

BOOK REVIEWS/COMPTES RENDU

Peter Baehr, *Caesarism, Charisma and Fate: Historical Sources and Modern Resonances in the Work of Max Weber*. Piscataway: Transaction Publishers, 2008, 320 pp. \$US 44.95 hardcover (978-1-4128-0813-2)

Peter Baehr's *Caesarism, Charisma and Fate* is a deeply intelligent work, but it is also a lost opportunity. The book promises to challenge Robert Merton's distinction between the "history" and "systematics" of sociological theory: genuine historical research, as distinct from those theories and findings that have ongoing analytic purchase. Baehr, in refusing Merton's proposal for a division of labour, insists that history *qua* history might directly inform present-day scholarship. Baehr is right about this. He is also one among a mere handful of sociologists with the empirical interests and historical knowledge to successfully mix the two. The problem is that *Caesarism, Charisma and Fate* does not really attempt such a mixing. The book's first half — on "Caesarism" and "charisma" in Max Weber's thought — is lopsidedly historical, while the second — on another Weberian theme, "fate," as applied to the 2003 SARS emergency — is weighted toward systematics. The two halves barely overlap, so that, for example, "charisma" and "Caesarism" appear only rarely in the book's last hundred pages. Both halves are erudite, well-written, and meticulously argued — a pair of superb short monographs, were they permitted to stand alone. As it is, however, Baehr's stated intent to use historicist exegesis to inform current empirical work is a good argument camouflaging a disjointed book.

In the first chapter, Baehr traces the centuries-long evolution of "Caesar" as a discursive reference point in political thought. He details how "Caesar" was, in particular, a term of abuse in early modern republican thinking, and proceeds to document often subtle shifts in the term's political valence, up to and including the 19th century. Baehr shows how "Caesar" took on a distinctly modern coloration as a descriptor for Napoleon's legitimation through plebiscite. Louis Bonaparte's seizure of power in 1851 crystallized this new inflection: "Caesar," and its newly coined variant "Caesarism," were used to designate a distinct kind of authoritarian rule, based on demagogic appeals to the newly enfranchised throng. The widespread use of "Caesarism" as a pejorative in the late 19th century was driven, Baehr shows, by fear of an irrational (and sug-

gestible) mass electorate — a fear shared by liberals and conservatives alike.

This history of “Caesar’s” meaning drift is largely a reprise of Baehr’s unjustly neglected *Caesar and the Fading of the Roman World: A Study in Republicanism and Caesarism*. Both books are indebted, in substance and method, to the tradition of contextualist intellectual history associated with Quentin Skinner and J.G.A. Pocock. One refreshing aspect of Baehr’s history is that he defies the arbitrary division of scholarly knowledge between “social theory” and “political thought” — a divide best captured, perhaps, by the date range meant by “classical” in the two literatures. The breadth and depth of Baehr’s learning is impressive, and the reward is in his footnotes — compact excursions on Plutarch, Bagehot, and many others.

Baehr’s attention, in the excellent second chapter, turns to Max Weber’s evolving and context-dependent use of “Caesarism.” Weber invoked the term frequently in his political journalism, not just to attack Bismarck’s legacy but also to recommend a different, better “Caesarism” constrained and shaped, as in the British model, by a strong parliament. Baehr shows that Weber, worried over centrifugal pressures in German society after World War I, later came to endorse an undiluted “Caesarist” regime, without even a parliamentary check. Whether qualified criticism or full-throttled advocacy, Weber’s shifting attitude toward plebiscitary legitimation was structured by his belief in its inevitability. Mass electoral democracy, along with machine party politics and bureaucratic governance, were regarded by Weber as indelible features of the modern West. In Weber’s resigned view, ostensibly democratic regimes are never really “democratic”; the choice is between better and worse varieties of plebiscitary acclamation. Weber’s bleak outlook was coloured, as Baehr shows in a fascinating but too-brief exposition, by his *Le Bon*-like conviction that the masses are emotional and suggestible — unfit for self-governance.

In addition to his (partial) normative inversion, in his political writings, of what had been a republican term of abuse, Weber deployed the Caesarist idea in his strictly sociological writings too. “Caesarism,” however, in Weber’s self-consciously academic work — most notably in his well-known typology of legitimate *Herrschaft* — was replaced by a rotating cast of interchangeable descriptives like “plebiscitary leadership.” “Caesarism” was, Baehr argues, thereby cleansed of its “storehouse of nineteenth-century arguments and preoccupations,” and subsumed, moreover, under the less combustible “charisma” concept. Charisma, Baehr explains, provided Weber with both a “blank check and a route of escape from the unruly preconceptions tenanted in the house

of Caesarism.” In a somewhat elliptical critique of Weber’s rhetorical moves, Baehr argues that the “new and sanitized vocabulary” helped to disguise some of the anti-democratic implications of Weberian sociology — especially in the context of Weber’s recasting of legitimacy in neutral, descriptive terms.

After a brief account of “Caesarism’s” decline in 20th century political discourse, Baehr rather abruptly shifts to another Weberian trope, “fate.” Baehr excavates this second term with less historical rigor, as he readily admits. After all, Baehr’s intent, in this half of the book, is to develop a derivative, “communities of fate,” as an analytic tool to understand mass emergencies like the 2003 SARS epidemic. We learn that his reflections on “communities of fate” were stirred up by the author’s own experience in Hong Kong: “I realized that I could die along with countless others in a sudden and surprising way; my fate was linked with innumerable strangers.”

Weber’s use of “fate” is never more than suggestive of Baehr’s inventive redeployment, which amounts to an original and distinct project of theory building. Weber does inform that project, though in relatively minor ways that, when Baehr claims more for Weber’s role, comes off as too much protest. Indeed, Baehr’s theory of group formation under duress owes more to Emile Durkheim (on ritual) and Erving Goffman (on face work).

Baehr does borrow from Weber a definition of “fate” that insists on space for human self-direction within otherwise constraining limits. Baehr also draws on Weber’s World War I-informed reflections on soldiers’ solidarity in the face of uniquely meaningful deaths. To Weber, moreover, the nation is formed by the possibility, and shared memory, of life and death struggle, with its “particular pathos” and “enduring emotional foundations.” These Weberian fragments inform Baehr’s theorizing on mass emergency, but only indirectly; they are invoked, too, to illustrate the complex history of “communities of fate” in the German — *Schicksalgemeinschaft* — in response to actual and anticipated objections to the word’s Nazi overtones. For the same reason, Baehr is eager to assert that “communities of fate” is an English-language term first.

The theory itself is elegant and appropriately narrow: To qualify as a “community of fate,” an emergency response must pass a demanding seven-part test, including the presence of some social ritual to furnish a “specific crisis identity.” For SARS-threatened Hong Kongers, the ritual was mask-wearing — “efface work,” as Baehr calls it, that disguised individuality and fostered a sense of common fate. Baehr points to the media’s recursive role in amplifying the cohesion, though he does not engage with neo-Durkheimian work (such as that of Dayan and Katz)

on “media events” — live, widely viewed broadcasts of “historic” occasions—as high-tech generators of mechanical solidarity.

Caesarism, Charisma and Fate is always intelligent, and has the rare virtue of combining nuance with sweeping interpretive judgment. Its main flaw, as a book, is that it is not two.

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