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Introduction

On September 23 and 24, 1885, Patrick Sarsfield Gilmore began a series of concerts at the St. Louis Exposition's new music hall. Cutting a smart figure in his dress uniform, the most famous bandleader in America bowed to the hall packed with 4,300 wildly applauding audience members, plus an extra thousand crowding outside the doors. Raising his baton, Gilmore led his 22nd New York Regimental Band in virtuosic performances that amazed the assembled audiences. "Every note melted like moonlight," gushed the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*. Bursting with pride, the paper congratulated Exposition organizers for bringing Gilmore to St. Louis. "Another triumph was scored for the management," the *Globe-Democrat* concluded, "and another proof given to the world that when St. Louis people undertake to do anything it is done with judgment, energy and liberality."[1]

As impressed as they were with the fine music and the large audience, the *St. Louis Republican* and *Globe-Democrat* reporters seemed especially taken with the relationship between Gilmore and the members of his band. "The master seems to, and actually does command music from the various instruments, as much as if he directly played upon them himself," marveled the *Republican* writer. "His men, all artists of high rank, have been asked to give expression to his wish, to become, severally,

[1] "Exposition," *St. Louis Republican*, September 25, 1885, 5; Rusty Hammer, *P. S. Gilmore: The Authorized Biography of America's First Superstar* (Gainesville, FL: Rusty Hammer, 2006), 242; "Magnetic Music," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, September 24, 1885, 8; *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, September 24, 1885, 6; "Gilmore's Glory," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, September 22, 1885, 8.

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the parts of one grand organ whose stops and frets he, and he alone, comprehends. It is in this way that his concentrated degree of skill and musical genius is focused and made to tell upon the popular emotions."[2] The *Globe-Democrat* reporter was similarly awed by the intimate connection between Gilmore's gestures and the music his band produced. "The music seems in him rather than around him," the paper wrote; "he is the instrument and the player." The editor of the *Globe-Democrat* summed up the effect in a headline: Gilmore and his band were creating "MAGNETIC MUSIC."[3]

It was not surprising that Gilmore's magnetic power over his band fascinated the St. Louis reporters. The relationship between Gilmore and his musicians represented in microcosm what was happening all across the United States – in revival tents and stump speeches, at lecture halls and whistle-stops. Beginning in the 1870s, American leaders deployed new techniques, particularly a unique brand of emotional public speaking, designed to attract large numbers of followers to their religious, political, and activist causes. Just as Gilmore conjured lyrical music from the restless tip of his baton, these leaders outlined visions of a better America and dramatized those visions through their onstage oratorical performances. The social and economic upheavals of the late nineteenth-century United States had left many Americans searching for meaning and purpose in their lives. Millions eagerly joined social movements led by dynamic orators. In the same way that the members of the 22nd Regimental Band willingly took their cues from Gilmore, these followers responded to leaders' visions and devoted themselves to a variety of religious, social, and political causes. Thanks to the development of transcontinental railway networks and the ability of leaders to spread their message in person to all corners of the United States, the resulting social movements were national in scope and ambition. Together, each group of followers formed a "grand organ," a powerful social instrument upon whose "stops and frets" its leader played. When such a movement was thoroughly motivated and effectively organized, the result was a harmonious ensemble whose members believed they could exert significant influence on society.

Americans who followed leaders in this way drew on a distinctly Protestant religious vocabulary to describe the phenomenon.

[2] "Exposition," *St. Louis Republican*, September 25, 1885, 5; Hammer, *P.S. Gilmore*, 242.
[3] "Magnetic Music," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, September 24, 1885, 8.

