The flight of the eagle: The charismatic leadership of Sá Carneiro in Portugal's transition to democracy

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the impact of the leadership of Francisco Sá Carneiro, the first leader of the Portuguese Social Democratic Party, and Prime Minister, in the tumultuous years of Portugal's transition to democracy in the 1970s. Sá Carneiro was and still is revered as a unique charismatic figure within the party, and is viewed today as the founder of the Democratic Right in Portugal. This qualitative analysis emphasizes major aspects of Sá Carneiro's career and leadership, paying special attention to the development of charismatic dynamics between the leader and his supporters. The author argues that Sá Carneiro's discourse and actions throughout the years were a major factor in the emergence and consolidation of a charismatic community around the leader that persists to this day.

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He was simple and direct; but his eyes, his gestures, the whole man, proclaimed the presence of some secret spring of certainty, some fundamental well into which no disturbing glimmers penetrated.- John Galsworthy.

1. Introduction

The interest in leadership is not exclusive to any field of human activity. Throughout the times it has captured the imagination of many novelists, historians and commentators. The rise and fall of leaders, as well as the people and movements they inspired, for better or worse, are themes of endless scrutiny and popular interest. The social science focus on the study of leadership is, however, relatively recent (for a background see Rustow, 1970; Paige, 1977). But such novelty has not precluded a wide boom in leadership studies. Naturally, a subject of such wide appeal crosses many research areas; leadership is an interdisciplinary field by excellence. Religious, sociological, psychological, and organizational literatures have contributed, in different ways, to enhance, redefine, and expand the understanding of leadership.

Within this booming field the study of charismatic leadership has been at the center of many discussions, theorizations, and empirical demonstrations. Max Weber, in the first half of the 20th century, was the first to apply the term *charisma* to the world of social sciences and his contribution became the founding moment of charismatic leadership studies—in such a manner that, in regard to the world of political leadership, it has been lamented that "the theory of charisma has moved on little or not at all since Weber's initial formulations" (Eatwell, 2006: 153). Originally a religious term meaning "gift of grace," charisma in Weber's usage defines a personal and emotional relationship in which a leader emerges in times of crisis and widespread distress, and is perceived as a quasi-superhuman to whose heroic qualities and mission of salvation his followers "surrender" (Weber, 1978: 1115). This characterization of the charismatic leader as someone with a sense of special mission to revitalize or save a specific group, plunged into turmoil, has persisted in subsequent research on charisma: it is the feature most constantly ascribed to leaders

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perceived as "charismatic," and it is generally seen at the very core of the charismatic dynamics in both authoritarian and democratic regimes. But perhaps it is an overstatement to decry the immutability of Weber's theory. Charisma is a variable, and it should be viewed as such rather than as an all-or-none concept. Indeed, it was initially formulated as an ideal type, an exaggeration of reality. When Weber's concept is adapted to contemporary democratic society, the charismatic impact of leaders may be evaluated on a continuum ranging from one pole (Weberian "maximum" charisma) to another ("minimum" or untraceable).

At the same time, many authors have built upon Weber's contribution and suggested ways of enhancing the study of charismatic authority in both contemporary political and organizational contexts. In many ways the role of followers has been promoted, while the role of leaders, if not demoted, has been minimized. In the study of organizations, research into the "romance of leadership" concludes that leader's behaviors and traits are in reality much less important, or even irrelevant, to the formation of charisma and the success of the collective mission. Followers, constituted as a group, are the ones who create, for a variety of dynamics, larger than life attributes to leaders (see Meindl, 1995). But the view that charisma is literally in the "eye of the beholder" and that the source of the charismatic bond is to be found primarily within the followers' dynamics has also gained plenty of traction in the study of political charisma, and beyond. Or, to put it differently, much of the focus has been on demand (audience response) than supply (the role of the leaders). Additionally, the tendency has been to ascribe more importance to structure (social–economic conditions) than to agency (individuals), in the development of charismatic relationships. Thus, the role of crisis is magnified. Such examples abound. Madsen and Snow (1991) argue not only that a collective psychological crisis is essential to the emergence of charisma, but also that such a crisis must be relatively abrupt. In a sense, the charismatic bonding is circumstantial because the right moment only comes when the followers are no longer able to cope with the environment and try to find their proxy. In their view, the attributes and actions of the leader in any other moment other than the "right moment" would not strike the necessary chord of response. The charismatic leader helps to give people a sense of direction, but without collective need truly charismatic groups can only be found in small spellbound groups. Van Dooren (1994) sees charisma, above all as "the result of externalization of basic human needs, reinforced by or supplemented by social adjustment processes." But the rise of these needs can be a consequence not only of social crises or changes, but also of identity crises, or crises of personal growth. His framework of analysis is important to understand the nature of the charismatic bond but purposely avoids any systematic analysis of the role of the leader in the creation of the bond. In a way, the demand side (the followers) takes priority over the supply side (the leader). The same can be said of Ronald Heifetz's approach to charismatic leadership, which states that communities generate charismatic authority during times of distress when people search desperately for someone to relieve their pain. In his view, "in times of disorientation [we] seem inclined to endow our authorities with idealized gifts. As long as they serve this need, we imagine them larger than life… As in Hollywood, the star steps into a role that the audience has made" (2001: 66, 247).

