The Pharisaic Style in Weber's Sociology of Charisma

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ABSTRACT: *This paper theorizes the importance of the "Pharisaic style" to Weber's descriptions of charismatic interaction. By drawing on insights from the performative turn in social theory, along with recent work that has described a series of "charismatic counter-roles," the paper develops an interactional description of "Pharisees": elite figures from the rational-legal and traditional spheres who, through expressions of shock, exasperation, and moral outrage, help to define societal expectations about the (seeming) impossibility of the leader's success. Equipped with imposibilist characterizations from these elite figures, even minor victories by the aspiring charismatic leader come to be regarded as miraculous. By performing Pharisaic incredulousness along both sceptical and moralistic modalities, these actors thereby create what is in essence the social-interactional negative-image of the charismatic miracle. I find that such onlookers continue to play a critical role in buoying and propelling the Trump phenomenon. The "Pharisaic style" is a concept readily understandable within the sociology of religion, but less so within political sociology. By theorizing the Pharisaic style, we can thus simultaneously better understand the meaning-oriented and sacred dimensions of charisma that are evident in Weber's thought, while also drawing closer to promise Weber saw in the universal applicability of the ideal type.*

A little more than a century ago, Weber wrested the term 'charisma' from arcane theological discussion and placed it at the center of his enormously influential triadic theory of legitimate domination. Since that time, two research strategies have emerged and become somewhat shopworn in the sociology of charisma. The first—often referred to as the classic 'leader-centric' approach—is represented by analyses of leaders who, as a consequence of character or performative skill, manage to effect miraculous or otherwise extraordinary "proofs" of status to followers (Weber 1922a:242-244, 266, 441; also Abel 1937; Gerth 1940; Gerth and Mills 1946:53; Schiffer 1973; Willner 1984]). Taking lead from Weber's descriptions of charisma as something that inheres within "a certain quality of individual personality" (1922a:241), and his emphasis on the "short-lived mass emotions" that such personalities inspire (1946c:262), these accounts seek to analyse the psychodynamic resonances that build up between individuals and "mass society." The result, in such theorizations, is an astonishing social asymmetry, with elephantine leader-personages

reshaping entire societies according to personal design (Cohen 1972; Eatwell 2006; Kohut 1976; Lepsius 2006; Lindholm 1990; Michels 1927; Oakes 1997; Post 1986; Schiffer 1973; Schweitzer 1984; Willner 1984).

Finding this strategy insufficiently sociological and all too reminiscent of Carlylian hero-worship, a second generation of researchers has turned to interactionism (Andreas 2007; Chan 2013; Finlay 2002; Joosse 2017; Junker 2014; Wallis 1982; Wasielewski 1985; Wilson 1975) and cultural pragmatics (Alexander 2011; Blasi 1991; Joosse 2012; 2018a; Mast 2016; Reed 2013; Smith 2000) as a means of focalizing the "follower side"—devotees and encomiastic publics who actively construct and mediate proofs of charismatic status. These "transactionalist" analyses explore the various ways that devotional agents, interacting creatively within a forest of cultural symbols, contribute to the social production of extraordinary personalistic agency. By coming to the leader, followers lend gravity to the leader's presence; by supplicating themselves, devotees enact status differentials that constitute the leader's exaltation; by making determined efforts to transform their lives in response to the leader's direction, disciples embody and give witness to the leader's transformative power (see Joosse 2018a:928). It is thus by way of a cooperative (if perhaps unwitting) leader-follower compact that charismatic leaders can emerge and assert themselves upon society.

Both of these approaches—one leader-centric, the other follower-agentic—thus direct their gaze toward the inward-intimacy of the "charismatic bond."[1] This focus is valuable, and it offers a certain pristinity to those seeking access to what Weber often called "pure" charisma (1922a:216, 219, 244, 263, 1113-1114). But there are also drawbacks. For one, the

[1] Weber never used this term, which first appeared primarily among psychiatrists and psychologists in the 1950s and 60s (eg. Lipman and Pizzurro 1956). As this article argues, this notion of an almost ionic "bond" obscures the more complex "extra-molecular" forces implicated in charismatic eruption.

conceptual encapsulation of charisma within leader-follower relationships has an exoticizing, trivializing effect, encouraging researchers to pursue examples within religious cults, radical political sects, and febrile fan culture. Such phenomena comprise and inordinate share of the empirical backing for charisma theory (e.g., Barker 1993; Chan 2013; Junker 2014; Wilson 1975; Wignall 2016). The association of charisma with societal marginalia thus threatens our ability to draw closer to the promise that Weber (1922a) saw in its world-historical significance, while also annulling the programmatic aspirations of those like Eisenstadt (1968), Shils (1965), and Geertz (1977), who sought to conceive of charisma as a driver behind more diffuse and gradual processes of sociocultural evolution and institution-building (Abrutyn 2009; Abrutyn and Van Ness 2015).

Another aspect of this limitation is that an exclusive focus on mutual adoration among leaders and followers is liable to foster a condition of incuriousness toward a second set relations; namely, those that take place *between* the "charismatic community" (*Gemeinde* [Weber 1922a:241-245; 1119]) and wider society itself. This second-order cultural footprint was clearly important to Weber, who attributed startling scope to charisma's disruptive capacity within social structure. Charisma is credited, for example, with being "*the* great revolutionary force" in traditionalist periods (Weber 1922a:245, emphasis in the original, also 241, 439, 1115–117) and he consistently entertained the possibility that new prophets might arise to provide stirring challenges, even within the stultifying morass of modern bureaucracy (Weber 1905[1920]:182; also 1922a:241-254, 1111-1157; Mommsen 1959[1984]). At more micro levels, Weber noted that charismatic enthusiasm is always pitched in a manner that is "sharply opposed" to traditional and bureaucratic social structures (1968:51, also 29, 39; 1922a:212–301), and that charismatic leaders always exist in *contradistinction* those who head up such structures (1922a:244).

The principle contention in this paper, then, is that existing approaches to the study of charisma, which focus on leader-adoration and follower-accretion, are incapable of theoretically contending with the performative vectors through which charisma spills *outward*—the consumptive leading edge through which charisma radiates through society, destabilizing traditional and rational-legal social orders. Following upon literature that has already described an expansive range of institutional entrepreneurs and charismatic "counter-roles" (Abrutyn and Van Ness 2015; Joosse 2017; 2018a; McCaffree and Abrutyn 2020) and combining this with recent work on eventful rupture (Sewell, 2005; Tavory and Fine 2020; Wagner-Pacifici, 2010; Wagner-Pacifici and Tavory 2017), this paper offers a new theory of charismatic expansion. It does this by focalizing charisma's aggressive exterior posture, looking beyond the adoring leader/follower compact and toward the performative bearing of a third, less agreeable category of actor: pharisaic non-believers that I introduce in this paper, and first condensate below, as *incredulous onlookers*.

Incredulous onlookers are institutional animals—creatures of regulation and custom (the rational-legal and traditional *Herrschaft*) who have a stake in institutional continuity. They can be thought of as a "kind of person" who comes into being at particular historical junctures (Hacking 1986; 2002) but also with reference to specific cultural-dramaturgical logics (Klapp 1948; 1962; 1964[2009]). As purveyors of institutional permanence, incredulous onlookers read the incipient charismatic challenger as a sort of *enfant terrible*—a plucky upstart who "doesn't know their station." Charismatic indifference to institutional code roils these onlookers into expressions of shock, exasperation, and moral outrage (collectively, "incredulousness"), and while such expressions are meant to bolster institutional strength and instigate monopolistic closure within the halls of power, they can actually work to augment charismatic potency and proliferate charismatic rupture. This they do in two ways.

First, through expressions of incredulity, such onlookers work to define societal expectations about the seeming impossibility (read: "miraculousness") of the leader's conduct. By enshrouding incipient leaders with impossibilist characterizations, incredulous onlookers lend a sense of wonder to their early successes, even if such successes are initially only relatively minor and otherwise unimpressive. The performative contributions of incredulous onlookers are thus social-interactional "negatives" of the charismatic miracle—and as negatives, they stand ready for development by others into a photorealistic visage of miraculous "'proof' before their eyes" (Weber 1922a:266).

Second, by virtue of their functionary role as institutional-organizational mouthpieces—a location decidedly outside of what Weber (1922a:241-245; 1119) called the "charismatic community" (*Gemeinde*)—incredulous onlookers widen the aperture for extraordinary expression within the institutional spheres they represent, bringing the full communicative/interlocutory capacity of such institutions within reach of the incipient charismatic leader. In so doing, incredulous onlookers offer exposure to a much wider audience than would otherwise be available from within the closed interactional sphere delineated by leader-follower relationships.

Thus, by two different means—as a function of affect and position—we can say that incredulous onlookers unwittingly generate and promulgate charismatic culture.