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In letters, they referred to their chosen guides as Messiahs and compared them sometimes to George Washington or Abraham Lincoln, but more often to Moses or Jesus Christ. "I believe you the second Moses," Alphonse J. Bryan wrote to 1896 presidential nominee William Jennings Bryan (no relation) in a typical missive, "not of Egypt but of America, who will lead back the poor blind oppressed laborer ... to the road of Salvation."[4] Followers used similarly effusive language to describe their own connections with such figures. They were "united" with the leader, transfixed by "magic" and "electricity," or moved by words "echoing in their hearts." Followers themselves had undergone transformations at the leader's hands; they were "different" or "new men," "changed" and "shook up," with "new" or "awakened hearts" filled with "joy and love" – in short, new apostles ready to serve a noble cause. This religious language of followership appeared with remarkable consistency through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and into the interwar years. Indeed, it was the defining feature of this type of leader–follower relationship – the necessary characteristic that separated these uniquely emotional connections from other more transactional movement relationships. As leadership and organizational practices shifted with cultural currents, the consistent rhetoric of follower experience made it clear that the underlying phenomenon remained the same.

Despite the persistence of this emotional type of leader–follower relationship, Americans had difficulty settling on a single name for leaders' ability to attract followers in this way. One leading contender was the term the *Globe-Democrat* had applied to Patrick Gilmore and his band: "personal magnetism." Leaders who exhibited this quality were called "magnetic men," and, less frequently, their followers were said to be "magnetized." But writers did not use "magnetism" to describe the relationship between leaders and followers or the social movements constructed out of that relationship. Furthermore, the term fell out of favor well before the qualities it described began to lose prominence in American culture – and some "magnetic" leaders specifically denied that they were magnetic at all. Accordingly, commentators soon developed other names for this type of leader. "Spellbinder" was one, used to describe the political stump orators who dominated national

[4] Alphonse J. Bryan to William Jennings Bryan, October 31, 1896, box 5, William Jennings Bryan Papers, Library of Congress.

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campaigns beginning in the 1880s.[5] Others described such leaders as possessing a great deal of "personality," though that term, too, had other meanings. In the end, Americans were unable to find a name broad and comprehensive enough to reflect all the elements of this leader–follower relationship, just as they could not reach consensus on its effects or its value.

For this reason, it may be preferable to use the anachronistic term "charisma" to describe the phenomenon in its totality. The ancient Greeks first used "charisma" to denote a special ability given by the gods; St. Paul used the word in a similar way but cited Yahweh as the ultimate source of the ability.[6] The theologian Rudolf Sohm revived the term and introduced it into modern scholarship in an 1888 volume on church history.[7] It was the German sociologist Max Weber, though, in the late 1910s and especially in his posthumously published *Economy and Society* (1922), who decoupled charisma from religion and gave it its modern meaning.[8] Weber, born in 1864, was a contemporary of those Americans who experienced the phenomenon of personal magnetism firsthand. Like Americans of the period, Weber spent much of his life responding to the socioeconomic upheavals occasioned by industrial capitalism. In particular, Weber viewed with alarm the growing bureaucratic reorganization of society; memorably, he charged that this "rationalization" had stripped humanity of its individuality and locked it in an "iron cage."[9] Also like his American contemporaries, Weber lived in a society controlled by leaders who wielded immense power over popular ideas and culture – though many of these German figures, such as Kaiser Wilhelm II and Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, were monarchical or dictatorial rather than democratic.

[5] J. Adam Bede, "Spellbinders: The Men Who are Talking from Maine to California," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, August 1904, 388–390; William Bayard Hale, " 'Friends and Fellow-Citizens': Our Political Orators of All Parties, and the Ways They Use to Win Us," *The World's Work*, April 1912, 673–674; Curtis Guild, Jr., "The Spellbinder," *Scribner's*, November 1912, 561–562; William Dudley Foulke, "The Spellbinders," *The Forum*, February 1901, 658–659.

[6] John Potts, *A History of Charisma* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 5; I Corinthians 7:7.

[7] Potts, *A History of Charisma*, 118; Rudolf Sohm, *Outlines of Church History*, tr. May Sinclair (orig. pub. 1895; London: Macmillan, 1931), 66.

[8] Joshua Derman, *Max Weber in Politics and Social Thought: From Charisma to Canonization* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 176.

[9] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, tr. Talcott Parsons (orig. pub. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930; Los Angeles, CA: Roxbury Publishing Co., 1996), 181.

