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David A. Bell, *Men on Horseback: The Power of Charisma in the Age of Revolution*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020. 352pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$30.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780374207922; \$14.99 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781250798626; \$14.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9780374714741.

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“Charisma” is a word widely used and rarely defined with any precision. Its public manifestations have become so loose that it can refer to anyone with “excellent interpersonal and communication skills,” to a brand of sheets you can buy at Bed, Bath & Beyond, or even to the addition of iceberg lettuce to a salad, said to lend charisma to the dining room table.[1] The debasement of the term may explain in part why most historians have been loath to use it, but as David Bell compellingly shows in this excellent and engaging book, the concept deserves a prominent place in our analytical toolkit.

It was, of course, Max Weber who developed the modern understanding of the term. For the German sociologist, charisma was a way of understanding authority, command, power, or influence (*Herrschaft* in German) that came neither from tradition nor from law, the two main historical sources of these phenomena. Charisma represented a third form of authority, opposed to the others in being “foreign to all rules.”[2] This third, or “residual,” form seemed a kind of gift, an inexplicable, indefinable force that makes those who possess it different from other people, magical in a way, and all the more powerful for the impossibility of putting one’s finger on its source.

For Weber, charisma possessed two essential ingredients: “an individual personality...treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities...not accessible to the ordinary person; and the existence of fervent followers of that individual whose recognition of his charismatic authority “is decisive for the validity of charisma.”[3] In both ingredients, the followers are crucial. The charismatic individual is “treated [by his flock] as endowed” with exceptional powers or qualities, and it is the followers who must continually validate his authority, for “if proof and success elude the leader for long...his charismatic authority will disappear.”[4]

Weber may have underplayed the inherent qualities of the charismatic individual in favor of charisma’s socio-cultural roots, but Bell rightly insists on both sides of the coin. “Charisma,” Bell writes, “does not just radiate outward from charismatic figures but is projected onto them by admirers.” (p. 66) The charismatic individual and his followers, Bell adds, are not transhistorical

phenomena as Weber thought, but rather must be examined in a particular historical situation. The context Bell has aptly chosen is the Atlantic revolutions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the most important of which took place in Britain's North American colonies, France, Haiti, and Gran Colombia (today's Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, and Ecuador). All four were led by charismatic Men on Horseback—George Washington, Napoleon Bonaparte, Toussaint Louverture, and Simón Bolívar. A fifth figure, Pasquale Paoli, the Corsican rebel lionized by James Boswell, set the stage for the four to come. The horseman imagery is not metaphorical: Bell's protagonists were military leaders known for their equestrian skills and often depicted atop a magnificent mount. All were seen as heroic fighters and redeemers said to have saved their compatriots from destruction. They were also founders of their countries who had fathered them into being. These were masculine images that conformed to the ideals of masculinity prominent at the time. Charisma was thus gendered male during the age of Atlantic revolutions, and it would be some time before women could be commonly deemed charismatic as well.

Bell has structured his well-crafted, nicely written book around Paoli and the four revolutionary leaders. He examines them as both powerful historical agents and the embodiments of broad eighteenth-century cultural trends. By viewing them both ways, Bell avoids the pitfalls of biography, which can exaggerate the significance of Great Men, and steers clear of deterministic socio-cultural approaches, which tend to ignore individual agents in favor of impersonal forces. In *Men on Horseback*, we learn how the extraordinarily qualities of the five enabled them to shape their respective revolutions and also about the cultural developments that wedded large numbers of people to their charismatic authority. The cultural developments in question featured novel Enlightenment-era ideas about human equality, ideas that could now circulate widely thanks to the proliferation of print media and lithographed images, which lent people like Paoli and Washington a new status as celebrities. Invented during the Enlightenment, the concept of celebrity became possible thanks in part to the novel, a new literary form that gave readers intimate connections to fictional characters and made them desire intimate connections to real people as well.<sup>[5]</sup> The new culture of celebrity helped fulfill this desire, creating what the sociologist John B. Thompson has called "intimacy at a distance."<sup>[6]</sup>

The five figures featured in the book were thus individuals who towered above their compatriots while at the same time seeming to stand with them on the same intimate plain. This paradoxical relationship, Bell convincingly shows, enabled charismatic leaders to win the trust of people buffeted by the winds of revolution and disoriented by newly minted laws and institutions. Under these uncertain conditions, charismatic leaders alone could hold their budding nations together. But they did so not entirely, or even largely, by building allegiance to new political ideals. They also created and exploited the intense emotions that bound people to them. In doing so, these men on horseback gained the ability to transform democratic or egalitarian revolutions into authoritarian regimes. The invention of modern democracy, Bell suggests, went hand-in-hand with the creation of new and dangerous forms of despotism that drew strength from the public's apparent consent, enthusiasm, and love.