Highlighting the performative bearing of incredulous onlookers helps to unlock the sociological utility of charisma by providing tools for navigating through various interpretive controversies that have beset its reception since Weber introduced it a century ago. In the next sections, I outline two such controversies—what I call the "miracle" and "expansion" problems—while describing, in each case, how the concept of incredulous onlooking helps to ameliorate them. In short, incredulous onlookers serve as a social-performative component

that, once in place, colligates a discernible mechanism that renders miracle-performance and charismatic expansion legible as social processes. After making the conceptual contribution, I use interview and observational data to demonstrate the critical role incredulous onlookers played in buoying and propelling Trump during his ascendancy within American politics.

The Miracle Problem

Miraculous or otherwise extraordinary "proofs" (Weber 1922a:242-244, 266, 441) have long been acknowledged, albeit with frequent discomfort, to have held central importance in Weber's etiological account of charismatic power. This discourse on miracles owes its origin primarily to the fact that "charisma" is a loanword from Christian theology; the Pauline epistles specifically.[2] It is in the first letter to the Corinthian church that charisma (χάρισμα, literally "gift of grace" or "divine favour") received its most detailed elaboration, in terms of type (ranging from glossolalia, to healings, to powers of prophecy [1 Cor. 12:4-11, see also Rom. 12:1-8]) and function (as a spiritual force that binds the community of believers into one "body of Christ" [1 Cor. 12:12-28; see also Rom. 2:14-16, 3:29-30, 10:11-13, 15:8-12; Eph. 2:11-22, 3:6; 1 Cor. 1:10, 22-24; Gal. 2:2-10]). Making a more immediate impression on Weber, however, was the term's use by his acquaintance, the Lutheren jurist and social critic Rudolph Sohm (1895[1909]), whose *Kirchenrecht* (*Outlines of Church History*) essentially tells the story of "routinization": a decline in charismatic vigor from the original first-century "pneumatocracy" led by the Apostolic fathers, to the "lesser faith" of the bureaucratized, traditionalized, and unwieldy Roman Catholic Church (Smith 1998). In general, Weber was impressed with Sohm's formulation of charisma, crediting him with "work[ing] out the sociological character of this kind of domination" (1922a:1112; also 216).

[2] The term appears in the Bible seventeen times, sixteen of which are in Paul's letters.

Ever the comparativist, however, he was dissatisfied with the relatively narrow range of application in Sohm's work:

> [S]ince [Sohm] developed this category [charismatic authority] with regard to one historically important case—the rise of ecclesiastic authority of the early Christian church—, his treatment was bound to be one-sided from the viewpoint of historical diversity (1922a:1112).

Weber thus took what was on hand—a Christian concept, endemic to a particular historical case—and pursued a much more ambitious project that cross-referenced "charisma" against his own encyclopaedic knowledge of social history, expanding its application to non-Christian and even non-religious cases of extraordinary personalistic leadership.

This expansion proceeded in two directions. Working backward, Weber emphasized the *magical* nature of charisma as something that exists in ever-greater concentrations among what he referred to as more "primitive" social formations. This emphasis is most evident in the articles he produced for the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, which comprised his "world religions" studies, conducted from 1915 to 1919 (1946b:139; 1915[1951]:29-32; 1916[1958]:58, 198, 335-336 [especially his introduction to that work, published later as *The Social Psychology of the World Religions* (1946a); for more on charisma and magic, see 1922a:142, 241-244, 248-249, 1111-1112, 1134, 1142-1143]). In these works, charisma is endemic to the domain of:

> ecstatic states which are viewed, in accordance with primitive experience, as the preconditions for producing certain effects in meteorology, healing, divination, and telepathy. It is primarily, though not exlusively, these extraordinary powers that have been designated by such special terms as 'mana,' 'orenda,' and the Iranian 'maga' (the term from which our word 'magic' is derived). We shall henceforth employ the term 'charisma' for such extraordinary powers (1922c:400).

Not one to indulge in exotic fascination, Weber immediately took such curiosities and trained his focus on elements of familiarity: "even at [this] earliest stage of religious evolution there are already present *in nuce* all forms of the doctrine of religious grace [*charisma*], from that of *gratia infusa* to the most rigorous tenet of salvation by good works" (1922c:400). In a

type of "elementary forms" argument, then, Weber stresses a developmental continuity that extends, from the magicality of these "primitive" manifestations of religious charisma, through to the later (and by implication, more elaborated) Christian example, from which he borrowed the term.

At the same time, Weber draws charisma's empirical applicability *forward*, beyond Christian antiquity and into the putatively secularized present. If charisma was "originally always a miracle" (1922a:242), it certainly did not remain this way for Weber, who applies the concept quite unceremoniously to a variety of political and culturally-prominent contemporaries across his *Beruf* lecture on politics and in *Economy and Society*. Named figures include Bavarian revolutionary Kurt Eisner (1867-1919 [who became "overwhelmed with his own demagogic success"]), mathematician Karl Weierstrass (1815-1897 [whose "'intuition' (functioned) in exactly the same sense as that of any artist, prophet—or demagogue"]), and journalist and financier Henry Villard (1835-1900 [an exemplar of "grandiose robber capitalism"]) (Weber 1922a:242, 1116, 1118). He also lists venal figures like the "ingenious pirate" (p. 1113), Joseph Smith (1805-1844 [who "may have been a very sophisticated swindler" (p.242, also 1112)]), and examples that to contemporary readers could only have indicated abnormal psychology (his frequently-mentioned "mad dogs," "berserks," and "epileptoids"). In spite of all this profanity, Weber sees these figures as being every bit as deserving for inclusion, as charismatic exemplars, alongside those who "according to conventional judgments" are "the 'greatest' heroes, prophets, and saviors" (p. 242).[3] Weber's intentions for the world-historical applicability of his ideal-type were therefore clear: "[i]n principle, these phenomena are universal" (1922a:1112).

[3] Elsewhere, Weber (1922a:241) writes of being "entirely indifferent" about how such figures "would be judged from any ethical, aesthetic, or other such point of view."

Weber's theoretical expansion thus comprises a move that extends in two opposing but complementary directions, both "magicalizing" and "demagicalizing" charisma (Barbalet 2018). The centrality Weber accords to 1st century Christianity—against which both "primitive" and modern forms are indexed and theorized—will seem quaint to 21st century readers. So too will the secular-theoretical commitments that undergird his views on the dwindling possibility for "magic" in modern times (cf. Berger 1996; Hadden 1987). But his most basic commitment—to an agnosticism with respect to the validity of the diverse social factors that condition the possibility for "magical," "miraculous," or otherwise "extraordinary" construal—represents a contribution that justifiably endures. His choice to demur from all metaphysical evaluation was the impetus for the clause in his oft-cited definition of charisma, which glosses between "supernatural, superhuman, *or at least specifically exceptional* powers or qualities" (Weber 1922a:241, emphasis added), and he is therefore best understood as being unlike his theological forbearers in that he was driven by a social-figurational, as opposed to a metaphysical, conception of charisma.

Unfortunately, all too often this point has been missed by the concept's inheritors in the social sciences. One cause for this seems to be the connotative stickiness of the religious terminology itself, which has led some readers to feel that they can detect a rare moment of romantic mysticism in Weber's otherwise hard-boiled delivery (see especially Mommsen 1959[1984]; Emmet 1958:233). As Smith (1998:35) noted in his survey of charisma research, "Weber is often treated as if he shared Sohm's faith. It seems that Sohm's language of grace—filtered through Weber's skeptical but elliptical paraphrase—has prompted the belief that Weber, too, saw charisma as a divine 'given'" (also Smith 2013:22). It would be beyond the limits of the format to list any more than the most influential examples of this view, among which we can include: Bourdieu's accusation that Weber had succumbed to "the naïve representation of charisma as a mysterious quality inherent in a person or as a gift of

nature" (1987:129); Downton's (1973:210), claim that Weber's charisma is "not derived from the follower's consent, nor from custom or law, but from a transcendental realm, which [he] describes only vaguely;" Bensman and Givant's (1975:584) criticism that Weber's charisma is "a free-floating attribute…. so far as we can see, a metaphysical entity" (p. 584)]); Ratnam's (1964:343) allegation that Weber's account of charismatic qualities is "mainly metaphysical;" and finally, the chastisement from his old friend Georg Lukács (1962 [1980]:631), who denounced Weber's "partly abstract, partly mystical and irrational pseudoconcept of 'charisma.'"

For these interpreters, charisma is not a product of the mundane social mechanisms through which people *come to believe* that they are being visited by 'miraculous' or otherwise extraordinary forms of personal power. Weber's charisma is *itself* miraculous in some way. Coming from social scientists, this interpretation is ironic, given how quickly more theologically-oriented interpreters recognized and objected to the impiety that lurked behind Weber's 'common treatment' of Christianity (Haley 1980:196; Friedrich 1961; Rieff 2007; Schütz 1975[2007]; also Smith 2013:25-32). But as we have seen, the allegation that Weber was uncharacteristically 'musical' when it came to charisma does not pass scrutiny for three reasons: First, because of his clearly suspicious attitude toward contemporary exemplars (Eisner, Smith, Weierstrass, Villard). Second, because of his views about the relative impossibility of "magic" in the modern world. And third (and most importantly), because of his clear and consistent choice to reduce "the miracle question" to a matter of cultural and/or social-interactional legitimation.