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Writing in the 1910s, Weber argued that charisma was the only social force capable of challenging the inexorable advance of industrialized, bureaucratized society.[10] He defined the term as "a certain quality of an individualized personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities ... on the basis of [which] the individual concerned is treated as a 'leader.' "[11] Charisma could be either innate or acquired, Weber noted, and it could inhere in a person, an office, or an institution; the social movements it created were "charismatic communities."[12] Though Weber identified a "religious aura" surrounding charisma, charismatic techniques were present in politics, too. A "charisma of rhetoric" featured prominently in "modern democratic electioneering with its 'stump speeches' "; its effect was "purely emotional," designed "to convince [the masses] of the leader's charismatic qualification." At times, this charisma could overwhelm the political party structure it inhabited. Weber specifically identified American ex-president Theodore Roosevelt's 1912 presidential campaign as evidence that "the bureaucratization of the parties and of electioneering may at its very height suddenly be forced into the service of charismatic hero worship."[13]

For Weber, charisma was starkly opposed to bureaucracy. "In radical contrast to bureaucratic organization," Weber wrote, "charisma knows no formal and regulated appointment or dismissal ... Charisma is self-determined and sets its own limits. Its bearer seizes the task for which he is destined and demands that others obey and follow him by virtue of his mission." Charisma's transience and instability meant that followers could easily dethrone leaders they no longer deemed charismatic; the leader was only "master" of his followers "as long as he 'proves' himself."[14] Nevertheless, Weber felt, in the right circumstances charisma was a powerful agent of social upheaval that could "result in a radical alteration of the central attitudes and directions of action with a completely new orientation of all attitudes toward the different

[10] Charles Camic, Philip S. Gorski, and David M. Trubek, "Introduction," in Camic, Gorski, and Trubek, eds., *Max Weber's Economy and Society: A Critical Companion* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 2.
[11] Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, Vol. 1, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, tr. Ephraim Fischoff et al. (orig. pub. New York: Bedminster Press, 1968; Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978), 241.
[12] *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, 243, 400; Vol. 2, 1140. [13] *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, 1122, 1129–1130, 1132.
[14] *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, 1112–1113.

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problems of the 'world.' "[15] Because charismatic followers obeyed the caprices of a leader rather than a predictable hierarchy of regulations, they could cut through the orderly process of rationalized governance and create immediate, transformative change in their societies. "Charisma," Weber declared, "is indeed the specifically creative revolutionary force of history."[16]

Weber failed to grasp that charisma was more a historically bounded phenomenon than a world-historical force, and it is debatable whether charisma truly possessed the "revolutionary" power he ascribed to it. Nevertheless, Weber was one of the few commentators to identify charisma's most significant social feature: its ability to empower followers. As the St. Louis reporters demonstrated, Americans tended to view the charismatic relationship as one between player and instrument or between an all-powerful conductor and a passive "grand organ." Weber knew better, though. Followers' emotional support for their leaders, he realized, constituted the crucial element in charismatic movements' success. When followers withdrew that support, their movements often faltered or even disbanded. "Pure charisma," Weber explained, "does not recognize any legitimacy other than one which flows from personal strength proven time and again. The charismatic hero derives his authority ... solely by proving his powers in practice." When a leader appeared to lose his charisma – or worse, when he failed in "*bringing well-being* to his faithful followers ... then his mission comes to an end, and hope expects and searches for a new bearer." Weber's insight about the balance of power between charismatic leaders and followers led him to a significant conclusion: "The genuinely charismatic ruler ... is responsible to the ruled."[17]

Weber's definition of charisma is useful, but not in itself sufficient to explain what Americans experienced between 1870 and 1940. Rather, charisma in the American context represents the aggregate of not one but three overlapping historical phenomena. First, charisma was a uniquely emotional style of public speaking – a set of oratorical and gestural techniques developed by American elocutionists and taught to several generations of American public speakers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many, though not all, of the public figures described as magnetic during this period displayed at least some elements of this speaking style, although most of them were unaware of the role their oratorical training played in their popular reception. Second, charisma

[15] *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, 245. [16] *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, 1117. [17] *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, 1114; italics in original.

