

# **The importance of charismatic leadership to the human rights movement**

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**History says, Don't hope  
On this side of the grave,  
But then, once in a lifetime  
The longed-for tidal wave  
Of justice can rise up  
And hope and history rhyme**

An excerpt from "*The Cure of Troy*" by Irish poet Seamus Heaney.

## **Abstract**

The human rights movement needs heroes. Even with the increasing proliferation of human rights treaties and institutional frameworks, the passion and genius of extraordinary individuals can never be sidelined in the fight for social justice. In response to a predominant conception of human rights which places primary emphasis on their judicial and legal manifestations, this paper will highlight that it is frequently the actions of courageous and creative individuals that bring about positive changes in our societies. Mandela, Ghandi, San Suu Kyi, Biko, Malcom X: they all represent the irrepressible human spirit, and the endeavour for freedom and dignity so central to the human condition.

Charismatic leadership is a potent weapon in the fight for social justice. This paper provides an overview of the most salient issues of the lively academic debate on the nature of charismatic leadership. The legacies of Nelson Mandela and Malcom X will be investigated to demonstrate how challenging and visionary leadership can channel collective energies in the fight against oppression. I wish to show that the hope for human rights and social justice lies not in the increasing proliferation of legal mechanisms, but in courageous leadership.

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I dedicate this paper to the memory of Malcom X.

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# 1. Introduction

Whether the potent force of charisma is harnessed for good or for ill, charismatic leaders show an incredible ability to influence, unify and transform. While leaders such as Hitler and Stalin have aroused deep suspicion of unrestrained charisma and power, charisma can represent a particularly powerful force in the realisation of social justice. Throughout history, extraordinary individuals have awakened whole populations to the formidable powers of collective action, liberated their contemporaries from injustice and oppression, and roused the masses to action.

The starting point of this paper is that moral charismatic leadership and the social movements they help to generate, should not be marginal to any understanding of the human rights movement. This stems from scepticism of those human rights institutions which seek to control or appropriate human rights in a way that undermines their grass-roots reflexivity and emancipatory potential. While the ideological march of human rights is a positive development, the prevalence of a vision of human rights that promotes an exaggeratedly optimistic view of laws capacity to construct a better world all by itself is flawed. Indeed, it is obvious that such a perception of human rights is insufficiently comprehensive when compared with the complexity of human socio-political relations. This study represents an attempt to highlight another potentially more progressive mode of conceiving of human rights deployment - charismatic leadership of a liberation struggle or social movement. Any conception of human rights that maximizes human agency, empowers and invigorates more participatory forms of citizenship would prove a more rounded and fruitful comprehension than a prevalent vision of human rights which places primary emphasis on positivist and judicial manifestations of rights. This study does not attempt to present charismatic leadership as the primary vehicle for human rights attainment, or as the solution to all societal ills, but it is one of a number of significant and powerful forces making up the constellation of factors which influence the attainment of social justice. However, I wish to highlight that it is frequently the actions of courageous people and not laws or treaties that bring about positive changes to our societies; a perspective which appears to have somehow dropped off the

academic agenda.

If this position is to be accepted, it is necessary to develop a deeper understanding of the forces which bring about positive social change. For the purposes of this paper, this means examining the impact of charismatic leaders on their followers and on society at large.

The methodology of the study is outlined in Section 2. Section 3 provides a summary of the relevant literature on charisma, leadership and social movements, the aim of which is to provide an overview of the various perspectives and most salient issues within the debate. From an examination of the literature, a framework for conceptual analysis has been created. This framework is utilized in the fifth and sixth chapters in the analysis of the two case studies of charismatic leadership. The late Malcom X will be examined in light of his prominence during the civil rights movement of the 1960's, and his controversial and extremely challenging stances against white supremacy in the US (section 5). The role of Nelson Mandela in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa and his national and international legacy of charismatic leadership is examined in section 6. The case studies will provide biographical and historical details of both leaders, examine the extent to which their legacies correspond to the charisma literature, and examine the impact of their charismatic leadership. Additionally, where does the discourse of human rights fit into these two struggles, how effective were these leaders in the achievement of their "visions", and what concrete changes did they help bring about? The concluding section of the paper aims to address the question, "why is charismatic leadership important to the human rights movement?".

## 2. Methodology

The aim of the study is to investigate relevant literature on charisma and charismatic individuals, to develop an understanding of the processes by which such individuals can positively impact society and mobilize demands for human rights. The literature comes primarily from sociological and political perspectives. The main themes which emerged were leadership, charisma, leader-follower relationship, crowd psychology, and social movement theories. Nelson Mandela and Malcom X have been chosen as case studies to examine: 1. the extent to which they corresponded to the models within the literature, 2. to demonstrate how the phenomenon of charismatic leadership works within social movements, and 3. investigate how the two leaders advanced the human rights cause.

Malcom X was chosen because of his controversial activism against racism and white supremacy in 1960's American society. Rarely has a leader so fearlessly challenged an unjust status quo. His activism and rhetoric were deeply unsettling and uncompromising to the entrenched white power structure. The 1990's has witnessed a resurgence of interest in the political thinking of Malcom X, particularly among today's Afro-American youth. His charismatic legacy has continued beyond the grave, inspiring the ongoing Afro-American struggle for racial equality. As such, he is an important leader for understanding the ideologies and factors which are shaping contemporary Afro-American politics.

Nelson Mandela was chosen because of the impact his struggle against apartheid has had on the popular consciousness. Along with Mahatma Gandhi, he is usually at the forefront of any exchange on moral charismatic leadership. Few leaders have achieved his level of adulation while still alive - his standing both in South Africa and internationally is of nearly mythical proportions. As such, I was interested to investigate the historical factors behind this reverence, and to understand how he harnesses his charismatic status in his continuing fight for social justice.



An adequate analysis of leadership involves not only a study of the actions of leaders, but also of the situational factors in which they operate. As such, I conducted detailed research into the historical and social contexts within which these two leaders emerged. This reflects a theme in the literature that situational factors and the environment provide both constraints and opportunities for leaders. The environment is the substance, the raw material, and also the framework for the goals and policy initiatives; it is “the chessboard on which leaders play and have to play”<sup>1</sup>.

