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Recovering Charisma: Reassessing Patrimonialism and the Assault on the Modern State

By

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Abstract

This thesis examines the renewed use of Max Weber's political thought in contemporary analyses of threats to the modern state. It focuses specifically on Hanson and Kopstein's recent work *The Assault on the State: How the Global Attack on Modern Government Endangers Our Future*. Their work uses Weberian concepts such as *patrimonialism* and *legal-rational rule* to analyze the global threat posed by patrimonial leaders. Although Hanson and Kopstein provide an impressive theoretical lens through which to identify the erosion of what they refer to as the "rule of law," they insufficiently account for Weber's third form of legitimate rule: charisma. I argue that in their disregard for charisma, two main problems arise. First, they miss, or at the very least under-theorize, a possible key mechanism in the movement from legal-rational authority toward patrimonial authority. Second, their account of the movement to patrimonial authority in contemporary politics risks overdetermination by ignoring the ways in which charisma disrupts simple unidirectional change. Recovering charisma strengthens their theoretical account of the patrimonial threat to the modern state and reduces the risk of treating contemporary politics deterministically.

Introduction

There is a recent renewal of interest in the political thought of Max Weber. Some commentators emphasize the salience of Weber's concept of charismatic leadership for interpreting contemporary politics.¹ Weber highlights the possibilities and dangers posed by charismatic leaders who can destabilize legal-rational forms of rule.² Other commentators like Hanson and Kopstein, in *The Assault on the State*, consider contemporary politics through Weberian conceptions like patrimonialism and legal-rational rule while leaving charisma underdeveloped.³ In what follows, I claim that contemporary works which highlight patrimonialism should bring in, rather than discard or de-emphasize, Weber's account of charisma.

More specifically, I aim to supplement Hanson and Kopstein's *The Assault on the State*, in which they invoke Weberian concerns in their analysis of the global threats to the modern state by "patrimonial" leaders. Although they provide an otherwise impressive theoretical lens through which they identify the alarming trend of the erosion of the "rule of law," they underplay the role of charisma. In their disregard for charisma, two main problems arise. First, they miss, or at the very least under-theorize, a possible key mechanism in the movement from legal-rational authority toward patrimonial authority. Second, their account of the movement to patrimonial authority in

¹ On the renewed use of Weberian categories in contemporary political analysis, see Mikhail Ilyin, "Patrimonialism: What Is Behind the Term: Ideal Type, Category, Concept, or Just a Buzzword?," *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 18, no. 1 (2015): 26–51; Jonathan Rauch, "One Word Describes Trump," *The Atlantic*, February 24, 2025; Paul Joosse, "Becoming a God: Max Weber and the Social Construction of Charisma," *Journal of Classical Sociology* 14, no. 3 (2014): 266–83; Ann Ruth Willner, *The Spellbinders: Charismatic Political Leadership* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).

² See Max Weber, *Economy and Society: A New Translation*, trans. and ed. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 374–408; Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *Political Writings*, ed. Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 38, 76–77.

³ Stephen E. Hanson and Jeffrey S. Kopstein, *The Assault on the State: How the Global Attack on Modern Government Endangers Our Future* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2024).

contemporary politics risks overdetermination by ignoring the ways in which charisma disrupts simple unidirectional change.

In this study, I begin by examining two of the three Weberian classifications of the types of rule, namely legal-rational and traditional rule. These two ideal types of rule are at the heart of Hanson and Kopstein's argument. Next, I turn directly to Hanson and Kopstein's argument while paying especially close attention to their treatment of post-Soviet Russia. They treat Putin's rise as significant because his neo-patrimonial rule allegedly provided both a blueprint and a catalyst for the cascading global trend away from legal-rational authority. Then, I turn to Weber's treatment of charismatic rule, especially charisma's capacity for both routinization and disruption, and the problem of charisma as it relates to power politicians. The last section aims to supplement Hanson and Kopstein's analysis with the identified elements of charisma.

Part I: Weber's Classification of Legal-Rational and Traditional Rule

It is necessary to begin with an analysis of Weber's classification of the types of rule to analyze Hanson and Kopstein's work. In his analysis of the types of rulership ("authority"), Weber focuses on key attributes which make comparisons intuitive. Weber defines *rulership* as "the chance that specific (or all) commands will be met with obedience on the part of a specifiable group of persons."⁴ Unlike a more general definition of rulership as simply one group exercising power over another, this definition maintains more nuanced relational aspects between the ruler and the ruled. Weber's nuanced definition of rule foregrounds the attributes of each ideal type of rule. Each section below will loosely follow the emphasis he places on key attributes: contextual founding of rules, validity of legitimacy, subjects' obedience, economic relations, and the composition of the

⁴ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: A New Translation*, ed. and trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 134.

administrative staff. The three types of rule he presents are legal-rational, traditional, and charismatic. For now, I focus on the first two types of rule.

Legal-rational rule is based on the idea that “any law (*Recht*) can be created, and any existing law can be changed by enactment that is decided by formally correct procedure.”⁵ The rulers are not obeyed by virtue of their own right but by the enacted rules which they themselves are bound to. The ruling body (*Herrschaftsverband*) is either elected or appointed. The persons who obey are either citizens (*Bürger*) or members (*Genossen*).

Commands are legitimated by enacted rules and limited by the jurisdiction (*Kompetenz*) assigned to the office according to the specialized requirements of the official’s role. These officials are a part of the ruler’s administration which is “a *professional* activity (*Berufsarbeit*) on the basis of a defined obligation to the office.”⁶ Weber notes that the “basis of technical functioning is the *discipline of the organization* (*Betriebsdisziplin*).”⁷ In the ideal form, this discipline entails impartiality, predictability, and an objective outlook toward effectiveness.

The purest type of ideal legal-rational rule is *bureaucracy*. A purely bureaucratic rule, as an ideal, would be “rule by only contractually engaged and appointed officials.”⁸ Weber notes that the modern state is distinguished by bureaucratic institutions, just as the bureaucratization of economic enterprises corresponds with the rise of high capitalism (e.g. where capitalist enterprises depend on the validity of contracts). He defines *bureaucracy* as a governing apparatus and the “collegial corporate bodies” (*Körperschaften*) which constitute “the authorities” (*Behörde*) in the bureaucracy itself. Weber sees bureaucracy as “the most efficient and *formally* rational way in

⁵ Max Weber, *The Essential Weber: A Reader*, ed. Sam Whimster (London: Routledge, 2004), 133.

⁶ Weber, *Essential Weber*, 134.

⁷ Weber, *Essential Weber*, 134.

⁸ Weber, *Essential Weber*, 134.

which human activity can be organized, and that it is indispensable to the modern world.”⁹ However, despite its indispensable nature, Weber still sees bureaucracy as “a threat to humanity, and that only entrepreneurs and politicians can counter its power.”¹⁰

Traditional rule is based on “the belief in the sanctity of orders and powers of rule (*Herengewalten*) which have existed since time immemorial.”¹¹ Obedience is to the person designated by tradition rather than through obedience to statutes. The ruler is also *personal* insofar as they are not superior due to an office being granted via enacted rules (e.g., reverence can be granted to the ruler because of their shared lived experiences with the ruled). Commands are legitimated by their traditional content which, if challenged, might also challenge the legitimacy of the ruler’s own traditional position. The individuals who are ruled over are either “traditional associates” (*Genossen*) or “subjects” (*Untertanen*).¹²

A significant tension arises since a ruler is both bound *by* tradition and exercises freedom *from* tradition which traditional authority itself grants the ruler. Weber says the ruler’s power is:

...therefore divided into an area that is closely circumscribed by tradition, and an area of favour (*Gnade*) and arbitrariness (*Willkür*) in which he switches between favouritism, affection, dislike, and purely personal views, and he is influenced by favours done for him.¹³

This tension is significant for *patrimonialism* as it is legitimized by tradition on the one hand, but increasingly governed through favoritism, personal arbitrariness, etc. on the other. Unlike types of legal-rational rule where laws originate from statutes, new facts are legitimated as something that previously existed but were recently revealed in the form of new wisdom. Rule is exercised within

⁹ Swedberg and Agevall, *Max Weber Dictionary*, 20.

