

4:00 pm Wednesday 5 April 2006

Demystifying Contemporary Myths: The Weberian Conception of Charismatic Authority

Carol Strong

Max Weber is recognised as one of the foremost leaders in sociological thought during the twentieth century. His theory is still used by many as the starting point for the analysis of a wide range of political and economic issues. The focus of this discussion will be Weber's conception of legitimate authority and how it relates to contemporary political leadership, specifically that based on charisma. In the current political environment, there is a need for a renewed, but deeper analysis of the charismatic leader and why people follow. In traditional literature, this debate has often focuses on the psychology and motivations of the followers. When attention shifts to the leader, by contrast, the analysis invariably focuses on the use of coercive tactics to garner complete control, or conversely on the leader's personality, i.e. what makes him/her attractive as a political leader. There is little synthesis of these positions. Whereas Weberian theory often begins such debates, a number of 'contemporary myths' mitigate against using his theory to its full potential.

Myth one: Weber's theory on charismatic authority is only relevant to traditional leadership patterns based on religious principles and is not applicable to contemporary analysis.

Myth two: Charismatic authority can only be attributed to leaders with a charismatic personality.

Myth three: Charismatic leaders will have exhibited traces of charisma throughout their political career, i.e. they were always destined for greatness.

Myth four: Charismatic authority is primarily a tool to analyse 'good' or 'saintly' leaders.

This paper explores these four myths to reveal nuances of Weber's theory that while frequently neglected, are important to ongoing political debates over leadership and authority. Weberian theory will thus be modified, but not dismissed as a tool of contemporary political analysis and will help explain why some people support a particular leader who only mystifies the outside observer.

Carol Strong is a research fellow in the Centre for Citizenship and Globalisation, Deakin University.

**There is no entry charge and everyone is welcome.
Drinks and nibbles will be provided.**

The Blue Room , Building B, Room 2.. 20, Burwood Campus, Deakin University