As we have seen, the interpretative tendency to reify charisma's metaphysical connotations—the 'miracle problem'—has been persistent across the history of sociological commentary on charisma (Joosse 2014; Smith 2013). Moreover, we can predict that, so long

as the term enjoys wide usage,[4] incandescing along a variety of religious, popular, and otherwise extra-sociological registers, it is unlikely that we will see an end to such tendencies. The concept will remain in its current state: defendable by those specialists who are motivated to expend the effort,[5] but seemingly uncongenial for use within the wider scholarly community that might otherwise benefit from its application.

Incredulous Onlooking and Charismatic Miracles

The remedy I propose—focalizing incredulous onlookers—side-lines the miracle question in a manner that doesn't indulge in Weber's penchant for modernist dismissal. Instead, it brings Weber forward, imbuing his classic articulation with social-theoretical sensibilities that he did not have at his disposal—chiefly, interactionism and elements of the performative turn in cultural sociology. Bourdieu (1987:121) hinted at such a possibility, writing that Weber's discussions already contain,

> a representation of the relations between religious agents that may be termed *interactionist* (in the sense in which we speak today of *symbolic interactionism*). If this is a view of things that has to be read 'between the lines,' this is because, so far as we can see, the intellectual tools Weber had at his disposal prevented him from forming a clear awareness of the principles he was applying (at least intermittently) in his research.

To take this idea seriously is to permit the shift proposed herein: rather than returning once again to a discussion of leaders who "maintain recognition through 'proving'" themselves with incredible or miraculous feats (Weber 1922a:246), we should engage in the type of sociological displacement long practiced within micro-sociology; namely, directing our gaze toward those interactants who provide the definition of the situations within which miraculous happenings may occur.

Focussing attention on onlookers to charismatic performances may seem counterintuitive—like watching pedestrians who react to the street magician rather than

[4] It, along with 'alienation,' is perhaps sociology's most successful vernacular contribution.
[5] Smith (2013) deserves recognition for producing the most exhaustive defense yet.

watching the trick itself. But as any magician knows well (provided they operate without illusions of their own), the miracle is in the wonder-struck eye of the beholder. It would be incorrect to reduce this to a phenomenological claim: i.e., that miracles exist primarily as experiences endemic to subjective interiority, and that eyes are "windows" that look upon this indwelling. In general, the magician's concerns are much more prosaic than this, involving a tradecraft that subsists at the level of dramaturgy, rather than phenomenology. For this reason, we can also say that the trick "exists in the eyes" in an affectual and socially-radial sense—the sense in which dilated pupils, bulging whites, and an astonished countenance also gleam *outward* to provide their own independent form of verification for the magic that is occurring. Bryan Wilson honed in on this point in 1975, writing that,

> [i]f a man runs naked down the street proclaiming that he alone can save others from impending doom, and if he immediately wins a following, then he is a charismatic leader…. If he does not win a following, he is simply a lunatic (1975:7).

The intention behind Wilson's thought experiment, of course, is not to illustrate the ultimate falsity of charisma, but instead to assert its sociological primacy. The divergent statuses Wilson considers (leader versus lunatic) thus do not refer to some latent psychic quality, but rather to eminently sociological processes of status-attribution. From such a perspective, charismatic miracle performance is subject to a mimetic process that has as much to do with "fascination with fascination" (Joosse 2017:348) as it does with the "trick" that putatively resides at the interactional charismatic core. Focussing on incredulous onlookers thus allows us to apprehend charismatic phenomena at the abstracted social-figurational level that Weber himself intended, but which he articulated in ways that were at times unconvincing to later readers, given his lack of access to the interactionist and pragmatist perspectives that would have suited his purposes.

Shifting our focus to onlooking also allows us to capture another feature of charisma that preoccupations with "inward intimacy" tend to miss: namely, the moral-indeterminacy

that is often evident in affectual responses to charismatic performance (Katz 1975). That is, while incredulous onlooking may imply wondrous, devotional admiration, it can also travel affectively through a population by way of less appreciative emotional signals relating to shock, bewilderment, and even fear. In either case, such performances are unified by a more basic performative criterion, which is to signal an encounter with what Rudolph Otto (1932[1958]) alternately called "aweful," "uncanny," or "numinous" experience.[6] By generating awe-filled expressions, incredulous onlookers can serve as active, if at times unwitting, accomplices to the modern miracle-worker.

The Expansion Problem

Weber's attempt to deliver sociological utility through "charisma" has tended to falter in professional sociology for another reason that is related to, yet distinct from, the aforementioned problem with miracles. According to several critics, Weber's concept lacks sociological legs as a result of its reduction of charisma to the micro/psychological realm.[7] In Weber's formulation, charisma germinates at the most intimate, interpersonal scales—amid an almost carnal devotion among leaders and followers. How can such intimacy not be inherently self-limiting during its expansion; subject to diminishing returns amid its propagation? How can it go on to have broader societal significance? Commentators have pointed to a variety of non-sequiturs—from personal gifts to group leadership (eg. Cavalli 1987:318), and from group leadership to wider sociohistorical impact (eg. Friedland 1964:20)—that together indicate a disciplinary suspicion, first expressed by Gerth and Mills

[6] Otto calls this general state '*mysterium tremendum.*' Old Latin may be useful for recovering non-evaluative nature of such phenomena. Another example is *miraculum*, which means "an object of wonder" but which contains verb forms that did not find its way into English:: *mirari* means "to wonder at," "marvel," and "to be astonished at." Such verbs would have been useful for the present project.

[7] Prominent examples come from Parsons (1963:lxxiii), who saw a "trait atomism" in Weber's formulation. McGuire (1983:6) faults the phrase "quality of an individual personality" in Weber's oft-cited definition, for sending "generations of sociologists off on a non-sociological tack" looking for "some oblique psychological factor such as 'special personality.'" Willner and Willner (1965:79) note that charisma research has been beset by "[t]he somewhat misleading search for the source of charisma in the personalities of…leaders."

(1946:53) in their introduction to *From Max Weber*, that "charisma" represents "a continuation of a 'philosophy of history' that, after Carlyle's *Heroes and Hero Worship*, influenced a great deal of nineteenth-century history writing."[8] This is the expansion problem.

A common response has been to "sociologize" Weber's charisma, theorizing it in rather Durkheimian terms as something characterized by proximity to "ultimate" sociocultural values (Bourdieu 1987; Carlton-Ford 1992; Eisenstadt 1968; Shils 1965; Tiryakian 1995). For these authors, charisma represents an ability to crystalize and embody cultural values that always already exist within a population, even if only as "inchoate sentiments" (Friedland 1964:23) or as "hidden transcripts" (Scott 1990). In these accounts, charisma is thus a sort of cultural-structural release valve that allows for the expression of previously inexpressible values. As Bourdieu and Passeron (1970[1977]:25) put it, "the religious or political prophet always preaches to the converted."

Predictably, this cultural-structuralism has elicited its share of criticism from those who take seriously the individualistic antinomianism that was an undeniable feature of Weber's original descriptions—where agentic charismatics challenge and even *overturn* existing cultural patterns rather than embodying them (Joosse and Willey 2020; Smith 2013; Wagner-Pacifici and Tavory 2017). Scholarship on new religious movements, for example, documents a pattern in which followers are consistently challenged, shocked, and exasperated by leaders who often pointedly attack existing repertoires for followership and defy cultural scripts pertaining to "what leaders do" (Bell 1998; Dawson 2002; Joosse 2012). Turner (2011:233) thus criticizes Bourdieu's (1987) attempt to theorize charisma as a form of

[8] *From Max Weber* was the volume that introduced much of English-speaking world to Weber's descriptions of "charisma." One can surmise that it has been particularly influential for this reason (Joosse 2014:274-276). Lukács (1962[1980]:631) accused Weber of "following the Rickertian methodology of history, which only recognizes individual phenomena."

religious or cultural capital, noting that doing so "rob[s] charisma of its transformative agency by, for example, making it look more like traditional authority, that is, a form of authority that is compatible with existing dispositions (customs, values, and mores)." Verter (2003:153) similarly argues that Bourdieu was incognizant of the agentic transformative power of charisma, writing that Bourdieu, "retains the term [charisma], but only in Weber's sense of 'the charisma of office'" (2003:153, nt.7). Finally, Smith (2013:58 n. 90) writes that Bourdieu's approach "plainly…negate[s] the rupture with 'a pre-existing signified' which is the crux of [Weber's] charismatic phenomenon."

