters of the Zambezi River. Brazza, competing with Stanley, planted French flags from the coastal marches of Gabon and the headwaters of the Ogooué River to the right bank of the Congo from its confluence with the Kwa River to its mouth near modern


Gordon, who had won his military spurs in the Crimea, and then in China during the attempted suppression of the Taiping Rebellion, subsequently sought to govern what is now South Sudan (Equatoria) on behalf of Ismail, the region’s Egyptian-based overlord. He tried to exterminate the slave trade even though Egyptians and Arab Sudanese were largely its perpetrators. In 1877, having failed to eradicate the trade in humans, he demanded full control of the entire Sudan, which Ismail granted. Gordon served for another three difficult years before being dismissed by Tawfiq, Ismail’s successor.

At about the same time, Muhammad Ahmad, a gifted Sudanese preacher from Darfur, proclaimed himself the Mahdi, or the expected messiah, and mobilized everyday Arab Sudanese to join him in taking back the Sudan from Turkish (Ottoman) and other foreign despisers of the Sudan. The Mahdi’s movement aroused Sudanese resentment of being oppressed. It also fit the expectations of the Islamic thirteenth century for an Islamist revival, and followed a host of similar Sufi-inspired reform efforts in West Africa and in the Saudi heartland of Islam. By 1882, the Mahdi’s forces were in control of large areas south and west of Khartoum. Later in the year, his soldiers annihilated a British-commanded legion sent by Tawfiq to restore order. Britain’s Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone declined to intervene, viewing the Mahdi’s followers as persons “wishing to be free.” But the London press was seized by the situation and advocated action in the person of Gordon. Only Gordon could save the day and prevent the Sudan from being “overrun” by Mahdiists.

The first issue, however, was retrieving the 21,000 Egyptian soldiers who in 1884 still were garrisoned in Khartoum, surrounded by the Mahdi’s forces. Gordon claimed that he could strike a deal with the Mahdi and secure a safe retreat. Some British political leaders believed him, falsely investing him with quasi-magical powers based on his military accomplishments in China. But by the time Gordon arrived in Khartoum in early 1884, he was less inclined to evacuate troops than to attempt to persuade the Mahdi to serve under his own authority—a conceit that to the Mahdi seemed incomprehensible. Gordon had God on his side, but the Mahdi had God and well-armed battalions. Gordon be-
lieved that he could pacify the Sudan without firing a shot. The Mahdi rapidly understood Gordon and Britain’s profound weaknesses. His forces cut the telegraph line north toward Egypt and began the siege of Khartoum.

Britain’s slow-paced military rescue mission of 10,000 soldiers finally reached the environs of Khartoum in early 1885, only to be mauled by the Mahdist army without ever launching a full-scale attack on Khartoum. Nor could they save Gordon, who perished near the end of January 1885, a martyr to a misplaced civilizing instinct and to the misguided boosterism of Britain’s yellow press. The vaunted British legion limped north toward Egypt. Only in 1898, after the Mahdi’s natural death, did General Herbert Horatio Kitchener plan and execute a proper reconquest of the Sudan. Kitchener was a charismatic leader, at least to his soldiers; Gordon was not. Martyrs are not always charismatic.

Kitchener was Marchand’s foil as well. After Marchand and hundreds of impressed Africans laboriously made their way up the Congo and Ubangi Rivers and across the Bahr al-Ghazal to the upper reaches of the White Nile, they found British expeditionary officers already in control. Marchand’s cross-continental odyssey was intended quixotically to prevent Britain, the usurper of French pretensions in Egypt, from establishing control over the Horn of Africa and East Africa. Marchand had even planned to present himself at the court of the Emperor Menelik in Ethiopia, intending to stop temporarily at Fashoda on the Nile (near the new South Sudan capital of Juba). In fact, Kitchener essentially told Marchand to turn around; London informed Paris that war was likely if Marchand persisted. So, after nearly eight weeks in late 1898, Marchand, the gallant French explorer, became Marchand the martyr for France. As his nation exulted in yet another glorious defeat, Marchand, who returned via the Congo to Paris, became a hero of yet another lost French cause. Huge crowds and great acclaim met his return. Berenson says, “The immense crowd seemed united in a patriotic endorsement of the charismatic personality” (194). But heroism is not charisma; nor is patriotism. Nobody, not even those who were part of Marchand’s traveling entourage, was invested in him as a charismatic figure.

