

Choosing Our Leaders

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Democracies cannot do without leaders, according to Jean-Claude Monod, as they guarantee our freedom against the domination of economic powers. Even so, we must learn to choose our leaders and to define what we expect of them.

Reviewed: Jean-Claude Monod, *Qu'est-ce qu'un chef en démocratie? Politiques du charisme*, Paris, Seuil, 2012. 320 p., 21 €.

“No leader!” Thus did Jules Vallès sum up the confusion of the Paris Commune’s final days. Taken in context, his words have a chilling ring: he uttered them while fleeing the Parisian insurgents, who were begging him for orders—for without leaders, a massacre was inevitable.¹

In the opening pages of his essay *Qu'est-ce qu'un chef en démocratie?* (What is a Leader in a Democracy?), Jean-Claude Monod reiterates the slogan “no leader” (though without mentioning Vallès). Yet Monod almost immediately supplements his claim with the caveat that the elimination of one leader—the authoritarian fantasy of a single, absolute ruler—need not entail the disappearance of multiple leaders. It is impossible to ignore the fact, he argues, that social life is regulated by the presence of “orchestra conductors, site managers, and department heads,”² and particularly by “political leaders and heads of party, government, and state” (p. 8).

The essence of democracy, according to Max Weber, is “the right to choose a leader directly” (quoted on p. 59)—which means, Monod insists, that democracy is precisely the regime in which “*the problem of charisma becomes crucial*, for it is on the basis of charisma, far more than under any previously known form of domination, that political leaders are chosen” (p. 22).

Monod asks us to reexamine the connection that Weber had noticed between democracy and charisma. No doubt Weber was too quick to see democracy’s “Caesarist” or plebiscitary dimension as the only alternative to technocratic disempowerment. Yet this does not necessarily undermine his emphasis on the irreducibly “personal character of political decisions” and the authority upon which political *responsibility* depends. Weber was

¹ On this passage from Jules Vallès’ *L’Insurgé* (chapter 30), see Julien Gracq’s harsh commentary in *Lettrines* (Paris, Corti, 1967, p. 159).

² Jean-Claude Monod leaves out chief executives, who are completely absent from his book. Generally speaking, contemporary analyses of the “de-corporatization” of democratic societies rarely take account of what English-speaking countries call *corporations* (i.e., businesses).

convinced that charismatic legitimacy is “one of the few counter-powers that can challenge the ‘lawless law’ of pure *economic* domination” (p. 61).

“The subordination of politics to the market’s logic” (p. 213) does not vitiate this diagnosis. On the contrary, it suggests that the anonymity of markets and bureaucracies can lead to forms of domination and impunity that are as destructive as demagogically-induced stupor. When this kind of domination (which is as efficient as it is impersonal) prevails, a charismatic democratic leader, who crystallizes a political moment’s legitimate expectations, can represent a genuine opportunity for social change.

Those who would “democratize democracy” (p. 306) must, Monod tells us, “stop banishing the word” “leader” (p. 9) from their vocabulary and commit themselves to elucidating the “specific demands that a democratic framework places on charisma and the individual ‘leader’” (p. 93).

Exorcizing the Leader

To “stop banishing” the idea of the charismatic leader, we must first recognize the reasons we have to be wary of it. We must exorcize—and thus acknowledge—the demon of charisma. Monod’s book is essentially an exercise in exorcism: it seeks to dispel a fear that we have repressed the better to master its object.

After all, we have good reasons for repressing the idea of the democratic leader³. First, as a result of the “pathologies of charisma” associated with the twentieth-century’s totalitarian regimes, the “cult of the leader” came to be seen as one of the greatest threats hanging over mass democracy. Moreover, the twofold process whereby society has become increasingly democratized while politics have been subordinated to the “logic of the market” has rendered the idea of the “leader” archaic and residual—as we see, for instance, with the notion of the “head of household,” the long patriarchal certainty of which finally succumbed to feminism’s blows, or with the small-time bosses of the shop floor and office, whose reign ended with the “managerial revolution of the 1980s”—even if, at times, the managers insidiously allowed these chieftains to survive, or abolished them only to assign individuals responsibility for their own exploitation (p. 256-263).