Bell's revolutionary figures did not, however, present equal dangers. Washington, in particular, appears different from other others in crucial ways. Although numerous Americans wanted the famous general to preserve their fragile post-independence republic by taking the reins as a benevolent dictator, or even a king, Washington refused to use his charisma in this way. After defusing an incipient army rebellion in 1783, he voluntarily gave up his military commission and

retreated to Mount Vernon. He returned to public life only when the Constitutional Convention of 1787 needed him to lead, if symbolically, the effort to turn the loosely connected former thirteen colonies into a coherent federal state. The Convention succeeded in creating the powerful office of president in part because everyone assumed Washington would occupy it and that he would not try to concentrate power in his hands. There were widespread fears, as one prominent poet put it, of the ambient “ambition [that] deluges the Globe with blood” (pp. 78-79). The former general, added the *Pennsylvania Packet*, “instead of assuming the pomp of master, acts as if he considered himself the father—the friend—and the servant of the people” (p. 83). Bell nicely sums up Washington’s restraint: “His charismatic reputation in 1789 constituted a potential political weapon of enormous power. A Bonaparte would not have hesitated to use it. Washington never did” (p. 86).

Americans developed confidence in Washington because he had long been idolized and treated as a hero. He did not, however, seem much of a celebrity. He detested familiarity, and his bearing remained stiff, formal, and distant; he encouraged no feelings of intimacy from the public. As for his charisma, it harked back to older religious forms of the phenomenon. Commentators, many of them pastors, described him in the scriptural tones of colonial America’s public discourse. One cleric touted Washington’s “form majestic, seem’d by God designed.” Another called him “his country’s deliverer,” and another dubbed him the “American Gideon...divinely raised” (pp. 71-72).

Only after Washington’s death did writers depict him in the language of the new celebrity culture. The most prominent early example was Mason Locke Weems’s *Life of George Washington*, first published in 1800 and reissued throughout the nineteenth century. Weems delved into the general’s early life, writing, “It is not in the glare of public, but in the shade of private life, that we are to look for the man.” In this effort, the biographer invented episodes out of whole cloth. The most famous is, of course, the legend of the cherry tree: “I can’t tell a lie” (pp. 87-88).

Bell shows that Washington’s reputation traveled across the Atlantic and that Napoleon was often likened to him. There were, however, notable differences between the two leaders. While Washington, like Bonaparte, was idolized by a broad public, the American seemed uncomfortable with all the attention. The Frenchman, as Bell makes elaborately clear, loved the adulation and stage-managed his public persona to gain more of it. But having laid out Bonaparte’s extensive self-promotion, Bell nonetheless concludes, “The essential attributes of Bonaparte’s image as a charismatic leader did not differ enormously from that earlier case”—that is, from Washington (p. 121).

While it is true that both men were considered great heroes and saviors of their countries, Washington’s charisma was grounded, at least in part, in his modesty, in his discomfort with being lionized, and in his reluctance to seize power for himself. Washington tended to maintain a dignified distance from those around him, while Napoleon touted his connections with common soldiers and ordinary people, reveling in his identification as the “little corporal.” And although Washington, like Napoleon, attracted an outpouring of public emotion, when it came to governing, the American seemed less dependent than the Frenchman on the public’s adulation. By the time Washington became president, he was no longer a man on horseback, his military career having ended a half-decade earlier (save for briefly leading troops against the Whiskey Rebellion in 1794). And, as Bell shows, his efforts to govern amid the intense partisan strife of

the 1790s sapped his charisma. The new president now seemed more the politician than the hero. This balance would not tilt back toward heroism until after his death, when Washington's reputation underwent a re-charismazation, if that is a word. Napoleon, by contrast, grounded his fifteen-year rule in the intense emotions of his flock, especially the ability to dazzle and impress with his military campaigns. He understood as much: "A government like ours," Napoleon declared, "needs brilliant actions, and therefore war. [It] needs to amaze and astonish people...or it will go under" (p. 130). Louis de Fontanes, one of the emperor's chief acolytes, wrote that he governed "more by sentiments and affections than by orders and laws." As Bell justly concludes, "To an extent remarkable in Western history, Bonaparte tried to ground his regime in the emotional relationship between himself and the French people" (p. 128).

Like Napoleon, Toussaint Louverture benefitted from an intense emotional bond with the formerly enslaved people he had helped liberate, although the Haitian feelings are harder to discern given the illiteracy of most of the island's Blacks and the silence of most White commentators about them—save, of course, for chronicling their "savagery." Still, the startling accomplishments of Saint-Domingue's slave rebellion and Louverture's immense talent as a diplomat and military leader brought him and his sugar island to the attention of people throughout the Atlantic world. Many of those who wrote about Toussaint connected him with Napoleon, comparing their extraordinary military victories, their political astuteness, and their stature as popular heroes. Chateaubriand famously called Louverture "the Black Napoleon." The Euro-American commentary also resembled the hero-worship of Washington and Bonaparte. The *Philadelphia Gazette* called Toussaint "a wonderful man, sent by heaven," while the British *Annual Register* enthused over his "genius" and "great mind." After Napoleon imprisoned Toussaint in France, Samuel Coleridge said that the French leader had acted vindictively out of "personal envy to a hero" (pp. 159-60).