¹⁰ Swedberg and Agevall, *Max Weber Dictionary*, 20.

¹¹ Weber, *Essential Weber*, 135.

¹² Weber, *Economy and Society*, 354.

¹³ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 354-355.

the limits of what the leader and administration can allow themselves without provoking the resistance of their servants (lest they have a “traditionalist revolution”).¹⁴

Weber argues that a traditional ruler may rule with or without an administrative staff. In the absence of a personal administrative staff, there are two types of rule that may emerge. First, a *gerontocracy* is “the condition in which, to the extent that rule is exercised at all in the organisation, it is done by the elders (originally in a literal sense, the most senior in years).”¹⁵ Second, *patriarchalism* is “the condition in which rule is exercised within a (domestic) organisation, usually primarily based on economy or kinship, by a person determined by strict rules of heredity.”¹⁶ To be clear, these two types may often appear in tandem with each other. Under these two forms the ruler rules in the interest of the members who remain *Genossen*, not subjects (*Untertanen*). The ruler remains dependent on *the members’ wish to obey them* since they do not have formal administration. More specifically, gerontocratic and pure patriarchal rule depend on the preservation of tradition due to their lack of a separate administrative staff.¹⁷

When there is an administrative staff, it is common that members of the ruling family or clan would fill the administrative positions. This administration would lack some of the defining features associated with those under legal-rational rule; competence, a fixed hierarchy, regular appointments, specialist training, and fixed incomes.¹⁸ Weber thus defines patrimonialism as a traditional form of rule where the administration and the military are seen by the ruler as his or her

¹⁴ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 355.

¹⁵ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 360.

¹⁶ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 360.

¹⁷ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 369. See also Chapter 2, section 38 for more on the administrative staff are funded.)

¹⁸ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 357.

personal instruments. Weber adds that “there is typically a ‘continuous struggle of the central power with various centrifugal powers’ in patrimonialism.”¹⁹

Patrimonial rule and *sultanism* “are both distinguished from primary patriarchalism by the existence of a personal administrative staff.”²⁰ All traditional rule tends toward these two types after the development of a ruler’s personal (and potentially military) administrative staff. Weber suggests that the *Genossen*:

now for the first time become “subjects” (*Unternamen*), and the ruler acquires a personal prerogative to rule instead of ruling by virtue of *Genossenrecht*, a prerogative appropriated to him personally like any other kind of possession, in principle capable of valorisation (of sale, of use as security, divisible by inheritance), as is the case for any other economic *Chance*.²¹

The essential shift that occurs with patrimonial rule is away from traditional rule *without* a personal administrative staff and toward traditionally oriented rule *with* a personalistic administrative staff. Although *patrimonialism* is traditionally oriented, the external support from things like “patrimonial armies” (e.g. slaves/coloni or impressed subjects, etc.) allows the ruler to act arbitrarily beyond the restraints of tradition. However, the ruler’s ability to act arbitrarily comes at the cost of the traditional dependence found in the above forms of rule *without* personal administration (i.e. gerontocracy and patriarchalism).

Sultanism goes a step further as it is power maximized. It is bound by traditionalism in appearance only. What distinguishes it from any form of rational rule is that it is “not objectively rationalized, for only the spheres of despotism and of grace are developed to extremes.”²² This

¹⁹ Richard Swedberg and Ola Agevall, *The Max Weber Dictionary: Key Words and Central Concepts*, 2nd ed. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 247, citing Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, trans. Ephraim Fischoff et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 231–32; cf. 1006–10.

²⁰ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 361.

²¹ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 361.

²² Weber, *Economy and Society*, 361.

distinction of sultanism elucidates the limits of rule detached from traditional restraints and thus stands as an extreme beyond patrimonialism.

Patrimonialism can express itself in at least three different ways. The first involves the leader maintaining a sort of *oikos* while remaining highly traditional.²³ The development of markets in this case is restricted due to an economy primarily focused on subsistence and consumption. In the second case, needs are met based on a social rank and some market development may occur. However, it is mostly constrained due to “the productive capacity of individual economic units [being] used for the ruling organisations’ own purposes.”²⁴

In the final case, patrimonialism can be monopolistic. In this instance, needs are met via profitable endeavors, taxes, and fees. Weber says this makes the economic development “irrationally limited” depending on the type of monopoly.²⁵ Especially in sultanism, the irrationality entails an economic expression of the inherent tensions found in traditionalism. On the one hand, tradition dictates things like the source and degree of taxation. On the other, there is complete liberty and arbitrariness in setting such terms. Weber argues that there is no way to reliably calculate the degree of the pursuit for private gain, nor the burden placed on the freedom to do so. Only under *accidental conditions* can there occasionally be a rationalizing economic impact.²⁶

Weber’s contrast between patrimonialism and feudalism clarifies the distinct character of patrimonialism. For Weber, feudalism is a type of rule which simultaneously holds great historical influence and shares many characteristics with modern forms of rule. In *patrimonialism*, authority

²³ The Greek word *Oikos* implies a sense of household management and is where the word *economy* comes from etymologically. More specifically: “An *oikos* can be described as the authoritarian household of a local or a central ruler that has want satisfaction as its primary task, as opposed to profit making.”

Swedberg and Agevall, *Max Weber Dictionary*, 231.

²⁴ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 369.

²⁵ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 369-370.

²⁶ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 370.

is an extension of household management, officials are “servants,” and the economy is based on the ruler’s *patrimony*. In contrast, *feudalism* “rests on a relation of personal loyalty founded in a freely contracted oath, but it lacks the purely household character of patrimonialism.”²⁷ The officials are *not* servants but rather “a partner bound by honor and faith; his rights and duties are reciprocally guaranteed.”²⁸ The administration is uniquely decentralized, with vassals exercising autonomous rule within their respective domains. These distinctive systems have different tendencies. Weber says that patrimonial domination “tends toward bureaucratic centralization; feudal domination toward political fragmentation.”²⁹ Above all, patrimonialism is characterized by the acceptance of a personal relationship of subordination by the clients.³⁰ This distinction is significant because patrimonialism may have some elements of bureaucracy without being truly bureaucratic (i.e. patrimonialism can distort bureaucratic institutions while still operating through them). Without careful attention to such distinctions, Weber warns that some may attempt to reduce historical reality to schema and claim to provide exhaustive accounts of the types of rule.³¹

Weber suggests that all forms of rule involve prestige and a requirement of proof. For example, traditional rule is founded on the belief in the prestige attributed to the ruler and acquired via tradition. In the case of legal-rational rule, “belief in legality is ‘acquired,’ itself conditioned through tradition; violation of that tradition might be fatal for it.”³² Weber then suggests that “the existence of the administrative staff and the continuing action it takes to assure the execution and enforcement of orders is vital to maintenance of deference.”³³ In other words, the administrative

²⁷ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 404.

²⁸ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 405.

²⁹ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 411.

³⁰ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 405.

³¹ Swedberg and Agevall, *Max Weber Dictionary*, 156-57.

³² Weber, *Economy and Society*, 401.

³³ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 402.

staff confirms the ruler's prestige through the execution of orders and therefore plays an important part in stabilizing the deference to rule. This is why Weber suggests that stability requires the solidarity of ideal/material interests between administrations and lords. Due to this relationship, "it can be said that a lord supported in this way is stronger than any individual member, but weaker than the members taken together."³⁴

Although the administrative staff plays a large role in stabilizing rule, Weber's distinction between two types of social relationship also explains how the administrative staff might coordinate *against* a ruler as well. Weber suggests that *communal* associative relationships (*Vergemeinschaftung*) bind individuals through a sense of belonging (e.g. national communities, families). For an administrative staff to coordinate against a ruler, it would require the administrative staff to deliberately participate in "sociation" (*Vergesellschaftung*). This concept describes a social relationship where "the orientation of social action rests on a rationally motivated agreement – whether by explicit or tacit mutual understanding."³⁵ The continuum between these two terms helps explain how an administration could shift from being bound by belonging to a community (e.g. a patrimonial leader which treats the administration like extensions of their household) toward groups with rationally oriented interests of their own.³⁶

In short, the above demonstrates the ways in which the administrative staff can both preserve and destabilize authority. As will be demonstrated in the third section, *charisma* may also play a significant destabilizing role and must therefore be included in any theory built on Weberian ideal types of rule.