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was a specific type of relationship between a leader and his or her followers. Although this type of connection had some antecedents in American history, it was intense, emotional, spiritual, transformative, and enduring in ways that most earlier leader–follower relationships were not. Charismatic relationships often, but not always, began with magnetic oratory and made use of a related set of performance practices and organizational techniques developed by speakers and managers. The strength and emotional heft of these charismatic connections made them ideal components of broader social, religious, and political movements. Finally, charisma contributed to a turn-of-the-century discourse about American democracy. Advocates of charisma held a collection of related ideas concerning the role of emotion in the leader–follower relationship and the power of followers within social movements. Many defended the charismatic relationship as a valuable and socially redeeming method of social organization; some also saw a democratic and populist component in the leaders' reliance on emotional support from followers. Overall, they advanced an idea that became charisma's most lasting legacy: that leaders owed something of themselves to their followers and that emotional availability, rather than emotional remoteness, was a prerequisite for democratic leadership.

These three interrelated historical developments – charisma as speaking style, charisma as leader–follower relationship, and charisma as democratic discourse – challenge traditional assumptions about how Americans of the period participated in their society. Though contemporary critics charged charismatic followers with hysteria and charismatic leaders claimed the power to manipulate the public, followers were in fact volitional agents who helped to shape and control the movements they joined. As in Gilmore's band, there was no "magnetic music" without musicians to perform it; the players controlled the success or failure of the ensemble by their willingness to commit themselves to the charismatic enterprise and to take direction from its conductor. Followers' ability to influence charismatic movements by increasing or withdrawing their emotional investment afforded them a type of agency unavailable to Americans through other types of social organization. To dismiss charismatic followership as inchoate, reactive, or self-defeating behavior is to misunderstand the charismatic project. Followers believed they were participating in a type of social engagement every bit as effective as traditional partisan politics or voluntary associations. Ultimately, charismatic followership served democratic goals; it was a purposeful and constructive effort to reshape society in positive and dynamic ways.

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Leaders and activists coveted the power inherent in a charismatic following; their activities, too, challenge popular narratives of political, social, and religious conflict in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Behavior often interpreted as showboating or demagoguery was actually a calculated effort by leaders to harness the power of charisma for the benefit of their personal or policy platforms. Figures as diverse as ministers Henry Ward Beecher, Billy Sunday, and Aimee Semple McPherson; politicians James G. Blaine, William Jennings Bryan, and Theodore Roosevelt; and activists "Big Bill" Haywood, Frances Willard, and Marcus Garvey made charismatic techniques a centerpiece of their self-presentation in an attempt to win followers and to promote their respective causes. They understood the stakes as Weber did: charisma, they felt, possessed transformative power and could unleash revolutionary change of a sort not possible through other types of social movements. Accordingly, many of the period's key battles had a charismatic subtext; numerous sacred and secular conflicts doubled as clashes over who would harness the power of charisma and to what end.

Although the historical record cannot show how effective charismatic techniques were in the tabernacle, the meeting room, or the polling place, charismatic movements often failed to achieve their stated goals. No president won election through a charismatic campaign between 1870 and 1940, though several candidates tried; several major charismatic social movements disintegrated spectacularly. In large part, this tendency toward failure was a matter of selection bias. Because it relied so much on the emotional responses of followers, the charismatic relationship was inherently unstable and destabilizing. Members of the political, corporate, or religious establishment, and those who could achieve success through traditional organizational techniques, had little incentive to try out the new methods or to place themselves so completely at the mercy of their followers. Accordingly, with some exceptions, charismatic leadership was the province of underdogs, outsiders, long shots, and others who could not reasonably have been expected to succeed in the first place. Their many failures do not necessarily prove that charismatic movements had little effect on society, but they do indicate that charismatic techniques were not the panacea some Americans hoped they could be – that the charismatic relationship could not by itself win an election or change society. Nevertheless, many leaders and followers were convinced that it could do these things; any analysis of charisma must take such views seriously, for the widespread belief in charisma's transformative power was itself the cause of historical change.

