



Luthuli & Leadership

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Albert Luthuli and Charismatic Leadership

In this contribution to this occasion in which we are paying homage to Albert Luthuli, I would like to offer some philosophical reflections on leadership utilising Max Weber's notion of charisma. I would like to propose that this notion offers a heuristic lens through which we might account for Luthuli's hugely influential leadership style that captured the imagination of the disenfranchised African people of South Africa during the 1930s through to the 1960s. This was a period in South African history during which the African people were radically disempowered and they were led by a man – indeed in the thrall of a leader to which they largely had little to no access at crucial times in the struggle. They had limited access to their leader on account of successive bans imposed over many years on Luthuli by the then government designed to keep him away from larger South African centres and from all public meetings aimed at minimising his influence and effectiveness as a leader. What then accounts for the enigmatic influence of the “absent” leader, Albert Luthuli? More accurately put, how did Albert Luthuli exert such a powerful presence despite his forced absence at crucial times of the struggle?

Exemplary of his influence is the following anecdote conveyed by Mary Benson:

During a brief interlude between banning orders Luthuli addressed large audiences including white people in Cape Town. Benson remarks that his lucid and uncompromising approach inspired great enthusiasm. “After one meeting a crocodile of men and women of all races followed him down the street, singing ‘Somlandela Luthuli...’ - ‘We will follow Luthuli’. Swinging and swaying in the traditional steps - one, two, three, kick - ‘we will follow, we will follow Luthuli...’¹

Weber theorised the idea of the leader who enjoys his authority not primarily through enacted position or traditional dignity, but owing to the gifts of grace (charisma) “by virtue of which he is set apart from other men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities” (Weber 1947: 358 cited by Tucker 1968: 731).²

¹ Source: <https://www.polity.org.za/article/leadership-in-question-part-seven-chief-albert-luthulis-leadership-comprised-multiple-mutually-respectful-identities-2021-01-18>

² I take my lead from Robert Tucker (1968)'s study in which he took Weber's principle thoughts on charismatic leadership as point of

Owing to their extraordinary qualities or what is perceived to be such, these leaders inspire followings among which their superior authority is freely accepted. The charismatic leader engenders deep respect and admiration from those in his thrall. They do not follow him out of fear or monetary inducement, but out of love, passionate devotion and enthusiasm. The following is not essentially or primarily organised bureaucratically, but stands in a communitarian relationship to their leader.

Powerful Persuasion rather than Absolute Obedience

What is specific to the charismatic response, according to Tucker (1968: 736) is not absolute obedience toward the leader, but simply the fact that by virtue of extraordinary qualities he exercises a kind of “domination” (as Weber puts it) over the followers. In other words, “[f]ollowers can be under the spell of a leader and can accept him as supremely authoritative without necessarily agreeing with him on all occasions” (ibid.). In the highly argumentative atmosphere of a modern radical party that Tucker cites as an example, a leader can be both charismatic and contested on specific points. Indeed, he can even display his charisma in the inspired way in which he resolves or dissipates dissent by the sheer power of his political discourse. Immense persuasiveness in argument may, in other words, be one of the charismatic qualities by virtue of which a leader acquires charisma in his followers’ eyes. One “should therefore not envisage the charismatic authority-relation as one that necessarily involves automatic acquiescence of the followers in the leader’s views or excludes the possibility of their disagreeing with him on occasion and up to a point. All the more so since as an innovator, the charismatic leader tends to break with established ways of thinking and acting, and thus to take positions which diverge from his followers’ expectations and consequently raise disturbing questions in their minds” (Tucker 1968: 736).

Charismatic authority is not exerted by way of the demand for absolute and unconditional obedience, but operates through powerful persuasion. According to the Greeks, persuasion operates along three lines: *ethos* is about establishing your authority to speak on the subject in question; *logos* is the logical argument you present to support your point; and *pathos* is your attempt to sway an audience emotionally. Charismatic authority would then be recognised to be legitimate by the followers and persuasive on the level of reason, which evokes affective commitment from the followers.

departure and developed an independent reformulation of the concept of charismatic leadership.

Possession of Extraordinary Qualities vs. Action

One might expect that it is presumably necessary to possess extraordinary qualities in order to be widely perceived over a period of time as the bearer of them, Tucker (1968: 737) contends. However, as he points out, Weber stresses the *response of the followers* as the decisive test of charisma. To be a charismatic leader is essentially to be *perceived* as such: “It is recognition on the part of those subject to authority which is decisive for the validity of charisma” (Weber 1947: 359 cited by Tucker 1968: 737). Moreover, such recognition of charisma on the part of the followers must be reinforced from time to time by the leader’s demonstration of charismatic powers. He must furnish “proof” of the exceptional abilities or qualities for the sake of which his followers render him their personal devotion, Tucker continues (ibid.).