Lyautey was another gifted French officer. His talent for self-promotion and his belief in the potential civilizing mission of France helped to give him stature and, in time, fame in France. He
also had numerous soldiers who were loyal to him, but the test of charisma demands much more than Berenson or the facts of Lyautey's supposedly "peaceful" conquest and governance of Morocco would suggest. Lyautey was more ostensibly "gentle" in his approach than those under whom he served during the "pacifications" of Vietnam and Madagascar. But the end results of Lyautey's efforts were congruent—the naked conquest of Morocco by force and the denial of German (and British) claims to that remaining redoubt of North African indigenous rule during the early years of the twentieth century. Lyautey saw himself as an agent of political and social change—an architect, an administrator, and a lawgiver—but he fooled himself as he fooled a French public that wanted to believe that conquest was good as well as right. The Moroccans knew better.

Lyautey's return to Morocco as its resident general in 1912 was popular, at least in France; there is little doubt that he was "not just a celebrity but a hero as well" (261). Morocco was in dire straits; every French person assumed, however, that Lyautey could turn chaos into glory. He was even elected to the Académie Française, presumably in recognition of his manifestation of the best qualities of French manhood. Lyautey's person and mission had great appeal, but they were not charismatic.

All of these larger-than-life heroes and celebrities doubtless had devoted acolytes, albeit in Stanley's case, "devoted acolytes" would be an oxymoron, since most of those who traveled with him detested him and his brutal ways. Gordon, a lonely and private man largely devoid of close followers, certainly had a nation attuned to his cause and his martyrdom in the Sudan. Likewise, Marchand's dramatic confrontation with Kitchener and Britain at Fashoda riveted the French. Brazza and Lyautey were admired for their "peaceful" qualities. But true charisma is a quality that attends leaders and followers via direct contact. It works more indirectly in politics, even in the case of a Nelson Mandela or a Barack Obama, than it does in a James Jones (Guyana) cult-type, small-group situation. The prosperity churches of Nigeria and the United States (and elsewhere) are all led by charismatic evangelicals who "embrace" their flock, at least metaphorically. None of Berenson's celebrities could reach out in such a way to more than a miniscule number of the persons who exulted in their examples and their fame.
Charismatics are emotionally expressive, confident, and committed. They have little self-doubt and are often morally righteous. Such indefatigable, determined leaders can fulfill other people's unmet emotional and existential needs—especially cravings for morally enriching authority figures, for consummate designs to shape and channel ordinary lives, for consistency and a collective mission, and for certainties to alleviate the ambiguities of workday strivings. Stanley, Gordon, Brazza, Marchand, and Lyautey certainly fit most of these criteria. But their followers quickly dispersed, having participated with their supposed charismatic leaders only in the most general way, hardly involved in the charismatic tension that Weber and others have specified.

Berenson and Giloi's suggestion that "crowds... invested the two explorers with charisma" arguably mischaracterizes how charisma operates (Constructing, 7); it contributes little to distinguishing celebrity appeal from potent charisma. Nor does it help to say that "Stanley's charisma ultimately faded into celebrity" (Constructing, 8). The conflation of terms is, as Berenson and Giloi themselves admit, "deceptive" (9).

In the world of corporate leadership, charismatic CEOs are usually future-oriented entrepreneurs, clever strategists, skillful opportunists, and serious risk takers—much like Berenson's quintet, who found unconventional solutions to difficult problems. They were magnetic—at a distance, anyway. They provided remedies to situations of stress; at least Marchand and Brazza probably did so. Lyautey intervened to make things right for France, but at the expense of indigenous Moroccans.

Charismatics, many of whom are knowledgeable experts with exceptional abilities, often foster strong attachments and arouse intense identification among followers (greatly aided by the vivid portraits of a competitive media). Charismatics also tend to elicit unquestioning obedience, welcoming and receiving severe dependence and co-dependence. Paradoxically, however, most of Berenson's figures did not fit this pattern.