³⁴ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 402.

³⁵ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 37.

³⁶ Swedberg and Agevall, *Max Weber Dictionary*, 59-60. Note: The German prefix *Ver-* preserves the verb form of the words which adds to translation difficulties.

Part II: Hanson and Kopstein's Argument: Patrimonialism Against the Modern State

The previous section provided the conceptual framework on which Hanson and Kopstein built their argument. Their argument explicitly builds from the Weberian concepts to highlight the potentially existential tension they see between patrimonialism (“the rule of man”) and legal-rational rule (“the rule of law”). Hanson and Kopstein describe the ways in which Putin operated within existing institutions during his rise to power and move toward patrimonial rule. Although they gesture toward some potentially charismatic elements of Putin’s patrimonialism and institutional capture, their analytical lens could be strengthened with a more robust treatment of charisma.

Hanson and Kopstein analyze post-Soviet Russia to contextualize Putin’s rise to power in the 1990s as the cornerstone of their analysis demonstrating Putin’s patrimonial form of rule. They suggest that the “reassertion of Russia’s great power status over the course of [Putin’s] reign” has provided the blueprint for “the consolidation of the ‘rule of men,’ and the destruction of the rule of law, for his acolytes and admirers on every continent.”³⁷ Hanson and Kopstein identify three distinct factors which made Putin’s rise possible: the social dislocation entailed with the implosion of the Soviet industrial economy, the arrogance of Western technocratic advisors during Russia’s first chaotic post-Soviet decade, and Putin’s fortunate timing in building a patrimonial petrostate just at the moment when energy prices rose to an all-time peak.³⁸

Despite the Soviet Union and the United States occupying the status of “co-hegemons,” the failures of Gorbachev’s *perestroika* fostered the catastrophic economic conditions where neither “the Soviet industrial enterprises nor Soviet farms were designed to compete for profits in a

³⁷ Stephen E. Hanson and Jeffrey S. Kopstein, *The Assault on the State: How the Global Attack on Modern Government Endangers Our Future* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2024), 65.

³⁸ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 68.

full-fledged market economy.”³⁹ In short, the Soviet economic system was incompatible with the demands of a full market economy and reduced once “heroic proletarians” into a “superfluous workforce” almost overnight. Hanson and Kopstein argue that the simultaneous loss of super power status, economic livelihood, and a meaningful place in the new social order fueled a search for someone to blame. This blame game, however, emerged at a time when it was easier to believe in conspiracy theories (e.g. about malicious Western influences) rather than face the fact that it was mostly Gorbachev’s incompetence.⁴⁰

Hanson and Kopstein argue that this moment in history should be thought of as a missed opportunity during a “critical juncture.” The ideal response from the West would have been for policy makers to have more humility when dealing with a transitioning state, to support reforms based on the rule of law, and to have recognized/supported this opportunity to capitalize on this critical juncture. Instead, the West assumed that “the Washington Consensus” would be sufficient (i.e. that market forces would handle everything). Furthermore, even if the “shock therapy” threats from Western financial institutions were hollow (i.e. the threats to “Westernize or else”), Hanson and Kopstein argue that they were insulting at best and awful advice that would likely have led to mass unemployment overnight at worst.⁴¹ Rather than being the recipient of good faith support efforts, Russia’s sense of abandonment intensified when the U.S. focused its “bipartisan enthusiasm toward a different newly emerging power, China.”⁴²

The above conditions helped foster an appeal for a leader that would return Russia to its previous status. However, Putin’s ascent was not immediately predictable since a number of ene-

³⁹ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 72.

⁴⁰ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 72-74.

⁴¹ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 78-80.

⁴² Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 81.

mies stood in his way. Hanson and Kopstein note that Putin faced “Russia’s ultrawealthy ‘oligarchs,’ a relatively open muckraking media, and the Fatherland-All Russia coalition, a new political party uniting the popular former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov, and many of Russia’s most important regional governors.”⁴³ Despite the steep opposition, Putin gained electoral support from the fortuitous outbreak of a second war with the rebellious republic of Chechnya and the dramatic recovery of the Russian economy. In the former case, Putin successfully capitalized on the “rally behind the flag” effect caused by the bombings by Chechen “bandits” (despite the contested source of the bombings).⁴⁴ In the latter case, Putin simultaneously benefited from the devalued ruble shifting Russian consumers toward domestic spending and the rapid rise in the price of oil. Electoral support followed close behind the country’s refilled coffers, the restored old Soviet infrastructure, and the fact that “workers began to receive their pay on time, in rubles, instead of months late in the form of IOUs as during the late Yeltsin era.”⁴⁵

Upon taking power, Putin pledged to make Russia a great power again at a time that “ordinary Russians had spent a decade coping with a devastating economic crisis, while Putin’s rise to the presidency coincided with a powerful rebound in GDP that persisted throughout the 2000s. All of these factors quickly translated into rising electoral support.”⁴⁶ Although many in the West were initially receptive to his rhetoric, his leadership marked the beginning of patrimonial rule rather than the rule of law. He made moves to restore traditional elements in Russian politics like the implementation of “the vertical of power” (i.e. a centralized top-down chain of command unconstrained by the rule-oriented bureaucracy). This style of rule is incompatible with modern civil

⁴³ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 83.

⁴⁴ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 85.

⁴⁵ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 85.

⁴⁶ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 85.

service systems, and it was reestablished by Putin by elevating his friends/colleagues into political positions.

Despite the opposition groups vying for power, Putin performed a remarkable balancing act. He was able to “appeal simultaneously to those who wanted a “tough guy” to take the reins of power, and to Russian liberals who thought that a strong state was needed to modernize the Russian economy in the face of social opposition.”⁴⁷ In other words, he could present himself as the shirtless horseback-riding leader built like an ex-KGB officer while also appealing to Russian liberals persuaded by his rhetorical promises. Even during his election campaign, his primary opponent was an aging individual who had repeatedly appeared intoxicated in public. In contrast, Putin was “a healthy 47-year-old black belt in judo who rarely drank.”⁴⁸

Putin staffed the government with individuals chosen based on their proximity to him rather than appointing those with the expected training or experience. As is the case with patrimonial regimes, those occupying government positions benefited from low turnover. Low turnover rates also coincided with Putin’s coercive mechanisms which guaranteed appointees’ positions as long as they continued to fall in line. Hanson and Kopstein note that this latter point was especially the case since individuals were drawn into networks of bribes and elevated status in exchange for being loyal to Putin. In contrast, disloyalty would likely be risky (e.g. suspicious deaths, more extreme coercive pressures, etc.).

Some observers of the time may be quick to point out that Putin’s rule *did* provide some forms of rationalization (even inadvertently in a Weberian sense). Putin’s government implemented more refined tax collection systems, handled budget surpluses, paid down foreign debts,

⁴⁷ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 87.