These "two charismas" (Greenfeld 1985; see also Riesebrodt 1999)—one agentic but minimizingly personalistic, the other cultural-structural but inexpressive of personal agency—thus constitute accentuations which increasingly threaten detachment from one another at micro- and macro-level outposts within charisma research. Valuable though these approaches have been, they have set parameters for a debate that tends to foreclose the possibility of recognizing and theoretically contending with the midrange scale where charisma's expansive capacity is first expressed and felt—those moments where charisma first breaks out, beyond the passionate union between leader and led, and goes on to effect disruptive perturbations within the wider societal context.

Incredulous Onlooking and Charismatic Expansion

Incredulous onlookers hold promise as an important site for theorizing this mid-range because of a duality inherent in their position and performative bearing. Positionally, they are *like* members of the cult and *unlike* members of wider society in that they actually notice, interact with, and comment on the incipient leader and his or her community of followers. This simple act of cathexis, of giving attention, is a service of no small value during the early stages of charismatic emergence. In his article "Why Religious Movements Succeed or Fail," Rodney Stark (1996:133) offers valuable insight in this regard:

> This year, hundreds of new religious movements will appear on earth…. [W]hatever their origins, virtually every new group will have one thing in common: eventual failure. Although it is impossible to calculate the actual rate of success, probably no more than one religious movement out of 1,000 will attract more than 100,000 followers and last for as long as a century. Even most movements that achieve these modest results will become no more than a footnote in the history of religions.

Such harsh realities underscore Simmel's (1923[1984]:164) assertion that "the opposite of love is not-love—in other words indifference. If hate appears instead of indifference, this stems from completely new positive causes." For charismatic groups, then, simple *inattention*—not condemnation—poses the most immediate and fundamental threat to their world-transformative designs.

Conversely, the position of incredulous onlookers is *unlike* members of the charismatic cult, and *like* denizens of wider society, in terms of their moral estimation of the leader. Rather than effecting an elated, supplicatory devotion, incredulous onlookers 'cry foul,' representing the conflictual and allergic nature of the clash between the charismatic community's vision and society's established normative framework. Incredulous onlookers register such contradictions viscerally, even physiologically, as a message carried forward in flushed tones, clenched jaws, and in steam rising from the ears. As such, they embody the socio-structural location where charisma actually confronts the otherwise impersonal dictates of tradition and rational-bureaucratic principle. Thus, while the devotee and the incredulous onlooker are united by an interactional comportment that focalizes the leader for moral evaluation, they diverge with respect to what they return on the question of *moral value itself*—with the incredulous onlooker taking shape a type of 'anti-devotee.'

Tavory and Fine (2020) outline a difference between *disruption-of* relations and *disruption-for* them—the latter being a form of dramaturgical misalignment which "give[s] rise to new, deeper modes of intersubjectivity and social coordination." It is clear that institutional shock, as performatively conveyed through widely-recognized establishment figures, can become the basis for such deepening. James C. Scott (1990) draws on George

Elliot's play *Adam Bede* in a way that is useful for illustrating the performative dynamics involved here. In the play, Squire Donnithorne, an iron-fisted parish ruler, is confronted by an impassioned outburst from Mrs. Poyser, his poor tenant:

> When the encounter is immediately told and retold around the parish with glee, the emphasis is on 'what she said to the squire,' with the text *and its addressee* both being essential for the electricity of the moment. Putting the matter more generally, we may say fairly that if Mrs. Poyser becomes a charismatic heroine to the parish it is because she was the first person who publicly confronted power (Scott 1990:221 emphasis added).

New intensities of co-feeling can thus arise in the wake of plucky confrontations with institutional figures, creating an excitement that travels by way of a "messianic secret,"[9] proliferating through the regions of society that harbour grievances toward established power. As an interactional countermotion to devotional attitudes, the performances of incredulous onlookers serve like the reverse cycle of a two-stroke engine which, oscillating between commendation and condemnation, powers the leader's journey toward cultural impact and significance.

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In connection to both the miracle and expansion problems mentioned above, it is worthwhile to briefly return to the biblical narratives which served as a conceptual substructure for much thinking on charisma among Weber and his theological forbearers alike (eg. 1922a:440, 568, 631-634, 1114; also Adair-Toteff 2005; Collins 2014; Joosse 2014; Smith 1998; Swatos and Kivisto 1991). To be sure, the gospels depict Jesus impressing and winning followers directly, through the performance of various miracles or "signs." But close attention to the *mise-en-scène* reveals an additional, more circuitous pathway through which his actions gained their wondrous force. This second track ran through a distinct set of characters who always seemed to be mixed in with the crowds that pursued him, but whose

[9] This is a motif, found primarily in Mark, where Jesus reveals his messianic status to disciples, but commands them to keep the status secret because (as is expressed in Jn. 2:4) his "hour has not yet come."

disposition was anything but devotional: namely, Pharisees (rabbinical 'teachers of the law'), Sadducees (Herodian quislings), scribes (Mt 2:4; Lk 20:19), elders (Mt 21:23), and chief priests (Mk 11:18; Lk 20:1; Jn 7:45).

The impressions made on *these* characters pertained to moral infractions: the fact that Jesus performed signs on the Sabbath (Mt 12:2; Lk 6:6-11; Lk 14:1-6; Jn 9:13-17), or that his healings occurred alongside the audacious presumption to be able to forgive sins (Mk 2:5-12; Lk 7:48-49), or that his mission included fraternizing with 'sinners' (prostitutes, tax-collectors, Roman soldiers [Mt 9:11; Lk 7:36-50]). These critics objected to Jesus' disregard for established power most explicitly and directly: "By what authority are you doing these things?" (Mk 11:28); "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders?" (Mt 15:2). These figures fretted about his growing status: "If we let Him go on like this, everyone will believe in Him!" (Jn 11:48; also Mk 11:18; Jn 7:45-49; Jn 12:19). These moral pillars—like the high priest Caiaphas who tore his robes in anguish when Jesus blasphemed (Mt. 26:65)—gave their own dramatic testimony to the moral-cultural rupture that his charismatic mission represented. In three places, Weber references Jesus' famous anaphora "it is written…, but I say unto you…!" to indicate charisma's opposition to tradition in an abstracted sense (1922a:243, 987; 1946a:296). But within the interactional setting where Jesus actually uttered these words (*Sitz im Leben*), it is clear that this challenge to "the written" also constituted a real-world provocation against *those for whom textual authority provided legitimation*. Jesus' ministry became a flesh-and-blood conflict (with blood eventually drawn) as soon as he deigned to teach publicly "as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (Mt 7:28-29).[10]

[10] This challenge to "the written" (and those who write) is also evident in the notion that through Jesus "the Word became flesh" (Jn. 1:14). As an incarnation of God's word, Jesus undercuts—or "fulfils"—scribal authority (see Lk. 4:17-21).

Our distance from the moral landscape of 1st century Palestine often works to obscure this dynamic, but these incredulous onlookers were the most convincing vessel for conveying the pains associated with institutional fissure, lending Jesus' mission its extraordinary (and therewith, charismatic) socio-political valence. It would thus be a modernist anachronism (one that, as we have shown, Weber's theorization of charisma expressly sought to avoid) to read Jesus' charismatic affect as being solely related to those magical actions which traduce 'laws of nature' (Hume [1748]2000). Breakages of social laws can in equal measure constitute charismatic proof, and across the range of his actions—conventionally miraculous or otherwise—Jesus accrued charismatic status by doing what "cannot" be done.

The haughty protest of the moral paragon—"Well, *I never…!!*"—intends to be forceful in its appeal to a sense of infraction against all past experience, all standards of propriety—all *possibility*. But there is something comic here also. Such expressions disclose the self-feeling of the institutional creature who glimpses, perhaps for the first time, the world outside his or her bromidic organizational honors. In this more expansive, extra-institutional setting, the decorous tartuffery of the Pharisee loses its resonance and begins to sound thinner, plaintive—even panicked. As will become evident in the next section, such expressions serve up a sweet delight to followers of the charismatic leader.

Case and Method: Incredulous Onlooking and Trump's Rise

So far, the paper has arrived at its contribution deductively, retrieving the incredulous onlooker as a type of interactant that is logically implied "'between the lines'" of Weber's descriptions of charismatic interaction (Bourdieu 1987:121). In what follows, I complement this social-theoretical (deductive) process of discovery with evidentiary (inductive) support, demonstrating the salience of incredulous onlooking during the emergence of Trump's cultural power.