An examination of the social background and intellectual development of leaders is an important aspect of the ‘personal’ elements of charismatic leadership. The study of personality is important for the political analysis of leadership, because personality appears to have an impact on the goals and the policy initiatives of leaders. As such, biographies and autobiographical accounts provided an insight into the intellectual and political leanings of both leaders.

Primary sources such as political speeches, writings, and interviews have been analysed to understand both the vision these leaders provided for their followers, and the demands and challenges they presented to the ruling white power structures.

The internet was also a useful resource. Official websites for Malcom X and Nelson Mandela gave insights into how both leader’s are perceived today, and what initiatives are taking place to spread their messages. It also showed what aspects of their legacies are highlighted or underplayed in their presentations to the public.

To enhance my practical understanding of charismatic leadership I attended a seminar given by Maharaji<sup>2</sup> in Livorno, Italy on the 28<sup>th</sup> of May 2005. While not directly relevant to either of the case

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Blondel, *Political Leadership: Towards a General Analysis*, New York, The Free Press, 1981, pp. 30.

<sup>2</sup> A.k.a., Prem Rawat, Indian spiritual guru and charismatic leader with a large worldwide following. He strives toward world peace by first helping individuals to find “inner peace”. Many of his followers believe him to be a holy Prophet.

studies, it allowed me to witness at first hand the effects of a charismatic individual on their followers, the stage-managed side of charisma (such as lighting, dramatic music, stage arrangements) and the skilful use of oratory and metaphor which was repeatedly referred to in literature on charisma. Followers spoke of feeling empowered by Maharaji, and expressed strong sentiments of emotional attachment to the group/movement.

### 3. Charismatic Leadership

*“There arise from time to time men who bear to the moral condition of their age much the same relations as men of genius bear to its intellectual condition. They anticipate the moral standard of a later age, which has no relation to the spirit of their time. The magnetism of their perfections tells powerfully upon their contemporaries. An enthusiasm is kindled, a group of adherents is formed, and many are emancipated from the moral condition of their age”<sup>3</sup>.*

Charismatic individuals have the power to uplift and inspire. Where charisma emerges, whether its power is harnessed for good or for evil, it usually points the way to change and the challenge of convention. For John Stuart Mill, charisma is the genius of the extraordinary individual. *“Such people...”* he says, are like the *“Niagra River”*, and cannot be constrained by the *“‘Dutch canals’ of ordinary rules and norms”<sup>4</sup>*. Instead, they have the freedom to point the way for the rest of humanity. Historically, the term charisma is derived from an ancient Greek word meaning “gift”<sup>5</sup>. It would later be adopted by the early Christian Church to describe gifts (charismata) from God that enable the receiver to perform extraordinary feats such as prophecy and healing. The application of the word to leadership contexts came with the work of the German sociologist, Max Weber.

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<sup>3</sup> W.E.H Lecky, quoted in, Gerth,, H. and Mills, C, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, London, Lowe & Brydone Printer Ltd., 1947, pp. 53.

<sup>4</sup> John Stuart Mill, quoted in Lindhom, Charles, *Charisma*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1990, pp. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Conger, J. and Danungo, R., *Charismatic Leadership in Organisations: Perceived Behavioural Attributes and Their Measurement*, in <<Journal of Organisational Behaviour>>, vol. 15, no. 5, 1994, pp. 440.

## Weber on Charisma

Max Weber was intrigued by the forces of authority in society and developed a typology of three ideal types: the charismatic, the traditional, and the rational-legal. Charismatic authority derives its particular legitimacy not from traditions, rules, positions or laws, but rather from faith in a leader's exemplary character.

Weber expressed concerns with the problems of human freedom, creativity, and personal responsibility in the twentieth century. He perceived modern society as undergoing increasing rationalisation, a process by which magical, spontaneous forms of thought and behaviour are gradually displaced by rational thinking. He believed that rational legal-authority was the hallmark of the twentieth century and that charisma is fated to decline as institutional structures increasingly develop, a process which may eventually "*demystify human existence*"<sup>6</sup>. Given these concerns, he sought to explain the forces of individual creativity and responsibility under the term 'charisma'.

For Weber, the rationalisation of society is best illustrated by the ascendancy of the bureaucratic system. As a permanent structure with a system of rational rules, bureaucracy is fashioned to meet calculable and recurrent needs by means of a normal routine. Its specific nature develops more perfectly the more the bureaucracy is 'de-humanized'; the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business all the emotional, personal and irrational elements which escape calculation. However, hardened institutional fabrics may disintegrate, and routine forms of life prove insufficient for mastering a growing state of social tension, stress or suffering. It is in such crises that Weber introduces a balancing conception for bureaucracy, namely the concept of charisma.

The term 'charisma' is used by Weber to describe a self-appointed leader, followed by those in distress, who need to follow the leader because they believe him/her to be extraordinarily qualified. Founders of world religions, prophets, military and political leaders are archetypes of charismatic leadership, and

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<sup>6</sup> Conger, J. and Kanungo, R., *Charismatic Leadership in Organisations: Perceived Attributes and Their Measurement*, in <<Journal of Organisational Behaviour>>, vol. 15, no. 5, 1994, pp. 440.

are viewed by Weber as truly revolutionary forces in history. “*Charisma, in essence, became Weber’s umbrella term for the forces of change and innovation in society*”<sup>7</sup>.

Weber defined charisma in the following terms:

*“The term ‘charisma’ will be applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as not to be accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a “leader”*”<sup>8</sup>.

According to Weber, charisma is an emotionally intense, undercutting force which is opposed to all institutional routines and those subject to rational management. A genuinely charismatic situation is direct and interpersonal, spontaneous and personalized. Charismatic individuals aim at the overthrow of all structure, the disintegration of the chains of custom. Charisma of this type is revolutionary and creative. In charismatic movements, people no longer obey law or custom. Instead they submit to the imperious demands of a heroic figure, whose orders are legitimated not by logic, but solely by their personal “power to command”.

Charismatic individuals tend to emerge in times of social crisis and stress, articulating a vision for the resolution of societal ills. Their mission must have an appeal to specific groups which see in it a solution to their distress. Success is determined by whether or not he or she finds these followers. The charismatic claim breaks down if the mission is not recognized by those to whom the leader feels he/she has been sent. As such, Weber placed great stress on the importance of recognition by a group of followers.