⁴⁸ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 87.

and in some instances accidentally led to competent technocrats from the early post-Soviet era into political positions.⁴⁹ During his time in office from 2008-2012, there was also evidence that Putin was not *fully* prepared to commit anti-constitutional behavior even if he was working with his successor the whole time (i.e. he only temporarily left office with the intention of returning shortly thereafter).⁵⁰ However, a more concerning move by Putin was the passage of the 2020 referendum which allows Putin to run and serve until 2036.⁵¹

Hanson and Kopstein point to the developments in Russia as indicative of an “inevitable” trend, “as in all patrimonial regimes, the shrinking space for independent initiative and autonomy within the Russian state undermined its ability to ensure economic dynamism and to provide public goods.”⁵² Despite Putin’s “resurrection of Tsarism,” his regime is starting to show signs of strain: economic stagnation, poor handling of the Covid-19 crisis leading to unnecessary civilian deaths, a decrease in Russian military readiness, brain drain as the youth avoid drafts, weak internal security, etc.⁵³ Hanson and Kopstein suggest that the high approval ratings at the polls that are highly controlled by the state to project pro-regime sentiments may be masking a population that is substantially concerned, fearful, etc. Regardless, they argue:

Yet as the Russian war on Ukraine approached its third year, Putin remained confident that time was on his side, as the diffusion of his patrimonial model of rule throughout the world continued to undermine the cohesion of the Western alliance opposing the invasion of Ukraine. Terrifyingly, Putin’s prediction may yet be proven correct.⁵⁴

This is the basis on which their “East to West” wave of patrimonialism argument emerges.

⁴⁹ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 89-91.

⁵⁰ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 91.

⁵¹ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 92.

⁵² Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 92.

⁵³ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 93-94.

⁵⁴ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 94.

Hanson and Kopstein argue that there has been an ongoing untold story of the spread of traditional modes of personalist rule from Russia westward. Putin's regime serves as an alternative model of rule in modern politics. There are three distinct mechanisms that promote the spread of personalist regimes. First, the Kremlin utilizes oil and gas exports to financially support those "kindred parties and movements abroad" and undermine liberalism throughout the world. Second, regions experiencing tumultuous economic and social conditions are more inclined to find Putin's patrimonial model more appealing than the status quo. Third, Hanson and Kopstein suggest that patrimonialism "was easiest to reinforce in the post-Soviet region, where personalistic rule was in many places a direct legacy of the communist past."⁵⁵ Regions where there had previously been rulers who converted to "democrats" only to reinvent themselves as autocratic "fathers" were especially ready for a return to patrimonial rule.⁵⁶

Hanson and Kopstein connect the East-West arc from Russia outwards with examples like Hungary, Israel, and the US. The most surprising part of this apparent diffusion is the appearance of personalistic patrimonial rule in core liberal democratic countries in the West which may have previously been considered impervious to such influences.⁵⁷ Patrimonial regimes that trampled their people and committed human rights violations were previously criticized by the international community. However, it is increasingly the case that they "forge alliances with their patrimonial colleagues in Russia, Europe, and North America, proudly collaborating to complete the task of undermining the global liberal order."⁵⁸ Hanson and Kopstein further argue that the modern state is particularly vulnerable at an existential level since "establishing patrimonialism in Western countries such as the United States requires not so much corrupting institutions as deconstructing

⁵⁵ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 96.

⁵⁶ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 96-97.

⁵⁷ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 124-129.

⁵⁸ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 136.

them.”⁵⁹ The deconstruction of institutions, Hanson and Kopstein suggest, also inhibits countries from addressing public health needs, safety concerns, and global crises (e.g. pandemics and climate change).⁶⁰

Part III: Weber’s Treatment of Charisma & Charismatic Rule

In the first section, I explained Weber’s distinction between legal-rational and patrimonial rule. In the second section, I provided an account of how Hanson and Kopstein’s argument is built on those two forms of rule. Now that their position is established, this section returns to Weber’s definition of *charisma* and the way he understands how charismatic rule functions in modern politics. In addition to defining charisma, it is necessary to show how charisma is pivotal for understanding transitions between regime types.

The concept of charisma is attributed to a person who is truly extraordinary (*außeralltöglich*). Weber suggests that “the term ‘charisma’ will be applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which [that individual] is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.”⁶¹ What matters here is how charisma “is *actually* judged by those who are ruled charismatically: how “followers” see things.”⁶²

Alongside traditional and legal-rational rule, charismatic rule is one of the three major forms of domination. *Charismatic rule* suggests an “affectual surrender (*Hingabe*) to the person of the lord and his gifts of grace, in particular magical capabilities, prophecies, or heroism, spiritual

⁵⁹ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 94-95.

⁶⁰ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 136.

⁶¹ Swedberg and Agevall, *Max Weber Dictionary*, 35, citing Weber, *Economy and Society* [1978], 241.

⁶² Weber, *Economy and Society*, 374.

power and oratorical powers.”⁶³ This form of rulership is based on moving beyond the mundane and toward that which is exceptional. Weber notes that the “emotional suggestibility (*Hingenommenheit*) of the exceptional are the sources of personal devotion (*Hingebung*).”⁶⁴ The one who rules is a “leader” (*Führer*) based on characteristics that equate to gifts from God. When describing the revolutionary character of charismatic rule, Weber suggests that it follows Jesus’ dictum, “it is written..., but I say unto you.”⁶⁵ Weber sees charismatic rule as “the great revolutionary force in eras bound up with tradition.”⁶⁶ Although he thinks that the force of *reason* can be equally revolutionary, he says:

Charisma can represent a transformation that begins within oneself, born of suffering or of enthusiasm, a shift in direction of leading sentiments and deeds involving a complete reorientation of dispositions and attitudes to all particular ways of life, and to the “world.”

Weber suggests that the tension between charisma and tradition in pre-rationalist eras represented the “near totality of forms for the orientation of action.”⁶⁷

A charismatic leader’s rule is legitimated by their followers. The basis for legitimation is “rooted in an obligation on the part of those who have received the call to acknowledge their duty to provide personal proof [of the miraculous nature of the charismatic leader].”⁶⁸ Moreover, Weber suggests:

[deference to rule] is also charismatic in a negative sense: striking failures can ruin any government, shatter its prestige, and prepare the ground for charismatic revolutions. For monarchies, therefore, lost wars reveal that their charisma lacks

⁶³ Weber, *Essential Weber*, 139.

See also: Joosse, Paul. “Becoming a God: Max Weber and the Social Construction of Charisma.” *Journal of Classical Sociology* 14, no. 3 (2014): 266–83. Joosse maintains that one must not overlook the relational aspect of charisma found in Weber’s theologically tethered definition.

⁶⁴ Weber, *Essential Weber*, 139.

⁶⁵ Swedberg and Agevall, *Max Weber Dictionary*, 37, citing Weber, *Economy and Society* [1978], 1115.

⁶⁶ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 378.

⁶⁷ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 378.

⁶⁸ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 375.

“proof”; for republics, wars won can be dangerous, for victorious generals can advance charismatic claims.⁶⁹

This quote demonstrates that traditional rule can contain a charismatic element insofar as it depends on prestige and proof. If that proof is fleeting or fails to appear, the ruler’s authority can become vulnerable to alternative charismatic claims. This dependence on proof contributes to charisma’s unstable nature.

The administrative staff under charismatic rule does not share the typical features found with rational administrations. The administrative staff does not resemble “officialdom” (i.e. typically rule-based, meritocratic promotions, formal training, etc.). Instead, the administrative staff is selected according to the authority which the leader’s charisma grants them (e.g. a “prophet” chooses “disciples,” the “leader” has “trusted bodyguards,” etc.). For Weber, there is “only the ‘call’ issued spontaneously by the leader on account of the charismatic quality of the person so called on.”⁷⁰ In other words, the leader is selected according to their charismatic quality. In return, the leader selects the administrative staff through personal calling from among those that are loyal to that charisma. In terms of its economic relations, “charismatic rule is typically ‘uneconomic,’ repudiating any kind of involvement in everyday life.”⁷¹ These features are entwined with the belief in the *calling* or *vocation* of the leader. This belief is what authorizes the leader to break from the ordinary via their perceived extra-ordinary capabilities.⁷² In this way, charismatic rule is opposed to everyday rule, irrational (insofar as it is alien to rules), legitimate insofar as the personal proof of charisma is maintained, and therefore opposed to the routinization of traditional and legal-rational rule.

⁶⁹ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 401.

⁷⁰ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 376.

⁷¹ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 377.