Importantly, then, charisma as theorised by Weber is not so much the inherent quality of compelling attractiveness or charm that can inspire devotion in others that derives from the person of the charismatic leader. Rather than his person(-ality), it is a quality that derives from his actions. It is action that makes for the quality of gravitational pull, and not the gravitational pull of charisma that makes for the leadership.

Innovative/Revolutionary Character

Another important theme that Weber stresses in his treatment of charisma is its innovative and even revolutionary character. Charisma, he theorises, does not belong to the world of everyday routine; it calls for new ways of life and thought. Whatever the particular social setting (education, religion, chieftainship or politics), charismatic leadership rejects old rules and issues a demand for change. It preaches or creates *new obligations*.

Tucker (1968: 737) explains that “[i]n contrast and opposition to bureaucratic authority, which respects rational rules, and to traditional authority, which is bound to precedents handed down from the past, charismatic authority, within the sphere of its claims, ‘repudiates the past, and is in this sense a specifically revolutionary force’” (Weber 1947: 362). The charismatic leader challenges established practice by going to the root of the matter.

Although Weber distinguished between these three types of authority – bureaucratic, traditional and charismatic – he was perfectly well aware that in practice these three types more often than not overlap,



as was the case with Luthuli. So apart from a certain measure of respect for rational rules, and for precedents handed down from the past, Luthuli's authority derived from his revolutionary practice.

Social Movement

As such "charismatic leadership, in Weber's view, typically appears in the setting of a social *movement* of some kind or creates such a movement. The charismatic leader is not simply any leader who is idolised and freely followed for his extraordinary leadership qualities, but one who demonstrates such qualities in the process of summoning people to join in a movement for change and in leading such a movement" (Tucker 1968: 737). One might contend that charismatic leadership inherently tends to become the centre of a charismatically led movement for change. "To speak of charismatic leaders, then, is to speak of charismatic movements; the two phenomena are inseparable" (ibid.).

Test of Charisma: Back to the Beginnings

"Emphasis upon the charismatic movement as the typical habitat or creation of charismatic leaders has important methodological implications for the study of such leadership", Tucker (1968: 739) avers. It means, he continues, that "when we study a case – or possible case – of charismatic leadership, we should always go back to the beginnings of the given leader-personality's emergence as a leader, rather than start with the status achieved at the zenith of his career" (ibid.). This has bearing on the problem of identifying charisma. To correctly classify a given leader as charismatic, it is of great importance, therefore, to study his impact upon those around him *before* he achieves office. Tucker (1968: 740) postulates that "[w]e may lay it down as a general rule that when a leader-personality is genuinely charismatic, his charisma will begin to manifest itself before he becomes politically powerful".

The pre-power of Luthuli's career would then be the litmus test of correctly identifying his leadership as charismatic. As you might know, Luthuli's charismatic leadership was not born on the public political stage. It started at home, as a farmer, at the school where he taught, and within the context of his tribe. In fact, the abundant evidence of his "pre-power" charismatic leadership paved the way for his natural election first as chief and then as the president general of the ANC at the apex of struggle against oppression.

Charisma as Salvationist

"Why does charismatic leadership emerge in the setting of movement for change, and what is the explanation of the passionate devotion that the charismatic leader of such a movement typically receives from his followers?" (Tucker 1968: 742). Weber tells us that charismatic leaders have been the natural leaders "in time of psychic, physical, economic, ethical, religious, political distress", and that charisma inspires its followers with "a devotion born of distress and enthusiasm" (Gerth & Mills 1946: 245, 249 cited by Tucker (ibid.)). What the charismatic leader embodies is the promise or hope of salvation – deliverance from distress. He offers himself to the people as leader uniquely qualified to lead them out of their predicament, and the charismatic following that he inspires stands testimony to the fact that he succeeds in doing so.

What distinguishes charismatic leadership from "inspired leadership" or "heroic leadership" is that it is "specifically *salvationist* or *messianic in nature*" (Tucker 1968: 743). This "helps explain the special emotional intensity of the charismatic response, and also why the sustaining of charisma requires the leader to furnish periodic 'proof' of the powers that he claims" (ibid.) or exudes. "The followers respond to the charismatic leader with passionate loyalty because the salvation, or promise of it, that he appears to embody represents the fulfillment of urgently felt needs" (ibid.). Crucial, then, to charismatic leadership, Tucker maintains, is the leader's periodical demonstration of powers of efficacious leadership on the road to the salvationist goal.