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<sup>7</sup> Conger, J. and Kanungo, R., *Charismatic Leadership in Organisations: Perceived Attributes and Their Measurement*, in <<Journal of Organisational Behaviour>>, vol. 15, no. 5, 1994, pp. 440.

<sup>8</sup> Gerth, H. and Mills, C., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, London, Lowe & Brydone Printers Ltd., 1947, pp. 245.

One of the key aspects of Weber's theory is the "routinisation of charisma"<sup>9</sup>. By its very nature, the existence of charismatic authority is specifically unstable. Pure charisma does not know any legitimacy other than that flowing from personal strength, that is, one which is constantly being proved. The charismatic leader does not deduce his or her authority from codes and statutes, as is the case with the jurisdiction of office. Weber sees genuine charismatic situations quickly give way to incipient institutions, which emerge from the cooling off of extraordinary states of devotion and fervor. Leaders and followers eventually wish to place their relationship on a more stable footing, in the recognition that their ideals and material interests are better served by a formalization of their own position. Routinisation also takes place to ensure survival of the message after the departure of the leader. One aspect of this change is that charisma is "de-personalised", and the importance of individual action is decreased. The leader's staff changes from a loose assemblage of devoted and enthusiastic disciples into a stable organisation - generally a bureaucratic structure. As such, even the potent and revolutionary force of charisma eventually succumbs to rationalisation.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, pp. 53-54.

## Critiques of Weber's theory

There has been much controversy concerning Weber's theory of charisma. As a study of the environment of leadership, his theory covers only a fraction of the phenomenon of leadership. Weber has little to say about the impact of charismatic individuals, nor is he concerned with how long they rule or how they fall. He seemed to focus exclusively on the bond between citizens and their rulers; and in the case of charisma, a bond which he considers irrational and emotional. Hence, it seems that Weber does not envisage a situation in which charismatic authority can cease to be irrational and become intellectual. In light of this criticism, Schlesinger asks whether Weber's conception of this prophetic, mystical, unstable and irrational phenomenon, is capable of dealing with the realities of industrial society? <sup>10</sup>. Similarly, Weber's classification demonstrates inflexibility when confronted with contemporary forms of rule characterised by a combination of two or more of the authority types, and hence fails to recognise explicitly that the charismatic element can be present in all of the three types of authority systems with varying intensity (Oommen, 1992). Some leaders seem to have charismatic pull while drawing much of their authority from 'rational-legalistic' structures. His conception of charisma is based on the direct relationship between followers and leaders; the object of charisma being the leader, directly and exclusively. Many scholars have criticised his apparent failure to recognise the leader-follower dynamic in the social formation of charisma (Lindholm, 1990; Gardner and Avolio, 1996); and his failure to recognise that charismatic leaders are sometimes 'conservers' or 'stabilisers' of a system rather than agents of radical change (Oommen, 1992).

A controversial aspect of Weber's concept has been whether or not charisma can emerge within an organisational setting. Weber, saw the two as fundamentally antagonistic; "*charisma is opposed to all institutional routines, those of traditional and those subject to rational management*" <sup>11</sup>. While in his

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<sup>10</sup> Schlesinger, quoted in Oommen, T, *Charisma, Social Structure and Social Change*, in <<Comparative Studies in Society and History>>, vol. 10, no. 1, 1992, pp. 87.

<sup>11</sup> Gerth, H. and Mills, C., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, London, Lowe & Brydone Printers Ltd., 1947, pp. 52.

analysis of modern bureaucratic-political institutions, he dealt with the recurrent appearance of charismatic personalities in the midst of bureaucratic organisations, he believed charisma to be intrinsically alien to the latter. However, several sociologically orientated scholars argue that charismatic leadership can emerge and be effective in formal, complex organisations (Shils, 1965; Bryman, 1992). By the late 1970's and mid 1980's, organisational behavior researchers were increasingly interested in the ability of charismatic leaders to bring about change from within the organisational setting. In particular, charismatic business leaders were analysed to understand change and innovation in what was seen as a largely non-adaptive and bureaucratic corporate climate in North America. This neo-charismatic literature is largely concerned with charismatic leader behaviors and follower outcomes, (Conger and Kanungo, 1994; House, 1977), and sees charisma as an attribution based on followers' perceptions of their leader's behavior.

While his typology is restrictive in some aspects, Weber has similarly been accused of inflating the concept of charisma; or "*abuse of the term charismatic*"<sup>12</sup>. By taking the word out of the realm of religion and placing it in the political field, Weber initiated a trend whereby anyone who makes a mark on the world, whether for bad or for good, is labelled charismatic. Carl Frederick is one of the most prominent proponents of the view that the application of the concept of charisma should not be allowed to stray from the purely religious domain. For him, Weber was in fact writing about 'inspirational leadership', which should not be confused with leadership based upon a genuine sense of divine calling, as characterised by 'charisma'. The uprooting of the term from its religious connotations has led to a situation where Hitler and Jesus Christ, Mussolini and Moses are being identified as essentially engaged in the same kind of work. "*This lumping together of demagogues, leaders of totalitarian movements, and founders of religions is misleading to say the least...Weber's typology is basically unsound and should be discarded*"<sup>13</sup>. However, Weber was careful to note that the term be considered value-free. Charismatic status is based not upon the outcome of the charismatic individuals work, rather

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<sup>12</sup> Friederich, C., *Political Leadership and The Problem of The Charismatic Power*, in <<Journal of Politics>>, vol. 23, no. 1, 1982, pp. 15.

<sup>13</sup> Friederich, C., *Political Leadership and The Problem of The Charismatic Power*, in <<Journal of Politics>>, vol. 23, no. 1, year?, pp. 16.



as an attribution based on followers' perceptions of their leader as 'extraordinary'.

Other commentators argue that true charisma is a thing of the past. Bensman and Givant contend that modern charismatic leaders are the product of the artifices of media experts and advertising exponents, who consciously seek to train them in the art of striking oratory, and create the aura of an extraordinary person in order to enhance the likelihood of the imputation of charisma occurring. From this perspective, heroes are a thing of the past, replaced by modern, media-manipulated "pseudo-charismatics"<sup>14</sup>.