⁷² See future link to the *Vocation Lecture*

Weber further identifies the disruptive capacities of charisma as well as the turbulence involved with the transition of charismatic rule (specifically the administrative staff) toward their everyday forms. Over time, charismatic movements adapt to reality which Weber terms “routinization.” The routinization of charisma entails a collapse of the “anti-economic” nature of charisma. In other words, the routinization of charisma coincides with the administrative staff’s increased interest in securing their own routinization (i.e. as followers seek consistent positions to secure their livelihood instead of remaining dependent on the unstable material conditions of charismatic rule). Significantly, for the task at hand, a “charismatic movement typically becomes a patrimonial organization.”⁷³

Charismatic norms are thus converted into norms that can be validated by tradition and social rank (i.e. hereditary charisma). This conversion allows administrative staff to create/appropriate positions and *chancen* for the members of the group.⁷⁴ Depending on whether this is done by tradition or by legalization, different forms of subsequent rule express themselves (*prebendialisation, hereditary charismaticization, patrimonialization, bureaucratization, feudalization, etc.*).⁷⁵

Charismatic rule in its purest form does not last long. Once a community is formed around those that have answered the calling to affirm their personal proof (*Bewährung*), charismatic rule becomes routinized (increasingly traditional or legal-rational). The previous “missions” that guided the leader and administration are exchanged for more permanent everyday orientations (e.g.

⁷³ Swedberg and Agevall, *Max Weber Dictionary*, 35.

⁷⁴ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 384.

⁷⁵ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 389.

to maintain the relationship, securing existence, family life, etc.).⁷⁶ This shift is especially apparent when faced with the problems of succession.

The legitimacy of a new charismatic leader can be sought out (e.g. Dalai Lama), appear via revelation (e.g. the Israelite *schoftim*), transmitted by blood (e.g. primogeniture in medieval Europe), be designated by an incumbent (e.g. Roman magistracies), or designated by a charismatically qualified administration. In the last case, legitimacy is acquired by designation but specifically *not* like anything that resembles an election process. Individuals are properly identified in a way that involves “proper identification, the selection of the proper person, the real bearer of charisma, a figure that even a minority could have successfully identified.”⁷⁷ Finally, it can be transmitted via ritual and the objectification of charisma of office. The legitimacy “no longer relates to a person but instead to the qualities acquired and a ritual act’s effectiveness.”⁷⁸ In other words, charisma is *not* simply confined to an individual quality and has a more nuanced relationship with modern political institutions.

What is at stake here is that despite the premodern forms of charismatic rule, charisma continues to play a pivotal role in modern politics. Weber presents the seemingly contradictory term *Führerdemokratie* (“leader” and “democracy”). A *leadership democracy* is characterized by “a naturally emotional dedication to and trust in the leader, which tends to result in an inclination to follow the most extraordinary, most promising leader who deploys the most attractive means of persuasion.”⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 379.

⁷⁷ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 380.

⁷⁸ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 382.

⁷⁹ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 408.

Weber refers to the “antiauthoritarian transformation of charisma” as the reinterpretation of the authoritarian nature of charismatic rule. Charisma begins authoritarian due to the unconditional acceptance of the ruler’s “personal proof” by the followers. However, the routinization of charismatic rule coincides with a move toward plebiscitary democracy:

A ruler legitimated by virtue of his own charisma becomes a ruler by the grace of those who follow him, since the latter are (formally) free to select and put in power whomever they like, and perhaps even depose him, which would be the consequence of a loss of legitimacy following the loss of his charisma and its personal proof. The ruler is now the freely elected leader.⁸⁰

In other words, the acceptance of the personal proof of the leader transforms from the consequence of its legitimacy into the basis of democratic legitimacy.⁸¹

Weber refers to *plebiscitary democracy* as “the most important type of leadership democracy...[which is] a form of charismatic rule concealed by the formality that legitimacy is derived from the will of the ruled and is only by virtue of this capable of being sustained.”⁸² *Elections* begin to reflect charisma insofar as the ruler only rules by the grace of those that follow them. The ruler is put in and can be potentially removed by the power of the electorate. Weber calls *plebiscitary rule* the most important transitional type of rule and is exemplified by the “party leaders” of the modern state. These leaders are distinguishable from bureaucratic rule since they have an independent source of legitimacy and are not strongly inserted into a hierarchy. This form of democracy is distinct from *leaderless democracies* which aim to minimize the rule of man by man.⁸³

As shown above, Weber provides the schematic for charismatic leadership and its routinization in *Economy and Society*. In his works on *Parliament and Government* and *The Russian Revolution*, he articulates more concrete concerns about complacent rule arising from irresponsible

⁸⁰ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 405-06.

⁸¹ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 405.

⁸² Weber, *Economy and Society*, 407.

⁸³ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 408.

leadership and its rubber-stamping of bureaucratic decisions. In *Politics as a Vocation*, Weber further clarifies charisma's role in modern politics via the figure of the called political leader who rises to the fullness of political responsibility and the problem of the demagogue.

Weber analyzes Otto von Bismarck's legacy after his rule ended in 1890. He takes a critical stance of his legacy contrary to the "unpolitical hero worship" toward Bismarck typical of the "conservative creatures" that owed their political existence to him.⁸⁴ During Bismarck's rule, he sought to split parties up through enacted emergency laws to be able to dissolve the Reichstag. For example, he presented contentious military budget matters which created enough strife between parties to cause political gridlock.⁸⁵ Furthermore, Bismarck was careful to appoint only ministers that he could easily remove in order to prevent any strong consolidation of powers that could oppose him.⁸⁶ He also only appointed ministers who could "be brought down at any time, if necessary, by discrediting [them] on purely personal grounds."⁸⁷ Bismarck thus limited parliamentary powers which left German political institutions unable to produce politically responsible leaders. Weber argues that these tactics by Bismarck left lasting effects on the German nation.

From 1875 onwards, Weber argues Bismarck's reign left lasting impacts on the German nation. First, his rule "led the nation to lose the habits of sharing responsibility, through its elected representatives, for its own political fate, which is the only way a nation can possibly be trained in the exercise of political judgement."⁸⁸ The nation was left lacking political education, especially as it pertained to parliament being a site for training individual minds. The nation was left without

⁸⁴ Weber, "Parliament and Government," 144.

⁸⁵ Weber, "Parliament and Government," 141.

⁸⁶ Max Weber, "Parliament and Government in Germany under a New Political Order," in *Political Writings*, ed. Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 130–44; quotation at 145.

⁸⁷ Weber, "Parliament and Government," 140.

⁸⁸ Weber, "Parliament and Government," 144.

a political will since most assumed that Bismarck would take care of political matters for them. Furthermore, the nation was accustomed to submitting passively to “monarchic government” while being unaccustomed to questioning the political qualifications of government officials. Weber concludes by arguing that the quality of parliament “depends on *whether anything* happens in *parliament* and on *how much depends on what happens there*, or whether it is merely the reluctantly tolerated rubber-stamping machine for a ruling bureaucracy.”⁸⁹

Next, Weber further substantiates his analysis of Bismarck’s lasting implications through his distinction between the rule by officials as opposed to political leadership. This distinction demonstrates bureaucratic rule’s necessity while also identifying the risks of a bureaucratic administration without politically responsible leadership. Weber notes that the modern state’s progressive march toward bureaucratic *officialdom* resembles the organizational structure of a factory with paid professionally trained officials with established responsibilities. He argues that this state “which adjudicates in accordance with rationally established law and administers according to rationally devised regulations stands in the closest relation to the development of modern capitalism.”⁹⁰ In conjunction with these developments, *parties* emerge as the will of those dominated by bureaucratic officialdom (“citizens of the state”) and they are characterized by free recruitment (an obstacle to their regulation).

However, there is a difference between bureaucratic competence and the appropriate behavior of a political leader. If a person in a “*leading* position performs leadership function[s] in the *spirit* of an ‘official,’ even a most able one, if he is a man accustomed to performing his work dutifully and honourably in accordance with regulations and orders, then he is useless, whether he

⁸⁹ Weber, “Parliament and Government,” 145.