Yet Monod demonstrates the ambiguity of the historical experiences that might lead one to conclude too hastily that leaders are a thing of the past. Thus in at least one of its iterations, totalitarianism was made possible by a doctrine which maintained that all power lies with the masses, while radically avoiding the question of leadership. Stalin was the terrifying return of the Marxist repressed (pp. 299-300). Moreover, totalitarianism was only defeated because individuals who chose to resist rallied others behind them and were, for this very reason, considered leaders worthy of support. Resistance groups, like all liberation movements, bred their own leaders. De Gaulle, fighting against Pétain, claimed he was “the incarnation of France” (p. 75, 140).

³ Jean-Claude Monod remarks on the strange abandonment, by political philosophy, of the « charisma question », nonetheless at the heart of his argument (p. 14-15). There are however a few exceptions, for instance in the work of Robert Damien (see for example « De l’autorité et de son chef », *Cités*, n° 6, 2001/2 : *Qu’est-ce qu’un chef ?*, p. 9-12).

To identify charismatic leadership solely with its pathological forms—the *Führer* or *Il Duce*—is to overlook the fact that political charisma is best exemplified by the emancipatory forces unleashed by such leaders as Franklin Roosevelt or Martin Luther King, through political activity involving constantly interaction with ordinary people. There exists “charisma that is favorable to the functioning and even the intensification of democracy,” which must be distinguished “from its double or distorted form: demagogic charisma” (p. 16).

Considered from this angle, leaders are the exact equals of their followers, whom they command only to the extent that they have decided to initiate a political project. Characterized by an “ability to lead the public towards a deeper sense of justice and equality,” the leader can be distinguished from “the father, the master, or the learned judge” (p. 270).

Rousseau had already gleaned that “a free people ... has leaders but not masters” (quoted on p. 83). The genuinely democratic conception of leadership—which could be seen as the Western counterpart to the Melanesian idea of the “chieftain as *one who presides over the exchange of gifts*”—cannot be conflated with paternalism and despotism and reveals the “authentically (or ‘qualitatively’) democratic forms of charisma”: the “charisma of foundation,” the “charisma of resistance and liberation,” the “charisma of equality,” and the “charisma of justice” (p. 275 ff).

Constructing Leadership by Deconstructing It

Should the philosopher’s task therefore be to draw the portrait of the ideal democratic leader and his unique brand of charisma? Monod, who never addresses the narrowly procedural question of how leaders are chosen and checked, rejects a normative approach that in practice would be a continuation of the ancient tradition of “mirrors for princes.” His book, he claims, was assembled like one of Calder’s mobiles, “the revolving movement of which illuminates the various facets (drawing on philosophy, history, novels, theater, sociology, and ethnology, etc.) of a single problematic object” (p. 32).

It is impossible to do justice here to this mobile’s movements, which alternatively balance out and spin around such notions as Weber’s conception of domination and Kojève’s views on authority; Foucault’s description of pastoral power (including a subtle analysis of his ambiguous fascination with the Ayatollah Khomeini) and Lefort’s analysis of democratic disincorporation; the Melanesian definition (according to Leenhardt) of the chieftain as “the face of an activity” and Clastres’ assessment of “powerless chieftains”; Hegel’s celebration and Musil’s scorn of great men; Stalin’s paradoxical non-charisma and Hitler’s manufactured charisma; and Derrida’s deconstruction of paternalism (and “fraternalism”) and the Freudian theory of the murder of the father. Following a worried diagnosis of the contemporary privatization of politics, the mobile reaches a kind of equilibrium in the sober, muted praise Monod offers two recent heads of state, Ignacio de Lula and Barack Obama.