Edward Shils contends that Weber was dealing with only one particular variant of the charismatic propensity, which has more far-reaching manifestations than his analysis has hitherto led to us believe. For Shils, the charismatic quality of an individual lies in what is thought to be his or her connection with some very central feature of man's existence; and it is this centrality coupled with intensity, which makes the person extraordinary. These 'charismatic connections' may also become resident in varying degrees of intensity in institutions<sup>15</sup>. As such, the author claims that where institutions like the army, religious or corporate bodies, express or symbolise important societal values, they can awaken the disposition of awe and reverence, i.e., the charismatic disposition. It is arguable that Shils' position represents an over-inflation of the concept of charisma

In light of these and other criticisms, is Weber's notion of charisma relevant to an understanding of leadership in the modern world? While Weber's concept of charisma has generated much controversy, criticism and confusion, it remains the foundation from which most other theories of charisma have materialised. A whole body of literature has emerged which builds upon his initial premises. This literature (referred to as the neo-charismatic or post-Weberian perspectives), is consistent with, and complementary to the Weberian conceptualisation of charismatic leadership. This later literature asserts that exceptionally effective leaders are visionary, offer innovative solutions to

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<sup>14</sup> Bensman and Givant, referred to in Lindholm, C, *Charisma*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1990.

<sup>15</sup> Shils, E., *Charisma, Order, and Status*, in <<American Sociological Review>>, vol. 30, no. 2, year, pp. 202.

major social problems, stand for unconventional if not radical change, generally emerge and are more effective under conditions of social stress and crisis, and induce significant social and organisational changes. This body of theories describes also the social conditions which facilitate the emergence and effectiveness of charismatic leaders, the behaviours and personality characteristics that distinguish these leaders from others, their psychological effects on their followers, their sociological effects on normative social arrangements of the collectives they lead, and the process of routinisation of the charismatic vision and relationship. As such, Weber's original standpoint has been greatly enriched to give rise to a more dynamic, multi-faceted understanding of the phenomenon of charisma.

### **The Emergence of a Charismatic Leader**

Is the rise of a charismatic individual simply a coincidence of extraordinary personality and extraordinary social conditions? Or are charisma and crisis dynamic interlocking forces, feeding on and manipulating each other?. It is generally agreed that charismatic leaders are more likely to emerge and to be effective under conditions of social stress. David Aberbach goes so far as to say that aspiring charismatics might welcome crisis, or even try to create it,

*"...in order to emerge from the ordinary, to break out of the cell of themselves and their painfully narrow world, to give scope to their latent talents, to forge their transcendent role"* <sup>16</sup>.

Shamir cites the conditions under which charismatic leadership is likely to emerge and be effective:

1. In a situation threatening important moral values.
2. A period of instability.
3. A situation requiring exceptional effort for resolution <sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Aberback, David, *Charisma in Politics, Religion and the Media: Private Trauma, Public Ideals*, London, Macmillan Press Ltd, 1996, pp. 4.

<sup>17</sup> Shamir et al, referred to in Jacobsen, Chanoch, *The Rise and Decline of Charismatic Leadership*,

Under such conditions potential followers of emergent charismatic leaders suffer either stress, alienation, loss of meaning of life, or feelings of impotence to deal with the crisis they face. The rigid ideologies usually associated with charismatic leaders offer a defence against fragmentation and uncertainty; and give a society in crisis firm, consistent direction.

Charismatic leadership is primarily about the communication of a vision. A “vision” can be defined as a mental image that the leader conjures up to portray a highly desirable future and end state for a society or organisation; a sort of “big picture”, or fulcrum around which followers can align their efforts (Gardner and Avolio, 1996). In times of social crisis, charismatic leaders possess an innovative solution for the predicaments of followers, offer promise of a better future, envisage a new social and political order which will release followers from the injustices and inequalities of the present. They articulate an ideology clearly, and amplify certain values and identities. Conger (1989) concluded that the amount of charisma attributed to the leader grows as his or her strategic vision becomes more idealized and utopian. This is because idealistic goals make followers’ work more meaningful and provide them with a deeper sense of purpose<sup>18</sup>.

Charismatic leadership frequently breaks with traditional institutional authority and encourages followers to embrace innovative or revolutionary ideas. As such it is motivated to alter and break the ‘frame’ or interpretative scheme by which individuals locate, perceive and label occurrences in their life consistent with the status quo. To effect a change in social values, a charismatic leader must first attempt to reduce the strength of the value individuals place on conventional norms by breaking down ideas, motivating change, and replacing discredited convention. Charismatic individuals are often noted for their use of inclusive language, high levels of abstraction, and ambiguity. Inclusive language and abstract representation are rhetorical techniques that serve a specific purpose: to include and engage followers in a change process that defies convention. Inclusion invites followers to engage and embrace the leaders values, while higher levels of abstraction open the space for followers to align their personal

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University of Pennsylvania, unpublished dissertation, 1999, pp. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Jay Conger, quoted in, Gardner, W. and Avolio, B., *The Charismatic Relationship: A Dramaturgical Perspective*, in <<Academy of Management Review, vol. 23, no. 1, 1996, pp. 39.

values with those of the leader. As such, membership of a charismatic community involves a certain amount of re-socialisation, frequently at deviance from the social and cultural norm (Gardner and Avolio, 1996; Aberbach, 1996).

## **The Nature of Charisma**

*“The ever-present human quest for the omnipotent guide”*<sup>19</sup> .

To summarise so far, charisma is most likely to emerge in times of social stress. The charismatic leader communicates a vision and strategy for change which frequently involves the transmission of revolutionary and unconventional ideas. Followers are “re-socialised” and challenged to question the status quo. However, none of this sheds light on the actual nature of charisma or the leader-follower relationship. As a somewhat ambiguous and complex concept, charisma has been examined from several points of view by neo-charismatic scholars. Various perspectives see charisma as inherent in an extraordinary human being, others see the charismatic leader as a certain personality “type”, while others still envisage it as a dynamic leader-follower exchange relationship, and they challenge the view of charisma as some mythical power emanating solely from the individual.