⁹⁰ Weber, “Parliament and Government,” 147.

is at the head of a private firm or state.”⁹¹ This passage begins to elucidate what Weber later refers to as responsible political leadership (i.e. a leader cannot merely administer rule bureaucratically and must take personal responsibility for their political decisions).

Weber also emphasizes what *responsible* officials look like as well. Officials should have the opportunity to be educated during their rise through the ranks, be “outside the party,” behave objectively, and be willing to follow the leader except when it would be preferable to leave their office rather than fulfil an order they know to be inappropriate.⁹² For an official to be outside the party implies that they must “remain outside the *struggle* for power of his own.”⁹³ It is through the struggle for “personal power and acceptance of full *personal responsibility for one’s cause (Sache)* which is the consequence of such power – this is the very element in which the politician and the entrepreneur live and breathe.”⁹⁴ This difference in the responsibility of officials also entails that it would be irresponsible for an official to follow orders from a leader purely based on their *conviction*; rather “his sense of duty to his office overrides his individual willfulness.”⁹⁵ Weber’s distinction between the responsibility of leaders and officials has clear implications for what constitutes an effective parliamentary system.

Weber suggests that a *working parliament* is “one in which parliament *continually shares in the work of government and the control of the administration.*”⁹⁶ In contrast to a “merely talking parliament,” only a working parliament “can be the soil in which not merely demagogic, but gen-

⁹¹ Weber, “Parliament and Government,” 160

⁹² Weber, “Parliament and Government,” 160-61.

⁹³ Weber, “Parliament and Government,” 161

⁹⁴ Weber, “Parliament and Government,” 161

⁹⁵ Weber, “Parliament and Government,” 160

⁹⁶ Weber, “Parliament and Government,” 177

uinely *political* qualities of leadership can grow and work their way up through a process of selection,” (with the *power* and *responsibility* in the state as the reward for success).⁹⁷ Effective control of the administration depends on knowledge and an indispensable “right of inquiry” which brings a level of publicity to the inner workings of government. Specifically, he says “an effective system of *parliamentary supervision and control* which forces the administration to work *publicly* must be demanded as a prerequisite of the political education of the nation and any fruitful parliamentary work.”⁹⁸ In other words, a *working parliament* allows for the recruitment of leaders responsibly attached to the exercise of power and the political education of the people (i.e. as opposed to, for example, the politically complacent “conservative creatures” under Bismarck’s rule).⁹⁹

Weber contrasts a working parliament in his work on the Russian revolutions. He identifies an example of “pseudo-constitutionalism” which he defines as a politically irresponsible parliament that prevents the rise of politically talented leadership and promotes their morally justified ambitions for power. Weber did not consider the Russian October Revolution a genuinely socialist revolution; rather, it was, in his opinion, a “military revolt cloaked in socialist drapery.”¹⁰⁰ He argues that the “special quality necessary for this difficult area of responsible activity – including strict *objectivity*, the steady sense of *proportion*, the restrained *self-control*, and the capacity for *unobtrusive* action which it calls for – are not necessarily inherited along with the crown.” Weber argued that Russia needed “firm and strong powers” that make possible the removal of inadequate leaders when necessary.¹⁰¹ In other words, Weber suggests that mere “military revolt” did not

⁹⁷ Weber, “Parliament and Government,” 176-77.

⁹⁸ Weber, “Parliament and Government,” 182.

⁹⁹ See above, Weber, “Parliament and Government,” 130-44; quotation at 145.

¹⁰⁰ Wolfgang J. Mommsen, “Max Weber as a Critic of Marxism,” *The Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers canadiens de sociologie* 2, no. 4 (Autumn 1977): 381.

¹⁰¹ Max Weber, “Russia’s Transition to Pseudo-Democracy,” in *The Russian Revolutions*, ed. and trans. Gordon C. Wells and Peter Baehr (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 244-45.

constitute a revolution since the change in power still left Russia without a necessary working parliament (i.e. capable of producing the benefits mentioned above).¹⁰²

Weber maintains that the right of inquiry prevents parliamentary government from becoming merely the domination of the majority. Instead, where investigative powers are preserved for minorities, parliament can expose administrative actions to public scrutiny and place pressure for responsibility onto those who rule. A strong parliamentary system “alone consisting of men with the confidence of the voters, that can provide an apparatus capable, where necessary, in his own and the country’s interest, of removing a monarch lacking all political talent, without at the same time overturning political institutions.”¹⁰³

In contrast to pseudo-constitutionalism stands Weber’s concept of “great politics.” Great politics requires leaders to “know how power struggles are carried out in situations where regulations, commands and military or bureaucratic obedience are *not*, in the nature of things, appropriate methods – and this is the case in great politics.”¹⁰⁴ In other words, great politics is dependent on having a particular type of political leader.

In *Politics as a Vocation*, Weber recounts the development of the modern legal-rational state. Every country in the world has been undergoing a transition from service under charismatic leadership (typically monarchs) toward “professional politicians” who, unlike the charismatic leaders, “did not wish to become masters themselves, but to *enter into the service* of political masters.”¹⁰⁵ Unlike professional bureaucrats, a truly called politician must have passion, a sense

¹⁰² ¹⁰² Weber, “Parliament and Government,” 176-77.

¹⁰² Weber, “Parliament and Government,” 176-77, 182.

¹⁰³ Weber, “Russia’s Transition to Pseudo-Democracy,” 245-46.

¹⁰⁴ Weber, “Russia’s Transition to Pseudo-Democracy,” 245.

¹⁰⁵ Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” 38.

of responsibility, and a sense of proportion as they participate in struggles over which ultimate values should direct the political community.¹⁰⁶

Weber distinguishes between the called politician and the power politician. This distinction is most clearly seen through the figure of the *demagogue*. The demagogue can be a called politician or devolve into a mere power politician. The demagogue's *personality* helps them to gain power via secured seats, votes, etc. Party officials can't resist the tendency to submit to demagogic leaders with a powerful personality. The party followers look to the leader to achieve victories so they can benefit from rewards (i.e. their *chancen* of rewards that might come from post-redistribution). Weber notes that:

That is the price that has to be paid for having leaders. But there is only this stark choice: either a democracy with a leader together with a "machine" or a leaderless democracy, in other words, the rule of the "professional politicians" who have no vocation and who lack the inner, charismatic qualities that turn a man into a leader.¹⁰⁷

The demagogue, via charisma, can shake up the established order as the *homo novus* ("new man"). A demagogue can be inspiring, wield charisma to inspire an electorate (e.g. via delivering powerful speeches), and direct attention to value struggles. They can also fall into a trap of *vanity*. The "all-

¹⁰⁶ Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," 76-77.

Passion: They must have a passion as a "*commitment to the matter in hand* [Sachlichkeit], that is, the passionate dedication to a "cause" [Sache], to the God or demon that presides over it."

Responsibility: A sense of responsibility requires one to have a "service to a 'cause' [which] also means that a sense of *responsibility* toward that cause is made the decisive guiding light of action." Responsibility entails reckoning with average human failings. An individual that acts in accordance with an ethic of conviction "believes that if an action performed out of pure conviction has evil consequences, then the responsibility must lie not with the agent but with the world, the stupidity of men – or the will of God who created them thus." Those that act in accordance with an ethics of conviction only worry about making sure that the flame of pure conviction is never extinguished.

Distance: A sense of proportion which entails a sort of *distance*. Distance is crucial as "the heart of the problem is how to forge a unity between hot passion and a cool sense of proportion in one and the same person." This distance allows for sober and realistic judgment. Weber sees a politician lacking distance as condemned to be impotent in his duties.

¹⁰⁷ Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," 75.

too-human” weakness of vanity is “the deadly enemy of all dedication to a cause and of all distance, in this case, the distance from oneself.”¹⁰⁸ Out of vanity, the leader may strive for power for its own sake while lacking any struggle over ultimate worldviews.