Presidential elections are a classic illustration of what Althusser (1967) called overdetermination, in which no single factor can hope to account for the fullness of the macro-societal outcome (Wagner-Pacifici and Tavory 2017:316). That said, charisma must not be overlooked. As Steven Lukes (2017) noted when taking stock of Trump's political rise, Trump's leadership style "approximated Weber's ideal-typical picture of how charisma works… remarkably closely." This is a view that has gone on to amass considerable support within sociology (see Hochschild 2016; Joosse 2018a; Joosse & Willey 2020; Meyer 2016; Reed 2016; Wagner-Pacifici & Tavory 2017; Zaretsky 2019).[11] As I've argued, this visibility of charisma as an animating force within the cultural "centers" of society (Geertz 1977; also Weber 1919[1946]:79, 296; Shils 1965) presents fresh opportunities for examining its revolutionary nature—opportunities that would be largely unavailable to studies of the fringe and/or enclaved social phenomena where charisma is often thought to find its most vibrant expression.

When seeking to understand the "Trump phenomenon," it is certainly clear that charisma's less agreeable side—rather than cultic insularity—should draw our focus. Indeed, what marked Trump out as a singular candidate, and what has continued to characterize the larger arc of his impact since 2015, have been a series of hostile takeovers that proceeded *outward*. His self-styling as a "winner" required a succession of "losers" (many of them seasoned politicians) and folk devils (often entire demographic sets) to file past our view (Bhambra 2017; Bock et al, 2017; Joosse 2018b).[12] An insouciant heretic in the field of

[11] Similar to Lukes, Hochschild (2016:687) writes that "[m]ore than other candidates, Donald Trump fits the classic description of a charismatic leader, as Weber defined it." Attention to the details in Weber's descriptions bear this out, whether one considers a) his promulgation of a grandiose persona and mission (Weber 1922a:241, 439, 1115-117); b) the 'outsider' assault on traditional (party) structures (Weber 1922a:244, 246; also Andreas 2007; Katz 1975; cf. Berger 1963); or, c) the fervency of his followership (Weber 1922a:243, 1116; also Bendix 1960:300).

[12] A *New York Times* analysis of 11,000 tweets from the President recently found that he attacked people or things on Twitter at nearly three times the rate that he praised himself (Shear et al. 2019).

conservative values,[13] Trump led an insurgency against the GOP, eventually capturing the party (Ware 2016).[14] His initial symbiosis with the media also quickly transformed into a morbid parasitism: media outlets were compelled to give him air even as he actively worked to kill their credibility in the civil sphere (Wells et al. 2016).[15] In these and so many ways Trump, the performative singularity, seemed to emanate a "reality distortion field"[16]—bending opposing social forces back on themselves and enfolding them within his own performative logic. As politicians and political institutions crossed over his event horizon, the rest of us were dragged along with them into an increasingly Trumpian universe.

But it would be a mistake—charismatic culture's "fundamental attribution error"—to give sole credit to Trump for this performative gravity. From the moment he announced his intention to run, incredulous onlookers were contributing to his charismatic swell, co-producing his extraordinary proofs and proliferating a sense of institutional rupture. The following describes, (1) How, during the early stages of Trump's presidential bid, members of the political establishment worked to enshroud his candidacy with an air of impossibility, lending a sense of wonder to what would otherwise—that is, outside of their incredulous displays—be less-than-extraordinary accomplishments; (2) How Trump used polls, debate appearances, and mass rallies to establish "templates of possibility" (Berezin 2012) for his candidacy, offering a variety of proofs for his viability which actively refuted impossibilist prognostications about his campaign; and finally; (3) How, in response to his undeniable successes, Trump eventually came to receive widespread acknowledgement as someone who

[13] Noteworthy examples include: his expressions of admiration for Vladimir Putin as a "strong leader" (GOP debate, 10 March 2016), his repeated attacks on "gold star families" (family members of those who died in US military service), his questioning the validity of the reverence accorded to Republican Senator John McCain for his Vietnam military service, and to his statement that, although he is a professed Christian, he has never felt the need to ask God for forgiveness (Luntz 2015).

[14] Elder statesmen and "never-Trumpers" like former Speaker John Boehner now bitterly refer to their "Grand Old" *alma mater* as the "Trump Party."

[15] Enticed by the ratings that his star power could deliver, they awarded him an estimated $2B worth of publicity even before he became the presumptive GOP nominee—nearly twice the all-in budget of Obama's entire 2012 presidential campaign [Confessore and Yourish 2016]). Trump repaid these benefactors with relentless attack.

[16] This term was used by early Apple employee Bud Tribble to describe the confrontational power of Steve Jobs.

possessed extraordinary powers. During this last stage, even Trump's critics took to using the language of miracles to describe his capabilities, contributing to a discursive field that was propitious for his charismatic rise.

The analysis draws on seventeen months of observational data and twenty-eight interviews with Trump supporters. The observational data consists of fifteen debates Trump took part in during his Presidential run (twelve GOP primary debates and three debates with Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton), 20 speeches made by Trump at campaign rallies during the same time period, and several interviews that Trump gave between his campaign announcement event (June 16, 2015) and election night (Nov 8, 2016). The debate transcripts were collated into a document (672 pages or 327,447 words long), 15% of which was initially read by myself and a research assistant with the aim of developing a series of themes that were applicable to the literature on charismatic leadership. All of the debates were viewed a second time, transcripts in hand, to allow for annotations related to non-verbal communication, crowd reactions, and to check for accuracy. After reaching a consensus on the developed coding scheme, the research assistant coded the remaining 85% of the transcript data, while I coded the speech and interview material. This data, in turn, was informed and assessed amid a more general daily practice of consuming the constant flow of commentary produced about Trump during his presidential run.

Because Trump's charismatic sway was persistent across his first term, during November, 2019, I also conducted interviews with twenty-eight Trump supporters in three states which were selected with the intent of capturing different geopolitical facets of American electoral culture. These included nine interviews with people living in the Texas panhandle (three of which were in Roberts county, which registered the highest level of Trump support in the US in 2016), eleven interviews with supporters in the Detroit metropolitan area (selected because it was part of the failed 'blue wall' that is often cited as

having been crucial to Hillary Clinton's loss in 2016), and eight interviews in Arizona (selected because it is a potential 'swing state'). I also carried out observations at four Trump-themed gatherings, including a meeting of workers at a campaign office in Michigan, a "MAGA Meetup" event in the Detroit area that was advertised on DonaldTrump.com, and two "Trump Friday" events organized by local campaign workers in Phoenix. Similar to the debates and speeches, this observational and interview data was imported into NVivo and coded for themes that were derived from and applicable to the literature on charismatic leadership.

An Air of Impossibility

At first, Trump's interactions with incredulous onlookers did not seem so consequential, primarily revolving around matters of style. There was no shortage of material in Trump's case. The announcement event for his presidential bid (June 16, 2015), for example, was festooned with all the tacky grandstanding which, since the 1980s, had made him famous. But now that he had entered the race, this guileless impresario from the tabloids was actually demanding attention from serious political commentators, forcing a recontextualization of TRUMP™—the gilded escalator, the *Phantom of the Opera* soundtrack (Gabbatt 2019), the bizarre streams of consciousness,[17] the swirl of xenophobia[18] and hubris[19]—within the customary bounds of what Bourdieu (1991) called the "political field."

It was *this* interpolation that, for many, seemed to beggar belief and produce an *entrepôt* to the surreal (Gabbatt 2019; Goldstein and Hall 2017). Katy Tur, an MSNBC

[17] "There is so much wealth out there that can make our country so rich again, and therefore make it great again. Because we need money. We're dying. We're dying. We need money. We have to do it. And we need the right people."
[18] "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best….They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people."
[19] "I will be the greatest jobs President God ever created."

reporter who wrote a book entitled *Unbelievable* (2017) about her experiences covering the Trump campaign, gave a telling response when she was asked about becoming one of the first network reporters assigned to him:

> Interviewer: So, is this a good assignment to get, when your bosses come to you and say, 'This guy's running for President. He's a joke. Hey, why don't you go cover him?'
>
> Tur: [cutting in] *No!* It kind of made me feel like *I* was a joke too! I mean I thought to myself, 'Listen, this'll be interesting....' But I *did* feel like they weren't taking me seriously because, if they really wanted me to cover politics at NBC; if they really wanted me to be a part of the fabric of political coverage there, they would have assigned me a more serious candidate. In fact, I think I started crying about it. I felt [like], '*What?!* They think I'm a joke at this company!'

What is striking in this quote, of course, is not Tur's implicit judgments about Trump himself. Rather, it is the overriding sense of Trump's threat to *her*—as someone who could sully her good name; as a potential debaser of her career. In this way, Trump's affectations as an interactant in the world of politics constituted an affront to the self-image of pundits and power brokers whose cultural authority was intimately bound up with its traditions and stature. It was distasteful to navigate the discursive field of someone whose verbiage was "not subject to laws of ordinary grammar;" to provide sense-making for someone who "spatters the air with unfinished chunks" (Gitlin 2015). To engage with a "bullshit artist" is already in some sense to lose to them—to be taken in (Zakaria 2016; also Wakeham 2017).