For many commentators, charisma is above all a relationship; a mutual mingling of the inner selves of leader and follower. It binds people together in ways that transcend and alter the selves of the followers. Through the articulation of a plan for radical reform in an inspirational manner and engagement in exemplary action involving personal risk and sacrifice, charismatic leaders are able to empower followers and build trust. Charismatic leaders have high expectations of their followers and repeatedly express their belief in follower abilities to perform the required tasks.

Charles Lindholm suggests that there is a deep human desire to escape from the limits of the self, and

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<sup>19</sup> Lindholm, Charles, *Charisma*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1990, pp. 75.

one way of achieving this is in a group brought together by the inspiring figure of a charismatic leader. In a similar vein, Emile Durkheim often professed strong belief in the eternal power and goodness of the potent bonding that ties social groups together. For him, people only become human beings to the extent they escape from their individual selves, which he envisioned as inevitably solipsistic and antisocial; and submit to absorption in the moral entity of supra-personal group. “Collective effervescence” is the term he employed to describe the participatory unity created, whereby revolutionary fervor overwhelms individuals and transports them beyond themselves into transcendent realms of community. However, Durkheim plays down the importance of leadership. A society may see within a person the embodiment of its aspirations, but is rarely totally influenced by the leader alone. Charismatic leaders are thus not inherently extraordinary, rather they are endowed with a special, supernatural quality because they serve as a lens through which the power of the community can be focused and amplified <sup>20</sup>.

Other commentators have examined the role of the crowd or group in the charismatic relationship. Gustave Le Bon <sup>21</sup> contends that the passive crowd instinctively follows anyone who expresses intense beliefs, since this permits the crowd to take on a form. A charismatic leader must make use of emotionally charged theatrically large gestures, dramatic illusions, and stimulate the imitation and slavish worship in his or her disciples. Fanatically obsessed by his or her vision, the leader gains the single-mindedness and complete confidence needed to arouse the masses from their torpor into action. Reason offers no hope of transcendence. As such, a charismatic leader must always reflect and embody the irrational sentiments of the crowd, flattering the aspirations of the crowd members, sharing their feelings, shifting the discourse to accommodate the responses of the audience. For crowd psychologists such as Le Bon, charisma is essentially the manipulation of the unique dynamic of the crowd through skillful oratory and theatrics.

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<sup>20</sup> Emile Durkheim, quoted in, Lindholm, Charles, *Charisma*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1990, pp. 13.

<sup>21</sup> Gustave Le Bon, quoted in, Lindholm, Charles, *Charisma*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1990, pp. 56.

Many charismatic leaders understand and manipulate the power of group dynamics to generating extraordinary states of commitment. They are also aware of the “de-individuation” which occurs in crowd situations, whereby strong societal values and morals no longer operate at their usual levels of potency. Hitler believed that much of his power to compel was due to the atmosphere of the crowd which gathered around him;

*“At a mass meeting thought is eliminated...what you tell the people in the mass, in a receptive state of fanatic devotion, will remain like words received under an hypnotic influence, in-eradicable, and impervious to every reasonable explanation”* <sup>22</sup> .

For him, one of the chief concerns of the politician were matters of staging and dramatic surroundings, skilfully constructed for spectacular effect. By speaking only at night, encircled by red banners, before orderly rows of onlookers, Hitler achieved grandiose masterpieces of crowd manipulation where the audience was both a prop and a participant. Hitler proudly called himself, *“the greatest actor in Europe”*.

### **Charisma: Inherent or Engineered?**

It is sometimes suggested that there is a charismatic ‘personality type’, a position which has clear parallels with the trait approach to leadership (Bass, 1981). While many are sceptical about narrowing a broad range of people down to a ‘type’, the literature on charisma abounds with references to specifically “charismatic” characteristics. Certainly energy, confidence, endurance, assertiveness, a tendency to dominate and the relentless pursuit of a vision, appear to be almost universal among charismatic leaders. Charismatic individuals are frequently referred to as having ‘a presence’, and physical authority. One commentator writes that the personal impact of Hitler was like *“a kind of psychological force radiating from him like a magnetic field. It could be so intense as to be almost*

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<sup>22</sup> Adolf Hitler, quoted in, Lindholm, Charles, *Charisma*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1990, pp. 103.

*physically tangible*”<sup>23</sup>. In terms of physical characteristics, the quality of the eyes of charismatic leaders is mentioned with striking frequency. It is well documented that charismatic leaders are often powerful orators. However, it does not appear to be an absolute necessity in a charismatic leader. Ghandi has been noted for suffering from a phobia of public speaking. Similarly, powerful oratory is a skill that can be developed and learned to a large degree, and thus is not necessarily “inherent”. There is also a suggestion that many charismatic leaders exhibit a special capacity for empathy. Lindholm (1990) proposes that Hitler had a capacity to woo prospective converts by making them feel that he was responding to their dormant wishes. While the plurality of charismatic leaders cautions against any attempt to lump them into a “type”, there is certainly evidence of a number of personal characteristics associated with the propensity for becoming a charismatic leader.

Alan Bryman’s (1992) analysis of evidence and empirical research leads him to conclude that evidence is not favorable to the popular view that charisma is something that resides in the person. Drawing on a number of theoretical ideas in the relevant literature and abundant research on charismatic leadership in the religious and political spheres, two themes emerged for him. First, charismatic leadership is essentially to do with a particular kind of relationship between leaders and followers, which can be regarded as a form of exchange. Special qualities of the leader are thus seen as an aspect of this exchange relationship. Secondly, it is argued that charisma can be characterised as something that is socially formed by the leader and followers to produce the kinds of effect with which the phenomenon of charisma is associated. He resists the tendency to seek to separate out certain individuals as special and extraordinary by dint exclusively of personal characteristics, a notion which pervades much popular commentary of charisma and to which Weber was especially prone. Other commentators have conducted analyses from the same premise - that charisma is a largely socially constructed phenomenon and they have explored the activities of leaders and their followers in generating charismatic leadership (Gardner and Avolio, 1996; and Lindholm, 1990). Gardner and Avolio (1996) present a model of the processes whereby social actors use ‘impression management behaviours’ to create and maintain identities as charismatic leaders. *“These leaders are exceptionally expressive persons, who employ rhetoric to persuade, influence, and mobilise others...[they are] the*

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<sup>23</sup> Adolf Hitler, quoted in, Lindholm, Charles, *Charisma*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1990, pp. 104.