Aung San Suu Kyi, the heroine of modern Burma, says that her undoubted charisma comes from the love of her beleaguered people, directly expressed and felt, and her reciprocated love for them. Such charismatic tension is difficult to sustain, however, without at least episodic face-to-face contact; for that reason, the military junta, which rules Burma (Myanmar) in a postelectoral ci-
villain guise, largely incarcerated or house arrested Suu Kyi from 1990 to 2010.  

Cecil J. Rhodes, the industrialist and imperialist of southern Africa at the end of the nineteenth century, was undeniably charismatic. How else could a squeaky-voiced dreamer make his way so well amid the rough Kimberley diamond fields and later in politics as premier of the Cape Colony? He used his charismatic abilities to enlist devotees in his dreams to spread British influence in Africa, to conquer Africans (who preferred to be left alone), to gain minerals and wealth to finance his conquests and his determination to spread British influence, and to become one of most influential buccaneers of his era. He also controlled most of the world’s diamonds and some of its gold by the time he was thirty-six, and influenced British as well as South African policies across a variety of imperial dimensions. Given his lack of analytical intelligence, his sloppy attire, a pronounced falsetto, and an absence of good connections, Rhodes’ charismatic appeal—and his undoubted gift of emotional intelligence—won him numerous adherents and true believers by direct contact (and all before he was wealthy). The press (unlike in the case of Berenson’s European examples) hardly assisted. Rhodes was charismatic before he was famous, and successful because of his ability to project a charismatic persona and thus to connect with peoples of all backgrounds. He was less a celebrity than a leader.  

Charisma is an attribute of venal leaders as well as better-intentioned ones. Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and other dictators and mass murders like Pol Pot and Robert Mugabe were charismatic at one time. But the best students of the corporate world distinguish between two kinds of charismatic leader. The “socialized” charismatic produces good results, emphasizing the collective interests of followers while behaving in an egalitarian manner. The “personalized” charismatic, in contrast, is authoritarian, self-serving, and narcissistic. She or he uses charisma to intimidate and control, as Stanley and Marchand certainly tried to do. Personal—

4 Interview with Aung San Suu Kyi, October 1996, in Rangoon. That week in 1996 was one of the few weeks in the 1990s when she was not jailed or under house arrest. She was finally released from house arrest in November 2010.

ized charismatics are secretive, highly charged, and inclined—at least in the corporate world—to grandiosity and self-aggrandizement.6

As Stephen Mintz reminds us in his essay “Byron, Death, and the Afterlife,” charisma in Greek and in seventeenth-century English conveyed a sense of God’s gift of grace (Constructing, 120). But Weber made it clear that such a gift could be realized only through interaction with followers. Thus individuals, however powerful, cannot deliver charisma. They must understand that their gifts of grace are realized only when shared with sympathizers, employees, or constituents. This galvanizing relationship between leaders and followers is what makes charisma so powerful and so dangerous in evangelical and cult-like settings.

“Stanley returned to Britain endowed with such blinding charisma that he seemed to eclipse everyone else” (Heroes, 123). Such is Berenson’s wholly misguided formulation, which echoes much of the mischaracterization of charisma; a more complete characterization of charisma can advance our understanding of modern history.

The edited volume has many good essays about Franz Liszt, Wilhelm II, Stéphane Mallarmé, Sarah Bernhardt, and mass culture, but few of its contributors seem to appreciate how the concept of charisma might best be used to contribute to genuine historical understanding. Lionel Trilling in 1950 admittedly talked of charisma as “the charm of power,” but that literary conceit hardly helps us to understand power, leadership, or, more telling, historical issues (Trilling quoted in Constructing, 121).

Mintz’s essay on Byron, which is distinguished by a firm grip on charisma, also appreciates (as others seemingly do not) that celebrity and fame are not the equals or the correlates of charisma. Fame, as Mintz says, “is all about talk” (Constructing, 121). Yet, Mintz is mysteriously prepared to equate (in Byron’s case) the power to seduce with charisma. But even if his trope is appealing in literary terms, can it tell us whether or not Byron possessed charisma and, if so, how this trait manifested itself in leadership or organizational outcomes?