Thus, while outwardly Trump's vainglorious pretentions represented a challenge to political traditions in an objective sense—to conventional wisdom about what it means to be "Presidential;" to customs relating to "what one does" when vying for the office—there was at the same time a more personal, inward dimension to his challenge. Such political traditions (*mos maiorum*) generate an engrossing vision that grounds and upholds the vocational identities that populate the political sphere. Such heritage delivers credibility and esteem to expertise associated with "reading the horses." But Trump was running as an

entirely different beast. He was insouciant, and one could feel the collective recoil: "He *can't* be serious!!"

This emotional dynamic undoubtedly gave animus to the various reactions that Trump received. In the first months of his campaign, most political commentators were simply put off—or simply refused—when prompted to assess this "clown" (Leibovich 2015), this "buffoon" (Egan 2015), this "carnival barker" (Jones 2016). "Let's start with this:" Chris Cillizza of the *Washington Post* wrote in July, 2015, "Donald Trump is not going to be the Republican presidential nominee in 2016." "Let's be honest," said CNBC moderator John Harwood, attempting to have a "get real" moment during the opening of the third GOP debate, "Is this a comic-book version of a presidential campaign?" Karl Rove, the chief strategist for George W. Bush's White House bids, flatly told *Fox News*, "this guy is not a serious candidate… Ignore him,…he's completely off the base" (quoted in Elkin 2015). "[H]e's going to be a very big, televised distraction," said Republican strategist Ana Navarro to CNN. "I can't treat it as a serious Republican platform and I can't treat it as if it's coming from a serious Republican candidate" (quoted in Beamon 2015). From July to December, the *Huffington Post* filed all of its coverage of Trump in its *Entertainment* section, refusing, in Arianna Huffington's (2015) words, "to go along with the idea, based simply on poll numbers, that Trump's candidacy was actually a serious and good faith effort to present ideas on how best to govern the country."

If there was any modicum of appreciation, it came from comedians like Stephen Colbert and John Oliver, who thanked Trump for providing them with material, or from the odd commentator or candidate who considered that Trump might serve as a convenient "fall

guy"[20] (Beamon 2015; Cohen 2015; Wilson 2015). Prevailing over all such modes of dismissal, however, was the consensus that Trump's candidacy rested on a simple category error: whatever he was doing, he certainly was not *actually* vying for the presidency. To a degree not seen in recent memory, then, Trump was a distinctly impossible candidate.

Templates of Possibility

But this setup, which clearly intended to quash hopes for Trump's campaign, only served to freight it with charismatic potential, cementing affection for him among those who felt like he was being treated unfairly. As sociologist Isaac Reed (2016:104) observed:

> Every time some journalist pointed out in the *New York Times* that it was so hard to transcribe his speech because it was so all over the place, they played exactly the role they were supposed to play in the performance—that was the rise of Trump. Every time they said, 'He can never win' they were setting him up to be a charismatic leader—because then, every time that he won, it's a miracle. And as we know about charismatic leaders, they succeed by one miracle after another.

Samantha,[21] an organizer of "Trump Friday" gatherings in Phoenix, happened to be speaking to me during the week of the House impeachment hearings, which she regarded as a prime example of sabotage motivated by establishment fears relating about his popularity:

> He was so likeable—that's why the press has to destroy him. The first press conference [July 27, 2016] he had—he had them in the palm of his hand—and he said, 'They're looking for the emails that Hillary [Clinton] deleted.' He says, 'Hey Russia, maybe you can help us out and you can find those emails.' I was watching that at home on my TV live and I *died* laughing, and I had recorded it, and I said to my husband, 'You gotta see this! This is hilarious!' And now they're using it against him saying, 'He's colluding with Russia to hack our election.' Oh my God, it's just—it was *so funny*, and everybody that *actually saw* it at the time knows it was a joke! Like, Russia's gonna go out and look for the emails just because he's standing there [asking]?! So, whatever—the press had to destroy him because he was too much.

[20] Notably, Ted Cruz embarked on a "pilot fish" strategy—swimming alongside while not attacking Trump in the hopes that he would be well-positioned to seize first place after what he assumed would be Trump's imminent implosion (Wilson 2015).

[21] All names are pseudonyms.

In her estimation, such treatment by the press and political establishment was key to the growth of her Trump support group:

> I've never seen the press hate anyone like that. People [in her group] are so angry at what the press has done. People will come to our meeting that [sic] we don't even know and they'll say, 'I'm so happy I found you!' Yes, so angry… so I think it's backfired.

Margaret, an elderly Trump supporter from Quannah, Texas held similar feelings:

> I wish people would spend half as much time praying for him as they do running him down. He hasn't even got a chance to be President yet. We have no idea what he could do. I voted for him, and I'm voting for him again…. they [the media and Democrats] blow things way out of proportion, I'm so sick of it.

Finally, Marilyn, speaking to me at a "Maga Meet-up" event near Ann Arbor expressed her admiration:

> Well, could you imagine, being elected President, and all of a sudden you got the FBI director coming in and setting you up? How many people could handle that kind of adversity? And going and speaking in front of foreign leaders? I mean, the guy has some kind of inner strength, and a lot of the religious groups think he's like the savior of the world… I think that was one of the main things Trump got elected for.

The notions that "they had to destroy him because he was too much," that "we have no idea what he could do," and that he possesses tremendous "inner strength" are thus positive imputations made by these women toward Trump that become possible only amid an acute sense that he has been the victim of treachery. For these women, estimates about Trump's abilities were enlivened and accentuated by the feeling that he was being unfairly treated and constrained by a powerful political establishment.

When Trump *did* in have successes—even minor ones—these served only to augment the sense that these were remarkable achievements, simply because he seemed capable of getting things done while withstanding such attacks. And for Trump's critics, that was the grand inconvenience of it all. Despite universal incredulity, Trump quickly emerged as the GOP frontrunner, a position he would hold for the remainder of 2015 and into election year. He almost never opened his mouth without delivering proofs of some kind. He would use the at-times record setting attendance numbers at his rallies as a form of verification for his

candidacy (Cillizza 2016; Grier 2016). Poll numbers spilled out of him in a way that was "unlike perhaps any candidate in history, central to [his] pitch to voters" (Gass 2015). In this regard, Trump's fixation with polls was somewhat understandable since, against the backdrop painted by his establishment critics, they *did* seem to reveal someone who was "shifting the bounds of achievable reality" (Lachman 2018:7).[22]

Another proof for his viability was the seemingly uncanny invulnerability he displayed at debates. Time and again, he was able to effortlessly brush aside serious charges and condemnation, often with "zingers" that regaled audiences and filled the nightly highlight reels. When criticized by Marco Rubio for hiring "illegal" workers, for example, Trump quickly broke in: "I'm the only one on this stage that's *hired* people. You haven't hired anybody!" (tenth GOP debate, Houston, February 25, 2016). When questioned by *Fox News* moderator Megyn Kelly for his past descriptions of women as "fat pigs, dogs, slobs, and disgusting animals" he cut in, "Only [to] Rosie O'Donnell"—a facetious reference to his decade-long feud with the comedian and talk show host (first GOP debate, Cleveland, August 6, 2015). At the second general election debate, when Hillary Clinton remarked, "It's just awfully good that someone with the temperament of Donald Trump is not in charge of the law in our country," Trump immediately retorted: "Because you'd be in jail."

Such ripostes were met in each case with audible eruptions: gasps of disbelief, howls of opprobrium, and—by turns—raucous cheers and laughter. Recognizing these successes for what they were, Trump would often follow up, "saying 'thank you' to the crowd, as if he were a comedian building intimacy with his fans during his set" (Mast 2016:261). "I *love*

[22] As senior editor for *The New Republic* Jeet Heer (2017) wrote, "the nature of reality is an open question in the age of Donald Trump." A consideration of other factors leads to a less-miraculous assessment. It is a truism within political science, for example, that name recognition alone can translate into substantial polling and electoral success—an effect that was surely only magnified in a busy field of competition (seventeen candidates in the GOP race). Enticed by the ratings that his star power could deliver, Trump garnered an estimated $2B worth of publicity even before he became the presumptive GOP nominee—nearly twice the all-in budget of Obama's entire 2012 presidential campaign (Confessore and Yourish 2016).

that stuff!," Marilyn told me, explaining that Trump's ability to "tell 'em" gave her a vicarious sense of enjoyment:

> It's fun to watch someone do what I can't do. If you put me next to a real smart left-winger, I'd lose, I would lose—I just can't comeback—not that fast with the repartee…but Donald Trump could. I think there's [sic] certain minds that are able to recall and put together these quips. JFK had it, and Ronald Reagan was a master at it, and very few people have that talent. When you hear them, you know them, and you think, '*Now there's a guy who could stand on his own and make things happen!*'—because, he just kind of flips his hands and his words and he kind of knocks 'em down like bowling pins. It's just—it's fun to watch!