*epitome of drama...meaning makers...*”<sup>24</sup>. Followers are envisaged as active players in impression management, who work with the leader to construct his or her charismatic identity. Hence, rather than being ‘passive’, followers join with the leader in making coordinated presentations or “team performances”, for the purpose of facilitating vision attainment and the creation of charismatic identity.

For many, the charismatic leader is a person who is a spellbinding, or at least highly effective orator. The skilful articulation and communication of a vision is an important component of charisma. However, it has been demonstrated that this attribute is not absolutely definitive. For example, leaders are frequently deemed charismatic even when unable to speak in public (for example Nelson Mandela during his years on Robben Island Prison). Similarly, the restrictions of freedom of speech on freedom fighters, such as the public speaking ban on Aun San Suu Kyi of Burma, do not appear to undermine their charismatic status. In fact, speaking bans represent further evidence of the power of the rhetorical skills of charismatic leaders. Deployment of metaphor seems to be a striking feature of the oratory of many charismatic leaders - metaphors contribute greatly to the capacity of the leader to persuade others. Martin Luther King, in his famous “I Have A Dream” speech, used the power of rhythm and repetition to mesmerise and ignite the emotional commitment of his audiences. Hitler imbued his nationalistic speeches with a religious rhetoric in order to convey the impression that there was a God-given basis for his ideology. The association of charisma with powerful speaking is a strong one.

The creation of myth and legend around the leader is another important aspect of the social formation of charisma. Such myths contribute to the air of extraordinary that surrounds the leader. The incidence of “enlightened experiences” is high among charismatic leaders, enhancing their unique qualities, and compounding both leader and follower beliefs in the divine mission of the leader. Malcom X and Nat Turner (leader of 1831 slave revolt in Virginia), both claim to have experienced supernatural “visions”. Many other leaders such as Hitler, Winston Churchill, and Napoleon expressed strong feelings of being “chosen” by a higher being to carry out their mission. Mythologizing of the charismatic leader can also be in the form of the enhancement of his or her unique qualities or past. Followers tend to be

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<sup>24</sup> Gardner, W. and Avolio, B., *The Charismatic Relationship: A Dramaturgical Perspective*, in <<Academy of Management Review>>, vol. 23, no. 1, 1996, pp. 33.



particularly active in the creation and propagation of myth surrounding their charismatic leader. A leader's status as charismatic may only be created or enhanced after his or her death. Post mortem charismatisation of a leader who was rarely seen as charismatic during his or her lifetime (for example Abraham Lincoln), suggests that the depiction of a charismatic leader is sometimes almost exclusively a matter of social formation.

Academic investigation and debate into "charismatic leadership" is ongoing. As demonstrated, various commentators place greater or lesser emphasis on certain aspects of charisma. For example, while some scholars see charisma as emanating from an individual genius (such as Weber), others conceptualise the phenomenon as a dynamic exchange relationship in which both leader and follower are active participants in the creation of a charismatic identity (for example Bryman, 1992). These perspectives need not be antagonistic, rather the academic diversity can assist in the development of a multi-faceted understanding of this complex topic. The next section "Charismatic Leadership and Social Change" will develop further the assertion that charisma can be a potent force in challenging convention and ushering in social change. Theories on social movements have been amalgamated with the charismatic leadership literature to garner an understanding of how charisma works within the context of a social movement.

## **4: Charismatic Leadership and Social Change**

Society seldom changes its institutions as the need arises. Only in exceptional circumstances does it diverge from a conservative attitude which guards against radical social change. A primary reason for this is the desire of the social elite to uphold the status quo which legitimises their interests. The ruling class are thus loath to rush in with new developments, and social changes usually result from collective struggles of subordinate groups.

Where injustice and oppression is coupled with this elite conservatism, collective behaviours can emerge demanding social change. The emergence of collective behaviours/social movements has a double meaning, reflecting on the one hand the inability of institutions and social control mechanisms to reproduce social cohesion, and on the other, attempts by society to react to crisis situations through the development of shared beliefs on which to base new foundations for collective solidarity. More simply, collective action for social change often reflects refusal of disadvantaged groups to accept oppression and injustice. Historically, social justice and the attainment of human rights have been the result of an upsurge of radical energies and insurgent spirit, and not the products of generous elite initiatives. But these rights are not granted easily or willingly. On the contrary, the historical record suggests that ‘collective violence’ is often required to overcome elite resistance, and a society in which there is much demand or need for change will be ruled by a conservative only with the help of substantial coercion. Social movements are thus frequently the victims of repression precisely because they challenge the status quo and powerful elite interests.

As stated in the introduction, this paper takes as its starting point the assertion that charismatic leaders can be powerful catalysts for social change. By virtue of the unique relationship charismatic leaders have with their followers, they are particularly successful in unleashing the “radical energy” and “insurgent spirit” which can force concessions from elite social groups. The potent force of a strong social movement headed by a charismatic leader is arguably the single most powerful combination that

can bring about societal transformation. Their unconventional leadership style makes charismatic leaders and their followers exceed that of their non-charismatic counterparts, in both vision attainment and overall performance. As was outlined in section 3 (review of charisma literature), strategies entailing the destruction and re-construction of social meaning frequently transform follower identity in ways which favor action for change. Charismatic leaders appear to address the higher order needs of their followers; those relating to the intellectual and personal growth of the individual. For this and other reasons, charismatic leaders can activate extraordinary levels of commitment and self-sacrifice from their followers - levels which are necessary to challenge convention and bring about social change.

During a period of social instability, a charismatic leader emerges, articulating a vision for a better future. If that vision is accepted by a group of followers, a charismatic movement is born. The “charismatic community” is frequently part of a larger social movement. For example, Malcom X and his group of followers were one of a number of actors united in a common cause during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960’s in the US. These charismatic movements claim their stake as “problem owners”, and assert the right to deal with a particular problem in ways compatible with the beliefs and vision of the charismatic community. A crucial step in the communication of the leader’s vision is the identification of those responsible for the situation in which the aggrieved population find themselves. So while collective action cannot occur in the absence of a “we”; characterised by common traits and a specific solidarity, equally indispensable is the identification of the “other”, to which can be attributed the responsibility for the community’s condition, and against which mobilisation is called. There are also those third parties who are in a neutral position. It is with reference to these three components that charismatic movement identities are formed and come to life.