In short, this section has shown that modern politics does not eliminate charisma. Instead, it expresses itself via parties, mass democracies, demagogues, etc. Demagogues can be genuine political leaders when passion is disciplined by responsibility and proportion. However, demagogues can also become mere power politicians when their charismatic rule is driven by vanity and the drive for power. Furthermore, followers and officials obey not just because of legal-rational or traditional norms. Followers may choose to obey when there is a chance of reward that becomes tied to the leader’s personal success.¹⁰⁹

Part IV: Recovering Charisma in Hanson and Kopstein’s Analysis

The previous section elucidated Weber’s conception of charisma and how it operates through various facets of modern politics. This section turns to the two central arguments of this paper. First, Hanson and Kopstein undertheorize charisma as a mechanism of transition between types of rule. Second, due to their insufficient account of charisma, their argument is weakened and risks determinism. To be clear, these arguments are not purely negative. Hanson and Kopstein’s argument could be *strengthened* with the inclusion of charismatic rule in their analysis and potentially avoid the following pitfalls.

Hanson and Kopstein’s work serves as a mostly solid application of Weberian types of rule to the twenty-first century political landscape. Their excellent historical examples demonstrate the

¹⁰⁸ Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” 77.

¹⁰⁹ Especially if the option is between being well compensated or facing the wrath of a well-connected former KGB officer, for example.

ways in which patrimonial rule threatens the modern state. In line with much of the recent literature on democratic backsliding, it seems extremely useful to move beyond understanding regime changes in terms of an oversimplified paradigm of democracy vs autocracy. Instead, they highlight the substantial tensions which operate *within* modern political institutions between what they refer to as the *rule of man* and the *rule of law*.

However, Hanson and Kopstein almost entirely neglect Weber's third type of rule. Charisma and charismatic rule appear only once throughout their entire text. The following passage amounts to the total coverage spent explicitly on the concepts at hand:

During periods of social crisis, followers might obey orders under the spell of a leader's personal charisma. But charismatic leadership generally does not last long. To endure over time, the personal bond between leaders and their staff typically requires that both see themselves as defending the sacred traditions of their larger community.¹¹⁰

Hanson and Kopstein are right to flag the ways in which charisma does not last in its pure form, but they seem to confuse its short-lasting nature and its significance.

Hanson and Kopstein seem to allude to charisma indirectly in a few different examples. They note the ways in which Putin's personality traits allowed him to maintain something like the gift of grace in the view of a variety of different and incompatible constituencies (e.g. Putin's former ties to the KGB appealed to like-minded military officials who called for a leader with a strong image, etc.).¹¹¹ Putin's image also appealed to the more moderate end of the political spectrum as he appeared to be an individual who possessed the strength necessary to retool an entire economy. In short, the role of charisma was begging to be mentioned throughout Hanson and Kopstein's exposition on the circumstances which paved the way for Putin's electoral victory.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 51.

¹¹¹ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 85-90.

¹¹² Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 85-90.

Just when they approached an opportunity to recognize the influence of charisma, they glossed over the phenomenon and jumped straight into Putin's slide into patrimonialism.

The problem with the absence of charisma in this presentation is that they treat charisma as a fleeting one-off moment where an individual's magnetic personality meets fortuitous timing to produce the above-mentioned outcomes. However, from the vantage point of Weber's typology, ignoring charisma equates to completely missing a key mechanism for theorizing the disruption of traditional rule and the emergence of new forms of legitimate rule. In other words, they completely ignore charisma's status as legitimized rule where obedience emerges from the ruled and is maintained by the ruler.¹¹³ Charisma is a key form of legitimacy which redirects obedience away from legal-rational rule toward the leader and reorganizes the followers/institutions/material interests, etc. around personalistic loyalty. The allure of charisma is precisely its promise of a break from the ordinary when the ordinary is disenchanting and stultifying (e.g. long-standing legal-rational rule).¹¹⁴ Hanson and Kopstein's inadequate treatment of charisma means that they undertheorize how legal-rational obedience can be radically redirected toward the leader and become a patrimonial form of rule.

Perhaps because of their inadequate account of charisma, Hanson and Kopstein also seem to discount the possibility of a more extreme form of rule emerging from the transition of legal-rational rule toward traditional/personalistic forms. Weber argues that legal-rational rule can tend toward traditional forms of rule especially when the administrative staff forms around personalistic rulers instead of impersonal offices.¹¹⁵ If Hanson and Kopstein were truly worried about the exis-

¹¹³ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 374-75, 403-07.

¹¹⁴ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 374-378.

¹¹⁵ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 361.

tential threat on the modern state, it seems like they should consider the extreme form of patrimonialism where power is “maximized” and restrained by traditionalism in appearance only (i.e. sultanism).¹¹⁶ Further, without adequate attention to charisma’s disruptive role, the movement from legal-rational rule toward patrimonial rule feels more like a one-way causal pathway.

Before legal-rational rule has a chance to simply transition to patrimonial rule, it can be vulnerable in many instances to indeterminate charismatic rupture.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, charismatic authority can fail due to competing charismatic claims or renewed legal-rational projects. For example, a prophet who provides a prophecy may be granted the gift of grace from their followers which would remain dependent on whether their prophecy continued to come true. In other words, in the realm of elections, if a leader possesses charisma due to their personal quality that grounds their promises to combat corruption and strengthen the economy, followers may break from supporting such a leader if the economy then proceeds to collapse (i.e. their promised prophecy failed to come true). It might take only a moment of disillusionment or the rise of an alternative charismatic claim to disrupt an otherwise smooth flow toward patrimonial consolidation.

Hungary, an example which Hanson and Kopstein utilize, illustrates the ways in which competing charismatic claims further complicates their causal story. Viktor Orbán is cited as a key figure in the account of the “East to West” narrative.¹¹⁸ Orbán’s rise to power via appeals to break from the ordinary appeared as “a strange combination of traditionalism and kleptocracy, wrapped in a veneer of clear legalism – to the direct benefit of his cronies.”¹¹⁹ Hanson and Kopstein note

¹¹⁶ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 361.

¹¹⁷ For example, competing charismatic claims may appear in times of chaos where people feel “enthusiasm... despair and hope.” -- Swedberg and Agevall, *Max Weber Dictionary*, 35, citing Weber, *Economy and Society* [1978], 242.

¹¹⁸ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 95, 109, 112-13.

¹¹⁹ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 109.

that Hungary, “a country whose independence was twice crushed by Russia, first in 1849 and then in 1956, would, under Viktor Orbán, find greater cultural affinity with Vladimir Putin’s regime than with Joe Biden’s America.”¹²⁰ They also point to the ways in which Orbán attacked the core of Hungary’s modern state “bit by bit with a bloated army of incompetent loyalists who wrecked Hungary’s schools, gutted its healthcare system, and forced its most prestigious university to flee to neighboring Austria.”¹²¹ Orbán’s “kleptocratic traditionalism” also left the country’s economy in shambles.

More to the point, the 2026 elections in Hungary stand as a gentle counterpoint to the domino story presented by Hanson and Kopstein. For example, Péter Magyar’s campaign began with his resignation from his long-standing position within the Fidesz party (i.e. he was a part of Orbán’s administrative staff). This tracks Weber’s notion of *sociation* mentioned above (i.e. where members of the administration challenge the rule).¹²² Magyar expressed dissatisfaction with how the Fidesz governed the country and formed a party which sought to offer a political platform for those dissatisfied with the existing government/opposition parties. He ran an anti-corruption campaign with promises to promote stable relationships with the EU/NATO and to impose executive term limits of eight years.

To be clear, it is not that recently elected prime minister Magyar is some sort of magic bullet which will undo nearly two decades of patrimonial damage to the country. It seems that Hanson and Kopstein are still right to worry about the long-term risks of institutional capture. Yet Magyar’s political ascent *does* hint at a way in which *charisma must be accounted for* to properly theorize transitions between types of rule.

¹²⁰ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 112.