It is well-known that Calder’s mobiles shift without progressing. The downside of this mobile assemblage is that it risks occluding real intellectual advances beneath a kaleidoscopic display of references and quotations. “The unstable idea of the democratic leader” emerges through a series of deconstructions in which it is “modeled and undone, squandered and rebuilt, like a statue that is perpetually endangered by its own

monumentalization” (p. 31). In his effort to liberate the idea of the leader from the specters of patriarchy and tyranny that haunt it, Monod at times makes leadership a dangerously elusive concept, one that is perpetually at odds with itself—as if any effort to assign it too precise an identity might be suspect of authoritarianism.

Thus Monod does nothing with the first chapter’s “typological” analyses, which he does not develop in light of the ethnological and historical information that he subsequently presents. Yet the description of “powerless chieftains” lacking “coercive power” even as they enjoy “social prestige” (p. 153), the disentangling of the “great man” from power (p. 191-192), and the definition of authority as “figure, person, or source one can trust” (p. 249) seem to provide the basic elements of an original typology of democratic leaders, one that avoids the conflation of sovereignty, power, and authority. The theological burden of concepts such as charisma or leadership may, as Monod points out on several occasions, be tied to the moral problem of the duality of temporal and spiritual authority. The often-repeated claim that “a ‘leader’’s qualities relate in the first place to a *capacity for non-resignation* and an ability to motivate one’s followers” might have led Monod to expand on the concept of the “coach,” the counterpart in group sports to the idea of the “captain.”

Charisma Must Circulate

It seems that any analysis of “democratic leaders” must always seek to neutralize its potentially devastating consequences, lest it neutralize itself. Thus Monod, blunting the Weberian point that had sharpened his initial analysis, reproaches Ernesto Laclau for “essentializing the need for leaders as an unsurpassable element of politics as such.”⁴ Challenging him, Monod points to the “many contemporary forms of democratic invention consisting precisely in the formation of collectivities that strive to thwart the emergence of leaders and to rotate the spokesperson function as frequently as possible, while maintaining radically collective decision-making structures” (250-251).

So are we meant to understand that democracies can, after all, do without leaders? Unlike Antonio Negri or Jacques Rancière, Monod refuses to contrast the “extra-quotidian temporality of the ‘constituent moment’” to “its own creations”—that is, the resultant institutions and forms of government. One cannot devalue, by dismissing them as “police” activities, the practice of collective decision-making and the responsibility required to implement these choices. Taking seriously both forms of democracy—“organized democracy” as well as “off-the-radar-screen movements that reveal [the latter’s] limits”—requires us to reject “the idea of a *single charismatic entity*, concentrated at the top” and to consider the “circulation of charisma” (p. 222). Even so, the idea of charismatic leadership must be preserved because of the four roles it can play in a democracy: “expressing principles, representing the collectivity, assuming responsibility for a range of political decisions, and uniting people around a cause” (pp. 251-255).

Yet it remains to be asked if the idea of a democratic leader is essentially democratic or only accidentally so. Monod’s mobile oscillates between two positions. According to one, democracy discloses the true meaning of leadership and realizes its egalitarian essence. According to the other, democracy is a regime that forces leaders, despite themselves, to

⁴ Ernesto Laclau, *La Raison populiste*, trad.. J.-P. Ricard, Paris, Seuil, 2008.

accept the formal framework of the separation of powers and the oversight of the groups that have identified with them.

Monod would like to believe that political charisma can create a “space for political intervention in the social and economic realm,” a “positive transgression of the market’s pretention to define all norms,” and a “strengthening of the ‘public’ and ‘common’ sphere, without which democracy is nothing more than a set of electoral procedures and legal protections, but fails to create the kind of social homogeneity a democratic society requires” (p. 213). Yet the *expectation* that democratic leaders can strengthen democracy in these ways implies that these leaders are in some strange way external to the very democracies they are supposed to shake up.

This is no doubt a practical symptom of contemporary democracy’s deficiencies. Yet it also raises a theoretical question: is the democratic leader fated to emerge in democratic spaces as an apparition that these spaces *summon* yet do not *create*, or is it possible to conceive of conditions under which democracy might produce its own leaders? Can the idea of the leader be founded upon—or dissolved into—democratic norms, or must we resign ourselves to the fact that, in keeping with its original meaning, “charisma” is inevitably a form of “grace”?

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