This quality of "fun" also pervaded Detroiter John's sense of appreciation for Trump, getting him interested in Trump's campaign even though prior to 2015 he didn't consider himself to be very political:

> [*Laughing*] It's kind of schoolyard-ish. I find it a little bit entertaining. You don't expect it. In a Presidential debate you expect it to be all stuffy and boring, you know? And he kind of woke up the political system a little bit [*laughing*]…. Yeah he's not a politician!

Speaking events provided Trump with endless opportunities to riff on the topic of repudiating nay-sayers. After his victory in the Florida Republican primary (March 2016), for example, Trump told the crowd, "They said we wouldn't last, but then we came down the escalator, and it's been amazing. We've been at the top of the polls since June [2015], and they said we would fade." At the GOP debate in Detroit, Trump was asked about his stance on immigration, as reported in *Buzzfeed*. Rather than answer the question, he instead drew attention to the media outlet's lack of faith: "*Buzzfeed*? They were the ones that said under no circumstances will I run for President. And were they wrong. But a lot of people said that."

Viewed on their face, one might be tempted to read these as reactive statements; as expressions of frustration borne out of disappointment at the reception he was receiving from the political class. But such nay-saying was actively cultivated by Trump at the outset of his campaign—deliberately baked into the announcement speech itself ("But they all said, a lot of the pundits on television, 'Well, Donald will never run, and one of the main reasons is he's

private and he's probably not as successful as everybody thinks'"). Incredulity—and his defiance of it—was thus a dialectical centrepiece of his approach to voters; something that emerged not as a result of his formal entry into politics, but rather as a constitutive precondition to it.

Thus, while commentators were saying "Impossible!," Trump used political events to produce what Berezin (2012) has called "templates of possibility" for his candidacy. With each day that passed, and with each new delegate that he amassed, the arc of Trump's circumvention of establishment projections and allowances was becoming ever more pronounced; the departure between the establishment's view of reality and the new political reality that he was effecting becoming ever more permanent.

Levitation!

At some point in this process, it stopped being a joke. "Never Trump" was the phrase, but increasingly "always Trump" was the experience.[23] Rush Limbaugh must be credited with describing the political class's increasingly panicked responses to Trump in ways that are unmistakably resonant with Weber's ideal type—if augmented by a shock-jock's particular sensitivity to charisma's ability to roil "right thinkers":[24]

> Trump is so far outside the formula that has been established for American politics that people who are inside the formula can't comprehend it…. Everything he's doing goes against the book…. And somebody challenging it like Trump is doing, has just got everybody experiencing every kind of emotion you can. They're angry, they're flabbergasted, they're shocked, they're stunned—and all of it because he's leading. Everything that any analyst or consultant or professional would tell you not to do, Donald Trump is doing it, and he's leading the pack [of GOP candidates]. *This*

[23]A wide assortment of establishment figures, from 2012 GOP nominee Mitt Romney, to White House press secretary Josh Earnest, to *National Review* writer Heather Mac Donald among others engaged in expatiations of Trump's statements and actions as a means of illustrating his ineligibility or "disqualification" from the office of president (Tait 2016; Eilperin and Jaffe 2015; Mac Donald 2016). President Obama's considerably more measured if perceptibly less sure statement was that: "I continue to believe that Mr. Trump will not be President. And the reason is that I have a lot of faith in the American people and that they recognize that being a President is a serious job" (February 2016). Such discussions of 'qualifications' fail to account for charismatic logic, which "qualifies itself" through "new norms [that] f[i]nd their source in the inspiration or impulses, either actual or apparent, of the charismatically qualified person" (1922a:761, also 1204).

[24] The phrase comes from Cohen's (1972) classic work on moral panics, where "right-thinkers" (editors, bishops, politicians) man "moral barricades" as a means of giving strength to social orthodoxies. For a discussion of their salience within charismatic fascination, see Joosse 2018b.

> *creates its own set of emotions and feelings and thoughts that run from person to person*.... Trump is functioning totally outside this structure that has existed for decades. As such, *the people who are only familiar with the structure and believe in it and cherish it and want to protect it, feel threatened in ways that you can't even comprehend* [emphasis added]

What was shock and horror to some clearly translated into glee for the likes of Limbaugh and his audience. Extruded through such terror-stricken appraisals, Trump's persona took shape as an institutional wrecking ball or, as Michael Moore famously remarked, as the "human Molotov cocktail that [supporters] get to throw into the system" (Wang 2016; see also Wagner-Pacifici and Tavory 2017). As Gerald, from Amarillo, Texas ventured:

> I think that's why he got elected. Cause he's not a politician. He's not refined. He says what he thinks …. I think the American people hired him and they knew exactly what he was before they hired him. They may not agree with all things he has done—at least I don't—but I think that's why we wanted somebody up there [in Washington] to maybe shake it up—try to make some changes.

As this dynamic progressed, an odd trend emerged in which even Trump's critics began crediting him with miraculous powers. Trump had become "Teflon Don" (Illing 2016), a man-of-steel who was able to make statements that "would have ended the career of any ordinary politician" (Robinson 2015). Pundits professed to be "floored, mystified and stupefied by a candidate who prospers where others would perish," and exclaimed that "nothing…has the power to push this candidate an inch off the course that is preordained for him" (Byers 2015). In October, 2016 media executive and *Fox* co-founder Barry Diller called Trump's success up to that point an "evil miracle."

And so the language of miracles—so salient within Weber's account of charismatic legitimation—actually became a fertile source of descriptors for Trump among admirers and critics alike. One could object that these expressions were more idiomatic than charismatic. Trump's detractors didn't "truly" believe in his powers. But as we've already shown, "miracles"—in the modernist guise of supernatural interventions within a natural order—have never been the *sine qua non* for charisma in Weber's eyes. What matters is

"extraordinariness," and insofar as expressions of incredulity confer this status, they are eminently serviceable as sources for charismatic acclamation. Furthermore, we know from the sociology of religion that the distinction between "literal" and "figurative" miracles is inexact at the best of times, especially at the intersubjective interface between expression and reception (Joosse 2017:349-350). Of sole importance, from a dramaturgical perspective, was that Trump's followers were primed to receive him as an extraordinary figure[25] and that, as odd and as unwitting as it may have been, his critics were offering a form of corroboration for this charismatic status, reaching for the loftiest superlatives they could muster, pulling out their hair as their conventional/institutional wisdom failed them, and expressing a sense of disbelief about *the very reality that was before their eyes*.

Amid all such miraculous commentary, one expression emerged and became favored. Everyone from Republican pollster Frank Lunz, to Democratic political consultant Michael Bronstein, to CNN host Anderson Cooper, to media scholar Todd Gitlin referred to Trump as someone who could, in various ways, "defy gravity"—often expressed as "defying the modern laws of political gravity" (Luntz 2016; see also Stigall 2016; Gorenstein 2015; Gitlin 2015).

This last image—of seemingly inexplicable uplift—is a particularly evocative summation of classic descriptions of charismatic ascension. A "baffling success" within the societies out of which it emerges (Gerth and Mills 1946:52), it is something that "breaks all traditional and rational norms" (1922a:1115), and "knows no formal and regulated [process

[25] See, for example, Pollak and Schweikart (2017): "[W]hen I had thought Trump was on the verge of defeat, I imagined that if he should, by some "miracle"—we were using that word—actually win, I would jump up and down for joy, break down in tears, tear through the streets in delight." Also, see Arlie Hochschild (2016: 683): "The day before the Louisiana Republican primary in March 2016, I watched Donald Trump's Boeing 757 descend from the sky at the Lakefront Airport in New Orleans. Inside the crowded hangar, Elton John's "Rocket Man" was playing. Red, white, and blue strobe lights roved sideways and up. Cell phones snapped photos of the blond-haired candidate as he stood before thousands waving and shaking signs that read MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN. A small, wiry man bearing this sign with both hands, eyes afire, called out within earshot, 'To be in the presence of such a man! To be in the presence of such a man.' There seemed to be in this man's call…a note of reverence, even ecstasy."

of] appointment or dismissal" (p, 246). Indeed, insofar as it involves the ability to rise and stay afloat in ways that are not explainable with reference to taken-for-granted social laws, charisma might be described, in a state of sociological purity, as *social* levitation.

Conclusion

Recognizing the *incredulous onlooker* as a social type within charismatic cultural systems opens up new avenues for understanding charismatic formation beyond existing scholarly preoccupations with leaders and followers. Furthermore, it deepens the integrative logic through which charisma distinguishes itself within Weber's triadic theory of legitimate authority, showing how institutional figures from traditionalist and rational-legal domains actively contribute, albeit in a negative sense, to charismatic rupture. Specifically, incredulous onlookers co-produce miracles (an important component of charismatic legitimation) and signal institutional destabilization (essential to charisma's expansive proclivities and socio-political relevance). As I have shown, charismatic followers do not merely rail against "the system," as an abstracted, alien structure. Rather, it is a system that is embodied—personified and symbolized by representatives whose shock, anger, and humiliation give evidentiary support for "successes" that are both the substance and proof of charisma. Love between leaders and followers may be omnipresent across charismatic phenomena, but the type of outward-invidiation described herein is essential to charisma's revolutionary power.