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Finally, the role of the charismatic relationship in turn-of-the-century America underscores the importance of individual and collective emotion in shaping historical trends. The emotions evoked by charismatic leaders were not only an *effect* of cultural influences but also the *cause* of broad cultural shifts. While the themes and patterns present in American culture did inform emotional responses to charismatic figures, the relationship was a reciprocal one – Americans' emotional experience itself influenced society and culture in a variety of ways. Many followers' emotions translated directly into social activism, while many leaders subtly altered their self-presentation to attract emotional support. More important, simply by experiencing strong emotional attachments to charismatic figures and movements, Americans found they could reshape the connection between their leaders and themselves. By gravitating toward more emotionally available leaders, ordinary people altered the prevailing expectations about American leadership and forced politicians, activists, and evangelists to appeal to the new popular tastes. Charismatic movements, then, illustrate the power of emotions to do work in the world; simply by experiencing charisma, Americans transformed their culture.

* * *

Charisma emerged as an object of American fascination with the "magnetism craze" of the late nineteenth century. As Chapter 1 explains, the term "personal magnetism," borrowed from eighteenth-century hypnotist Franz Mesmer, became ubiquitous in American culture as a way of describing the power of one individual to influence another. Newspapers investigated the phenomenon, entrepreneurs advertised instruction manuals on it, and one enterprising huckster even founded a commune based on magnetic persuasion. After the Civil War, a variety of upheavals in American society – including the rise of industrial capitalism, a nationwide religious awakening, a cultural shift away from individualism, and the growth of a transcontinental railroad network – contributed to the growing national appetite for personal magnetism. The liberal minister Henry Ward Beecher, almost certainly the most accomplished charismatic orator of the nineteenth century, and the politician and "Magnetic Man" James G. Blaine were the first prominent charismatic leaders on the national scene. Their careers highlight both the promising and the troubling aspects of the charismatic relationship: both developed nationwide followings, yet both were accused, with some justification, of either sexual or fiscal improprieties stemming at least in part from their ability to influence others.

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The term "personal magnetism" became increasingly anachronistic by the turn of the century, but the charismatic movements it described continued to grow in number and size. By 1896, when William Jennings Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech landed him the Democratic presidential nomination and won him legions of followers, charismatic leadership had arrived as a major force in American culture. Chapter 2 investigates the origins of the charismatic speaking style and of charismatic organization more broadly. In the 1820s, eccentric researcher James Rush had invented a unique style of elocution based on both meticulous research and his own personal tastes. Coupled with an English gestural system and repackaged in textbook form, Rush's work became ubiquitous in higher education and formed the basis of the charismatic speaking style. Evangelist Charles Grandison Finney, an equally important forerunner of charismatic movements, made mainstream the idea that persuading audiences through emotional public speaking could be beneficial to American society. Influenced by a tradition of oratorical prowess and by Thomas Carlyle's writings extoling the virtues of heroism, a number of late nineteenth-century Americans adopted Finney's views and aspired to charismatic leadership. As charismatic movements began to proliferate, they developed their own set of performance practices and technologies: lecture circuits to facilitate speaking tours, new performance venues to maximize the reach of the speaker's voice, musical programs to prepare audiences, handshake events to enable direct interaction between followers and leaders, and lecture managers to oversee and implement the whole enterprise. Despite the ubiquity of charismatic movements by the early 1900s, women and African Americans often struggled to deploy charismatic techniques in an America that was hostile to female charismatic power and that marginalized or co-opted black charismatic oratory. Notwithstanding these obstacles, many female and African American leaders managed to circumvent opposition by challenging traditional views on the gendered and racial performance of oratory.

Charismatic movements depended for their success on the emotional investment of followers. Chapter 3 draws on hundreds of letters, oral histories, and archival and published testimonials to investigate the experience of charismatic followership. The decision to follow a charismatic leader such as Bryan, evangelist Billy Sunday, or Socialist politician Eugene Debs was not a self-defeating distraction from political commitments, as some scholars have argued; nor, as some contemporaries charged, were charismatic followers mere hysterical dupes. Rather,

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