It would be far from me to deny the association between crisis and the emergence of charismatic leadership. It seems logical to infer that a crisis situation is more likely to produce attributions of charisma than a non-crisis situation. Empirical research supports this hypothesis (for example, Pillai, 1996). The point to be made is that an overemphasis on the role of crisis may obscure the active role that leaders – through their words, actions, and example – effectively played in the formation of the charismatic community. I tend to side with Ann Ruth Willner's assertion that "preconditions of exogenous social crisis and psychic distress are conducive to the emergence of charismatic political leadership but they are not necessary." Consequently, a great weight can be attached to crisis as an explanatory factor of charismatic political leadership "only if we extend the notion of crisis to include those largely generated by the actions of the leader" (1984: 52). This may well be an exaggerated proposition (i.e., the leader creates the crisis), but it serves the purpose of showing that there are a number of factors at work in a situation of crisis, and leaders, in their relationship with the led, are propelled by *and* propel a sense of encircling threat by declaring that a turning point for the community is at hand if the vision of the leader is pushed, decisively, collectively, forward.

Instead of a follower-centered perspective, I want to show throughout this article a case of a leader whose behavior was neither irrelevant to nor independent from the development of charismatic dynamics with the community. The leader's personality, behavior, and discourse played an actual and real role in the definition of his leadership as charismatic; it was not solely an idealization or "imagined" construction by the followers. I will do this by focusing on the case study of Francisco Sá Carneiro, one of the crucial figures of Portugal's transition to democracy in the 1970s, the first leader of the largest center-right political party as well as prime minister (1980). I focus both on episodes of his career and on behaviors that I see as relevant to an understanding of the points being made about charismatic leadership. The analysis will be complemented by accounts, both contemporary and later, of those who had first-hand experience of the political leadership of the Portuguese leader — disciples, followers, and even enemies. Included are also personal interviews. This approach has been suggested before. Robert C. Tucker, for instance, stresses the need to take a close look – particularly by analyzing memoirs and private correspondence – at those intimate with the leader (1968: 741). Willner corroborates this idea and notes the importance of "statements freely tendered by followers concerning their beliefs in and emotional commitment toward a leader, especially when given in their own words" (1984: 30). Though an argument can be made about Sá Carneiro's charisma and devotion at a mass level (see for example Bruneau & Macleod, 1986: 94), a great emphasis is placed here on analyzing the charisma of the coterie (Eatwell, 2006: 153), which originates from "direct personal contact between the leader and his immediate followers" (Rustow, 1968: 17), including in this case local activists and militants at large. My contribution to the study of political leadership is qualitative and in tune with Howard Gardner's insight that the success of leadership and related attributions of greatness emanate from the discourse (verbal and symbolic) and actions of the leader, the ways in which the leader embodies the mission pursued, and the example he sets for the group. This in turn triggers devotion and emotional commitment on the part of the followers. Leadership is thus a narrative in which the leader incarnates the *story* he has announced to the group (Gardner, 1995: 42). I adopt a broad concept of discourse that goes beyond what is spoken and written; it is not limited to verbal language but comprises actions and imagery. In this sense symbolic communication acts are of utmost significance for an understanding of the dynamics of leadership, particularly charismatic leadership.