Indeed, the expressions of incredulous onlookers have continued to find an eager audience in the years since Trump's win, most notably in the form of compilation videos produced by his fans. Rather than focussing on Trump *per se*, these videos curate collections of "reaction shots" from detractors and enemies. One version of this emerging genre foregrounds Trump's naysayers, compiling statements from commentators, politicians, and "liberals" and bearing titles like, "People Who Laughed at TRUMP…and said he would

never be President – FUNNY!," "FUNNIEST TRUMP CAN'T WIN COMPILATION," and "Compilation Of Celebrities Saying Donald Trump Will Never Be President." These collections usually end with a final clip from a major news network, declaring Trump as President-elect or showing Trump's inauguration ceremony.[26] A second type of compilation focusses on "meltdowns"—blanched and teary-eyed expressions of horror and disbelief from those undergoing the realization that Trump has won. Their titles speak to a sector of the American electorate that clearly thrills to such displays: "People React to Donald Trump Victory [SJW Meltdown]," "Most UPSET Reactions to Donald Trump Winning Election Against Hillary," "WATCH: The Biggest Media Meltdowns to Trump's Win," and "CNN's *INCREDULOUS realization* Trump has WON FLORIDA!!" (see Figure 1, below).

[Figure 1 about here]

The present analysis suggests several directions for future research. First, the phenomenon uncovered in this article highlights the charismatic dimensions of Jeffrey Green's "ocular" approach to the study of modern politics, reflecting the "unpleasant but acute reality that for most citizens mass democracies today are defined by spectatorship" (2010:104). More than this though, it advanced our understanding of the relational nature of media consumption (Lauka et al. 2018), and the growing importance of "negative partisanship" across the Western world (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Caruana et al. 2014; Mayer 2017). Many from the mainstream media continue to operate under the conceit that there is "another America" out there that is ensconced in its own echo chamber consisting of concentric circles ranging from Fox News channel (at the largest) and narrowing inward into ever smaller enclaves of conspiracy culture (Alex Jones, QAnon), and the racist environs of the alt-right. Informed by such notions, journalists and commentators have gone on to

[26] Readers are especially directed to https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G87UXIH8Lzo, one of the most viewed examples (10.9M views, presently).

produce a string of pop-anthropological investigations with titles like *Hillbilly Elegy*, and *Stalking the Wild Trump Voter* that cohere around a common mission to search for Trump's hidden community of support. This framing perpetuates an incognizance among incredulous onlookers about their own socio-political relevance and obscures our ability to recognize that admirers of Trump are often not lost in some Appalachian backwoods, but are in fact actively and creatively engaged with mainstream media—if by way of "oppositional" readings of media texts (Hall 2001). While many were surprised by the constituency that announced itself in the 2016 and 2020 elections, the incredulous onlookers described herein were for a certain sector of American society very much seen. The perpetuation of this one-way mirror quality is an important socio-structural factor that deserves greater attention within the aforementioned developments in political sociology, but also as a potential barrier to "code switching" in recently theorized processes of societalization (Alexander 2018).

Second, as Eisenstadt's (1968) was able to show over fifty years ago, charismatic interaction is not something that only flares up episodically, in moments of cultural disruption. Rather, it is a central feature of more general and gradual processes of sociocultural evolution and institution-building. While the interactional importance of incredulous onlookers may be more apparent and pronounced during moments of charismatic upheaval, their influence likely also extends through more regularized and mundane processes of sociocultural evolution. Of all of his writing on charisma, Weber spent the most time discussing "routinization" (1922a, pp. 1121–1148)—the dissipation of charisma's original energy and its transformation into more regular and predictable forms of power. Abrutyn and colleagues have been instrumental in outlining the macro-level dimensions of these more gradualistic evolutionary processes (Abrutyn 2009; Abrutyn and Van Ness 2015), and it is my hope that the current contribution combines with other more micro-oriented work on institutional entrepreneurs and charismatic "counter-roles" (Joosse 2017; 2018a;

McCaffree and Abrutyn 2020) to elucidate the fine-grained interactional mechanisms that go into the production of institutional autonomy.

Third, this work shows promise for describing the charismatic underpinnings of recent work that has described the "eventful" nature of cultural ruptures (Tavory and Fine 2020; Wagner-Pacifici, 2010; 2017; Wagner-Pacifici and Tavory 2017). Writing more generally about "eventness," Wagner-Pacifici (2017:8) remarked upon "a genuine epistemological problem of generalizing the singular. Events are surprising and compelling precisely because they *are* unique, resisting absorption into everyday life. They shock and move us with their unpredictable specificity." One can perceive a deep-seated conceptual affinity between this theorization of events and Weber's notion of charismatic rupture—and indeed, with the shock expressed by incredulous onlookers. Rational-legal and traditional authority are, in Weber's conception, very much everyday phenomena, with "*alltag*-" ["everyday life"] being the most common prefix that Weber uses to describe components of traditional and rational–legal authority structures (Adair-Toteff 2005:194). Charisma, by contrast, is distinguished most fundamentally as something that, as with Wagner-Pacifici's description, is "specifically outside the everyday" ["*spezfisch außertaglich*" (Weber, 1922b [1956]:140)]—it actively interrupts the sustaining, continuous nature of legal and traditionalized "structures of everyday life" (1922a:1111). Thus, while much analysis of Weber's theory of domination is preoccupied with trilateral distinctions among the charismatic, traditional, and rational-legal types, this three-sided analytic frame is underwritten by a more basic distinction in which charisma is "unlike all others" with respect to its opposition to "the everyday." One way to understand the work of incredulous onlookers is as agents who actively work to impart eventful significance to charismatic challenges, announcing them within time (Sewell 2005). From this angle, Weber's "charisma"—along with the present contribution on the influence of incredulous onlookers—is positioned exquisitely for integration with more contemporary

theorizations of "the event" (Sewell 2005; Badiou 1988; Wagner-Pacifici 2010; 2017; Wagner-Pacifici and Tavory 2017).

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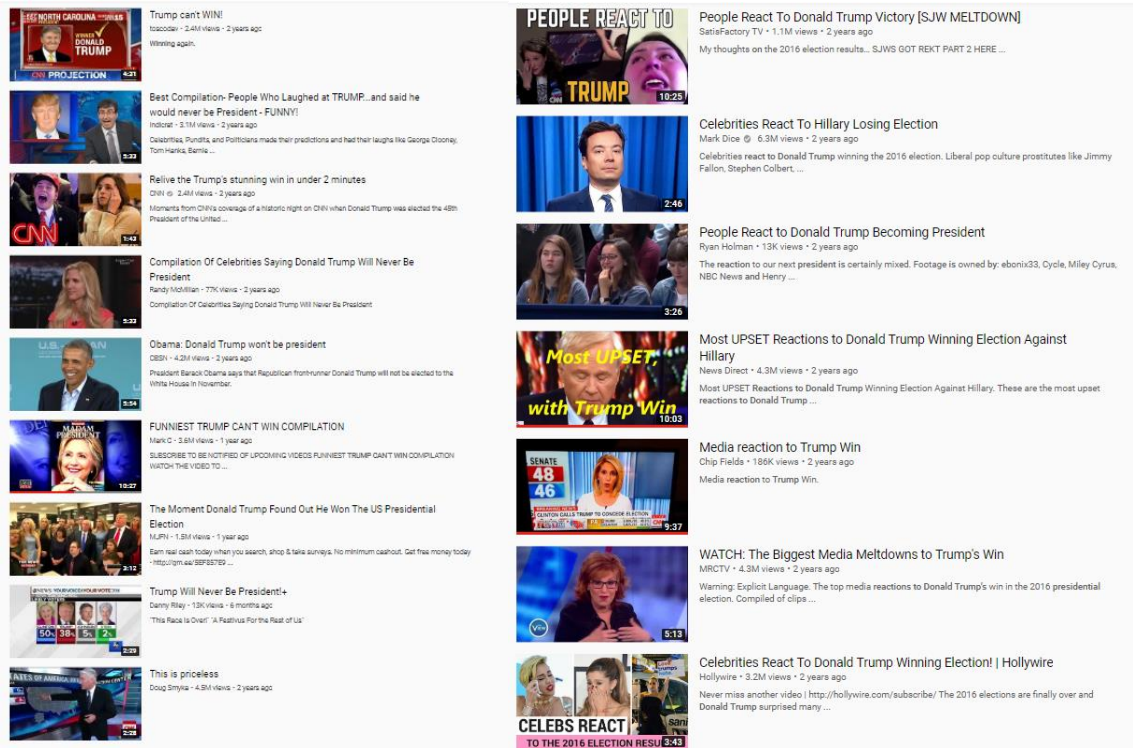

Figure 1: "Trump Can't Win" (left) and "Meltdowns" (right)