Like Napoleon, Toussaint carefully choreographed his exalted reputation using the printed word, reproduced images, and elaborate public celebrations. The Haitian public responded in kind. To honor Toussaint, towns and villages built triumphal arches like the ones erected for Washington and Napoleon, and in one locale officials gave him a medal with the inscription "After God, it is he" (p. 164). In large part, Bell writes, this adulation represented the desire of the Haitian public to see Louverture "as a reassuring symbol and source of unity in the midst of continuing violence and danger" (p. 165). As always, charisma involved a complementary relationship between the leader and his flock.

In key ways, Louverture resembled Bonaparte more than Washington; like the French leader, Toussaint became increasingly authoritarian as time went on. He produced a constitution that made him a virtual dictator for life, and he forced a great many Haitians to return to their plantations, this time as quasi serfs rather than as slaves. Toussaint came to believe so much in his image as an invincible hero that he left himself open to capture; he finished out his days in a dank French prison.

Simón Bolívar, who would lead the struggle to free South America from Spain, never met Toussaint Louverture, but he spent time in Haiti and learned from Toussaint's successors. The Bolívar story resembles those of Bell's four other charismatic men. The Liberator became the hero of Gran Colombia's independence movement, forging deep emotional connections to people eager for a savior from arbitrary Spanish rule. Early on, Bolívar professed republican sentiments, but he quickly revealed dictatorial designs, using the acclamation and obedience he enjoyed to

concentrate power in his hands. Although commentators compared him to Washington and Bonaparte, he resembled the latter far more than the former. As one of his key allies put it, “General, this is not the land of Washington. Here [in South America] people bow down to power out of terror and self-interest” (p. 198).

As Bell makes clear, Bolívar’s trajectory, like those of Bonaparte and Louverture, reveals both the creative potential of charismatic leadership in the age of democratic revolutions and the dangers it poses. With Washington, the dangers were much less pronounced. On the positive side, all four—and Paoli before them—demonstrate the ability of certain commanding individuals to stimulate and harness democratic enthusiasm to achieve great changes in their respective societies. Against all the odds, Washington led his rebellious colonists to victory over the potent British empire. Bonaparte, for his part, corralled the chaotic energy of the French Revolution into a French imperialism with global reach while reshaping his country internally in ways destined to last. As the French Revolution played out in Europe and beyond, Louverture helped lead one of the most successful slave rebellions of all time and then oversaw the transformation of Saint Domingue from colony to independent state. Having witnessed these French and Haitian events, Bolívar played the key role in freeing major parts of South and Central America from Spanish colonial rule.

To accomplish these feats, all five figures mobilized their peoples in unprecedented ways, but with the exception of Washington, the charisma that made this mobilization possible also enabled them to develop a new and dangerous form of despotism. It was a despotism based not on fear as in the case of autocrats before them, but on the mesmerizing power of love. The British consul in Caracas described “crowds of rejoicing people all wild in screaming Viva Bolívar... and showing various other demonstrations of joy and loyalty—or more properly, affection” (p. 205). This affection, as Bell writes, applied not just to Bolívar, but to the four other leaders as well.

Despite the democratic ethos of the time, the manly men at the center of Bell’s important, thought-provoking book were far from ordinary people who came from out of nowhere. Paoli had inherited from his father the leadership of Corsica’s rebellion against Genoa. Washington belonged to the Virginia gentry and gained a considerable fortune from his wife. Bonaparte hailed from the minor nobility and benefitted from an elite military education in France. Even Louverture, the least exalted of the group, may have come from a princely African family and in Saint Domingue earned his freedom well before the Haitian Revolution. Not until the twentieth century would truly ordinary people, individuals of lowly socio-economic birth, ride their charisma to positions of supreme power. In the meantime, even legitimate, hereditary rulers like Kaiser Wilhelm II, as Martin Kohlrausch has shown, would try to become media celebrities and add a dose of charisma to their traditional authority.[7] By the end of the nineteenth century, hereditary and legal forms of authority were no longer enough.

## NOTES

[1] <https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/charisma.html>

[2] Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, 2 vols., ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), v.1, 244.

[3] Ibid., 241.

[4] Ibid., 242.

[5] See Antoine Lilti, *The Invention of Celebrity* (New York: Polity, 2017).

[6] John B. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 219-25.

[7] Martin Kohlrausch, *Der Monarch im Skandal. Die Logik der Massenmedien und die Transformation der wilhelminischen Monarchie* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2005).

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