Social movements, charismatic leadership and human rights are closely interconnected. Neil Stammers argues that many people are unaware that human rights become realised only by the struggles of real people experiencing real instances of domination. He cautions against perceiving rights as an asocial, universal abstraction. He reminds us that the ideology of human rights has its roots

in social movements and collective struggle. Further evidence of the interconnectedness of rights and collective action is offered by Fowenraker and Landman (1997). They highlight that the rise of movements slowly spread the language of rights throughout society, and this newfound awareness can lead directly to a struggle to vindicate these rights. Social movements and charismatic communities frequently emerge from contexts where human rights are not apparent or are plainly denied, and it is through the processes of organisation and demand-making that a knowledge of universal, inalienable entitlements arises. It is possible to conceive of movements as a media through which concepts and perspectives which might otherwise have remained marginal, are disseminated in society. As such, social movements often constitute “schools” for understanding and disseminating ideas about human rights.

Charismatic leaders facilitate the ideological march of human rights, by spreading awareness throughout a community. Their very specific leadership methods make them far more effective than conventional leaders at educating the masses and rousing them to action to claim their entitlements. Simultaneously, human rights rhetoric is a valuable “tool” for charismatic leaders. The discourse of human rights serves as a source of bonding and a framework for the expression of group demands; a master frame giving political and ideological coherence to a broad range of social struggles. Human rights frequently play a key role in translating the specific demands of particular movements into a common language, and in facilitating the construction of political alliances and movement networks. The rights perspective can encourage or even elicit social struggle by providing social movements with a common language, which is variously described as a set of tools, a political resource, or a banner for action.

While social changes are the product of dynamic and complex human socio-political relations, the historical record suggests that the realisation and expansion of human rights are frequently the result of the struggles of oppressed peoples against conservative elite forces. It has been argued that due to their visionary and unconventional tactics, charismatic leaders are particularly suited to head collective movements demanding social change and human rights. Their altruistic behaviour and tendency to significant personal sacrifice motivates followers to transcend their own self-interests for the sake of

the group. While not an absolute necessity for social movements, charismatic leaders can channel collective energies, unify a diverse set of actors, and elicit extraordinary levels of commitment from their followers. Leon Trotsky nicely elucidates this point in his ruminations on revolution and leadership; “*Without a guiding organisation the energy of the masses would dissipate like steam not enclosed in a piston-box. But nevertheless what moves things is not the piston or the box, but the steam...*”<sup>25</sup>.

The following two sections of this paper contain case studies of charismatic leadership within the context of two recent liberation struggles; the anti-apartheid movement and the American Civil Rights movement. The courageous, grass roots leadership styles of both Malcom X and Nelson Mandela are examined. How did these visionary leaders mobilise the masses? In what ways did they challenge the “social elite”? How successful were they in realising their visions for a more egalitarian society? Analysis of these two important 20<sup>th</sup> century leaders, and the amalgamation of theory with real historical instances of charismatic leadership, will assist in the final section of this paper where the following question will be addressed; why is charismatic leadership important to the human rights movement?

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<sup>25</sup> Leon Trotsky, *Revolution and Insurrection*, in David Horowitz (ed.), *Radical Sociology: An Introduction*, San Francisco,

## 5. Malcom X: “the angriest black man in America”

*“He spoke of thoughts, feelings and ideas which were deep within me as a first-generation African American urbanite but which had as yet not been uttered. These were ideas that I and many in my generation and class were afraid of. Malcom had dared to give voice to what had previously been deemed unspeakable”*<sup>26</sup>.

*“Today, we tend to forget how unsettling a person Malcom X was even for his own followers. He articulated realities which many African Americans of his time had repressed and previously had refused to come to grips with”*<sup>27</sup>.

Malcom X was an enigmatic, shape-shifting personality, who showed exceptionally brave leadership during the 1960’s American Civil Rights movement. Along with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., he is regarded as one of the most prominent black leaders of the Afro-American struggle. His radically challenging views, refusal to adhere to non-violent ideologies, and shocking rhetoric ensured that he was heavily censored by the media, and demonised by many sectors of American society. He was said to be the only Negro<sup>28</sup> in America who could either start a race riot, or stop one. However, it would be a mistake to underestimate the legacy of Malcom X, or to fail to recognise the sophistication and revolutionary flavor of his plan for black liberation. Malcom X was not just about sensationalism, he was a serious, independent thinker who challenged his followers to break with the paradigm of ruling class thought.

The 1990’s witnessed a resurgent interest in Malcom X. He has become an icon for an increasingly assertive African American youth generation. Indeed, among Afro-American youth today, his image rivals and perhaps outshines Dr Martin Luther King Jr as a black icon, as a man utterly committed to

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Canfield Press, 1971, pp. 235.

<sup>26</sup> Sales, William, *From Civil Rights to Black Liberation: Malcom X and the Organisation of Afro-American Unity*, Boston, South End Press, 1994, pp. 22.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, pp. 59

<sup>28</sup> While the name African American is increasingly in usage, an attempt has been made to use terms that are consonant

his people's struggle. As such, his legacy has been of unquestioned symbolic significance and will continue to influence the ongoing struggle for racial equality in the United States.

His life is a story of transcendent personal development, an extremely challenging stance toward white supremacy, and passionate defence of the interests of the oppressed. His was one of many voices demanding that the West acknowledge the damage that had been done to its democracy and civilization by the twin evils of race consciousness and race hierarchy. The publication of his autobiography in 1965 allowed his charismatic leadership to transcend his assassination, and it has become one of the most widely read and important works of 20<sup>th</sup> century US literature.

This section is divided into two parts: a biographical section which is subdivided to reflect the political and intellectual developments of Malcom X's life, and his contribution to the Civil Rights movement; and a second section examining Malcom's charismatic leadership - to what extent does his legacy correspond to the theoretical accounts of charisma outlined in section 3 of this paper.