Indeed, Berenson’s own book is mistitled. It is really about five “heroes” who became celebrities and won the plaudits of the

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multitude in a pre-Internet age. In explicating this dimension, Berenson’s narratives are exemplary. He displays an excellent command of how the newly energized and popularized continental press helped to create celebrities and sometimes manufactured artificial fame. He shows how and why the press and the government manipulated and exploited the celebrity of the men who went into Africa for imperial glory. He even manages to explain how Stanley escaped being pilloried after his brutal, misguided march through the Congo to Equatoria (South Sudan) to rescue Emin Pasha (Eduard Schnitzler), who was neither in need of rescue nor anxious to be rescued. He reports, too, how Stanley “found” David Livingstone near Lake Tanganyika and how Stanley overcame intense British skepticism that Livingstone and Stanley had even met, much less that their meeting was meaningful (Livingstone actually liked Stanley.)

Yet Heroes is not the place to go to learn anything new about Stanley, Gordon, Brazza, and Marchand. Brazza made “treaties” with Africans that rationalized France’s occupation of Equatorial Africa, and Stanley indeed helped to “open up” the Congo for King Leopold II of Belgium. But Berenson is seemingly interested in neither the methods and strategies of conquest nor the contest between Britain and France that was played out, or play-acted, by Marchand and Kitchener at Fashoda. He ignores totally the nature of the Stanley and Brazza explorations even though he is nominally writing about explorers (Berenson also sources the Nile origins hundreds of miles away from its true location [Heroes, 138]).

Berenson’s treatment of poor Gordon also seems totally out of place, unfair to both Gordon and to the memory of the Mahdi. The latter really was charismatic, though he receives hardly any mention or appreciation. Instead, the focus is on the celebration of Gordon’s martyrdom—an artifact of media activity and not Gordon’s objective or his fault.

Curiously, Berenson bestows as much space to the 1931 exhibition in Paris over which Lyautey presided as he does to Lyautey’s governance of Morocco. That chapter, and the rest of the book, is sufficiently European-centered to make an Africanist cringe. In none of the chapters does Berenson evince much appreciation of the African dimension. Notwithstanding excellent existing studies of the massive African contributions to the achievements of white explorers (and thus to the ultimate fame of men
like Brazza and Stanley), Berenson remains silent. His book is driven almost relentlessly by how fame is created and celebrity embellished. That is the stunning contribution of *Heroes*. But no one should look to it for advances in the study of leadership or charisma.

It might make good sense historiographically to narrow the employment of a construct like *charisma*, to confine it to studies of political or organizational leadership. Even in those realms, however, analytical, political, contextual, and emotional intelligence are much more salient characteristics of leadership than is charisma. We learn too little about leadership by labeling one or another leader charismatic. Even Mohandas K. Gandhi, clearly charismatic in India (if not in Africa), succeeded as a nationalist leader more because of his discipline and his strategic understanding of the weaknesses of the British Raj and the strengths of his own compatriots than because of any edge that charisma gave him. The great Salt Satyagraha brilliantly mobilized followers and enhanced Gandhi’s charismatic appeal, but his control of the endeavor and his rejection of violence mattered more than his authority or his aura. Likewise, Nelson Mandela exited prison with legitimacy and an impending charismatic appeal. But rather than a charismatic appeal alone being responsible for a successful presidency, it was his inclusive, uplifting, tactics—his donning of the magical green Springbok jersey at a decisive rugby match and his willingness to take tea with the widow of the architect of apartheid—that enabled him peacefully to lead Africans and Afrikaners into the promised land of freedom.

Accomplished leaders, moreover, need not be charismatic. Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore and Sir Seretse Khama in Botswana (the African mainland’s only continuously democratic and prosperous country) were hardly charismatic in the popular sense. But they were profoundly transformational leaders and consummate nation-builders, exemplifying effective and responsible stewardship. The term *charisma* might henceforth be reserved for those unusually inspirational leaders who motivate people in an intense but rarely sustainable manner. Charisma always transcends either fame or the quality of being a celebrity.