¹²¹ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 112-13.

¹²² Weber, *Economy and Society*, 37. See also the section which covers the significance of *sociation* in Part: 1.

On the one hand, this campaign is indicative of a departure from the everyday in that it offered something new via a then-unknown political party. Voters arguably recognized Péter Magyar's charisma as the potential to be a successful counter to Orbán's long-standing personalized authority. Some of Magyar's popularized campaign slogans included "system change, peacefully, responsibly," "Árad a TISZA!" ("The Tisza is rising!"), and calls to rebuild Hungary "step by step, brick by brick."¹²³ Magyar's own rhetoric from his victory speech captures this sentiment: "They have given us a mandate to open a new chapter in Hungary's history. Not only to change the government, but to change the system as well. To start again."¹²⁴ Here his language further flags that his victory represents a type of charismatic rupture from the "ordinary" rule before him.

On the other hand, Magyar's victory demonstrates the possibility for charisma to be boring. This is especially the case when that ordinary seems like an impersonal and inescapable situation that appears formulaically determined. Again, Weber warns of a situation where bureaucratic rule dominates at the expense of responsible leaders, administrators, and the ruled.¹²⁵ However, Magyar's platform is based, for the most part, on ordinary legal-rational policies dealing with term limits, the rollback of previous reforms, and transparency. The Hungarian case is a prime example of how *charisma* can not only support movement toward patrimonialism but can also support the reaffirmation of legal-rational rule.

This example occurred after the publication of Hanson and Kopstein's work which was published before the 2026 elections. However, my argument still stands; without accounting for charisma and the unstable nature of charismatic rule, the conclusions which they arrive at risk

¹²³ <https://magyartisza.hu/hirek/ujsag/%C3%BAjabb-m%C3%A9rf%C3%B6ldk%C5%91h%C3%B6z-%C3%A9rt-a-rendszerv%C3%A1lt%C3%A1s-beny%C3%BAjtotta-els%C5%91-javaslatcsomagj%C3%A1t-a-tisza-frakci%C3%B3>

¹²⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/world/magyar-sworn-hungarys-prime-minister-promises-change-2026-05-09/>

¹²⁵ Weber, "Parliament and Government," 160-61. & Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," 77.

sounding overly deterministic. When applying Weberian concepts to modern politics, charisma plays an essential explanatory role when analyzing changes in types of rule.

For example, Hanson and Kopstein suggest that the "full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine must therefore be understood not only as a vital struggle for the future of democracy. It also marks a potential turning point in the global battle between patrimonialism and the modern state."¹²⁶ They may be merely using the conflict as symbolically capturing the essence of their overarching argument. Yet it seems to oversimplify the ongoing tensions between types of rule. Even if Ukraine achieves a victory and deals a crippling blow to Hanson and Kopstein's archetypal patrimonial threat, Weber does not seem to suggest that such an outcome would settle the problem once and for all. Weber's classifications of the ideal types of rule are historically independent and recurring measures of legitimate rule.

Hanson and Kopstein provide four practical strategies to address the patrimonial threat they theorize. First, they argue that the problem must be accurately identified in the first place. However, a more holistic account of *all three* of Weber's ideal types of rule is necessary to meet their own standard. By reducing the problem to a tension between patrimonialism ("rule by man") and our legal-rational modern state ("rule of law"), the analysis seems to slip into the type of binary analysis they attempted to avoid in the first place. It may be the case that this binary is more useful than the oversimplified dichotomy between autocracy and democracy. However, without the inclusion of Weber's third type of legitimate rule, their theory lacks a mechanism which explains the destabilization of legal-rational authority in the first place.

¹²⁶Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 153.

Second, they suggest that we should “fortify and honor the modern state rather than attack it.”¹²⁷ A fortified modern state necessitates a sensitivity for the anti-bureaucratic/legal-rational claims made by patrimonial leaders. This also includes resisting the “siren calls from the left” like arguments ranging from “radical inclusion of ordinary citizens into everyday state administration to the rejection of meritocracy as a principle for recruitment into educational, cultural, and bureaucratic institutions.”¹²⁸ Recovering charisma strengthens Hanson and Kopstein’s goal to fortify the modern state because it helps identify the various ways extraordinary claims to surpass legal-rational authority can be legitimated. The erosion of legal-rational authority can come from personalistic leaders who offer an alternative to impersonal rule. However, as Hanson and Kopstein point out, it may also appear as potentially misguided calls to action from the left (e.g. utopianism) that inadvertently weaken legal-rational institutions.

Third, they argue that there needs to be “an urgent drive to recruit the next generation of young people to commit themselves to lives of government service, lest the worsening attrition of professional expertise in our state agencies pass the tipping point.”¹²⁹ The fortification of the modern state demands more than a leader who merely administers rule bureaucratically and officials in a situation where their “sense of duty to his office overrides his individual willfulness.”¹³⁰ The recruitment of a new generation is a necessary but insufficient condition. Without considering the compelling aspects of charisma in modern politics, the next generation may lack the responsibility necessary to avoid the failures of Bismarck’s pseudo-parliamentarism and Russia’s powerless parliamentarism.

¹²⁷ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 12.

¹²⁸ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 13.

¹²⁹ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 13.

¹³⁰ Weber, “Parliament and Government,” 159-160.

Finally, they argue that we must “recognize that the assault on the modern state is being explicitly encouraged by patrimonial rulers who would love nothing more than to dismantle the global liberal order.”¹³¹ It has been shown that charisma is necessary to avoid the illusion of an inevitable patrimonial domino effect. A stronger account of the charismatic mechanisms involved is more effective when sounding the proverbial siren on the legitimate threat of patrimonial capture.

To be clear, reassessing patrimonialism after the recovery of the forgotten charismatic rule serves to strengthen rather than cripple Hanson and Kopstein’s work. As seen in the examples provided above, accounting for charisma provides the theoretical nuance necessary to capture how rule is legitimized, maintained, and/or transformed. While a better capacity for descriptive analysis does not eliminate the concerns of patrimonialism, it likely keeps the door open for better answers to the age-old question of “what is to be done?”

Conclusion

Hanson and Kopstein’s Weberian approach is strong in many respects. They are right about the ability of personal/patrimonial rule to make legal-rational authority vulnerable. This is especially the case when those loyal to the regime are dependent on those in power to an extent that they must either submit or face the consequences. They also highlight the ways in which patrimonial/personalistic rulers work *through* institutions, not simply withering them away like some of the early democratic backsliding literature would suggest. In other words, they show that modern

¹³¹ Hanson and Kopstein, *Assault on the State*, 13.

patrimonial leaders can have authoritarian behaviors well within the formally democratic institutions. The erosion of the rule of law by the rule of man thus occurs through targeted repurposing of institutions.

This thesis has argued that Hanson and Kopstein's account is incomplete without the third form of legitimate rule: charisma. Theorizing patrimonialism alongside charismatic authority enables a more detailed account of charisma's rupture from the everyday/ordinary and demonstrate how leaders garner authorization from the ruled in the first place. Charisma also helps explain the contexts where opportunities may arise to interrupt a slide into patrimonial rule. Charisma destabilizes political rule in ways that cannot be reduced to a unilateral routinization toward patrimonial rule.

I have demonstrated through a return to Weber's ideal types of rule that forms of rule are dynamic and are perpetually in unstable tension with each other. Charisma clarifies this ongoing tension by showing how moments of crisis can open opportunities for alternative charismatic claims to authority, authorize breaks from the ordinary "business as usual," and create possibilities which are irreducible to an inevitable march toward patrimonial rule. From this standpoint, charisma supports a more nuanced account of the "critical junctures" which Hanson and Kopstein use on multiple occasions to describe historical moments of opportunity through which to change the course of history. Hanson and Kopstein's argument largely frames the modern state within the threat of a movement toward patrimonialism. Recovering charisma strengthens their theoretical account of the patrimonial threat to the modern state and reduces the risk of treating contemporary politics deterministically.

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