Luthuli's life as leader – whether of his family, his community, his tribe, or his disenfranchised people is marked by an over-abundance of evidence of his efficacious leadership. Their total lack of efficient leadership helps explain why since after the time of Mandela, ANC leaders have failed to evoke any charismatic response from the people.

Charismatic Response as Situational

"The first determinant of a charismatic response is situational; the state of acute distress predisposes people to perceive as extraordinarily qualified and to follow with enthusiastic loyalty a leadership offering salvation from distress" (Tucker 1968: 743). This strongly suggests that when the situational determinant of a charismatic response is present, the presence or absence of a genuinely charismatic leader-personality may be a critical historical variable (ibid., p. 744). The varied fate of the ANC's struggle against the disempowerment of their people may be accounted for by the absence of such charismatic leader-personalities at certain times, and the presence of figures such as Luthuli – the Mandela before Mandela – and Mandela – should we say the Luthuli after Luthuli – at others.



To Sum Up

Tucker (1968: 747) sums it up as follows:

charismatic movements for change arise and spread at times when painful forms of distress are prevalent in a society or in some particular stratum of a society. The unique personal authority of the leader and the rapturous response of many of the followers grow out of their feeling that he, by virtue of his special powers as a leader, embodies the movement's salvation promise ... Since he ministers to their most pressing need – the need to believe in the real possibility of escape from an oppressive life-predicament – they not only follow him voluntarily, but tend to revere him and surround him with that spontaneous cult of personality which appears to be one of the symptomatic marks of the charismatic leader-follower relationship.

Charisma: A Phenomenon Belonging to the Past?

This explains, according to Tucker (1968: 747-748), “why we cannot rightly view the phenomenon of charisma as belonging primarily to the historical past. Wherever and whenever human beings in considerable numbers live in desperation or despair, charismatic leaders and movements are likely to appear. Depending upon such factors as the quality of the leadership and the depth and breadth of the existential disquiet to which it appeals, these movements will sometimes prove of little consequence and sometimes of great”.

Our local historical present testifies to the continued existential distress of the vast majority of the population who remains disempowered and plunged into abject poverty, which makes for conditions ripe for the emergence of a new charismatic movement. What such a movement depends upon, though is the concomitant emergence of a efficacious leader – the glaring absence of which we have witnessed in the past 25 years.

Luthuli's Charisma

Luthuli was a man who believed that leadership stems from being an example. His actions, his unquestionable integrity, his non-exclusionary, non-judgemental principles, his unwavering respect for all others regardless of race, colour or creed, made him someone the people could easily put their faith in.

He was committed to peace and non-violence without being a pacifist and accepted the armed struggle only as a limited exception necessary for the acquisition of peace.

He embodied both strength and gentleness, confidence and humility, authority and servitude. Indeed, his persuasive authority stemmed from the fact that he always put the welfare of others before his own.

His contagious charismatic leadership spilled over from his family life, into his community and tribal circles, and beyond that into political life.

In all spheres of his involvement – as family man, as educator, as sugar cane farmer, as elected chief, as elected general president of the ANC – he demonstrated effective leadership through his belief in organisation for the sake of the empowerment of the people. One such perhaps lesser-known example is his founding of the African Cane Growers Association through which he organised the sugar cane farmers of Groutville to trade collectively with the white-owned mills in order to protect their rights. More widely known is the fact that he led the ANC during a crucial time in which protest politics transitioned to militant defiance. During this time he provided the African people with a programme for action which showed them how to move forward. He had the profound ability to unite the ANC.

In an attempt to curb his charismatic influence he was repeatedly banned and isolated by the Nationalist government. The inefficacy of this attempt is best captured by Alan Paton's Praise Song For Luthuli, with which I conclude:

Alan Paton's Praise Song For Luthuli

You there, Luthuli, they thought your world was small
They thought you lived in Groutville^[LSEP]
Now they discover^[LSEP]
It is the world you live in.

You there, Luthuli, they thought your name was small
Luthuli of Groutville^[LSEP]
Now they discover^[LSEP]
Your name is everywhere.

You there, Luthuli, they thought that you were chained
like a backyard dog^[LSEP]
Now they discover^[LSEP]
They are in prison, but you are free.

You there, Luthuli, they took your name of Chief
You were not worthy^[LSEP]
Now they discover^[LSEP]
You are more Chief than ever.

Go well, Luthuli, may your days be long



Your country cannot spare you^{[1][2]}
Win for us also, Luthuli^{[1][2]}
The prize of Peace.

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