## **Biographical details**

### Malcom's early childhood

Malcolm X was born Malcom Little in Omaha, Nebraska, on May 1925<sup>29</sup>. Both his parents were active in the Universal Negro Improvement Association, the largest 20<sup>th</sup> century mass-based Black nationalist organisation, created in 1914 by the charismatic Jamaican Marcus Garvey. Malcom's father, a Baptist preacher and outspoken advocate of black pride, was killed when Malcom was seven years old (suspected to have been murdered by the white racist group, The Black Legion). Malcom's mother suffered a nervous breakdown soon after, and white welfare workers sent her eight children to several different families. Malcom was the only black pupil in his high school. He was a very gifted

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with the period under consideration, even if they are not currently deemed "politically correct".

<sup>29</sup> After Malcom joined the Nation of Islam in the early 1950's, he dropped his surname, replacing it with the infamous X. The X stands for the original African name that every African American lost in the middle passage and slavery.

and popular student, but soon came to realise that his church and the schools he went to were defined and controlled by white Christians who treated him like an inferior person throughout his childhood and youth. After visiting his half sister Ella Collins in Boston, where he found himself being a member of a mass of black people for the first time of his life, he had difficulties to accept his situation among whites. An encounter with his English teacher marked a turning point in his life. The teacher told Malcom to become a carpenter, rather than pursuing his dream of becoming a lawyer because he had to be “*realistic about being a nigger*”. Deeply affected and disillusioned by the incident, Malcom quickly withdrew from white people, dropping out of school after finishing eighth grade in 1941.

### Malcom the Hustler

Malcom’s teenage years were spent in Boston with his half-sister, where he soon became fully integrated in the black underclass. He worked as a dishwasher, a shoeshine boy, a soda jerk, and a busboy during the next few years. He moved to New York City, became mesmerised by the world of the hustlers, and soon descended into drug addiction and criminality; selling drugs, pimping women, and burglary. In 1946, he was sentenced to ten years in prison for breaking and entering. Prison offered him the opportunity to pause and reflect on his life, and he underwent a transformation. He quit drugs, gained self-respect, discipline and a sense of mission in life. The jailhouse savant Bimbi taught Malcom to respect the intellectual disciplines: reading, writing and being articulate; and to reconstruct his life and his reputation around their mastery. Malcom read voraciously while in prison, particularly literature on the slave trade and world revolutionary history. This instigated his lifelong commitment to history as the ultimate determinant of truth or falsity. It was in jail that Malcom converted to Islam and found the role model of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, the charismatic leader of the controversial religious organisation, the Nation of Islam (NOI). His leadership talents quickly became evident when he led the struggle of Muslim prisoners to have their religious and dietary needs respected.

*“I’d put prison second to college as the best place for a man to go if he needs to do something. If he’s motivated, prison can change his life... You studied what he [the white man] wanted you to learn about*



*him in schools. I studied him in the streets and in prison, where you see the truth”*<sup>30</sup>.

### The Nation of Islam Period

Malcom served seven years of his sentence, and after his release in 1953, quickly established himself in the Nation of Islam. By the latter half of the 1950's, he had risen through the ranks to become the national spokesperson for the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. Malcom almost single-handedly transformed the NOI from a small isolated sect into a national force in the African American community. Under his direction, more than 200 additional temples were organised, the organisation grew in size and prestige and was noted for its ability to reach and transform the lives of the most anti-social members of the “black underclass”.

The Nation of Islam was an extremely centralised authoritarian theocracy with decision-making concentrated in the hands of Elijah Muhammad. His leadership was legitimised by charisma attendant to his position as the physical link between God and man as the “messenger” of Allah. The organisation taught that Western civilisation was the product of white “devil-men”, themselves the creation of an evil scientist 6000 years ago. The NOI's demonology of whites was particularly suited to the mood of the alienated, ghettoised black masses and gave moral justification for the possession and articulation of the intense hatred which many black people felt for whites. While the organisation encouraged its members to be law-abiding and to respect the US constitution, racist terror was to be resisted by self-defence, which was seen not only as a legal right, but as a natural and inalienable right.

African Americans have long suffered from the legacy of slavery and continued racial discrimination in all aspects of life in the United States. They mounted a social movement in the 1960's - the Civil Rights movement (CRM), which forced important concessions from the US ruling class. The Nation of Islam offered a scathing critique of the movement, and Malcom was frequently at the forefront of these attacks. The NOI challenged the notion that the primary agent of change in the black community was it's middle class, whose thinking was seen as dominated by the integrationist-assimilationist paradigm.

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<sup>30</sup> X, Malcom, (with the assistance of Alex Haley), *The Autobiography of Malcom X*, New York, Penguin, 1968, pp. 19

They rallied against the desire to integrate into a fundamentally flawed and racist system, calling instead for racial separation, black pride and rejection of the US system.

By 1959, the whole nation was made aware of the presence of the NOI, and of Malcom X, when he appeared on nationwide TV openly advocating racial separation. During his period in the NOI, Malcom's rhetoric was distinctly anti-white and pro-violence. He attacked the concept of a non-violent revolution as a phenomenon not confirmed by the facts of contemporary history and vehemently disagreed with Dr Martin Luther King's rejection of self-defence. The question of violence was at the centre of his conception of the Black man's freedom struggle. Malcom X generated more controversy around his stance on violence than his analysis of the nature of white people. While he was not a vigilante, he openly encouraged black people to use violence in self-defence, "*in those areas where the government cannot or will not protect*". A few years later, Malcom X was to seriously consider the option of revolutionary urban guerilla warfare to offset a white backlash. It is difficult to imagine how shocking and threatening he was to America's white population. Nevertheless, he understood and articulated the rage of those in the northern black ghettos, and gave this group of street people its voice and a public persona. Malcom wished to establish an activist, nationalist presence within the Civil Rights movement, using the NOI as his base. This desire, along with jealousy towards his increasingly prominent position within the NOI, brought him into conflict with the leadership of the organisation, and ultimately convinced him to leave. Malcom X, having formally broken with the NOI on March 8<sup>th</sup> 1964, was able to expand his critique of the Civil Rights movement.

While Malcom's political thought was continuously evolving, he was consistently critical of both the leadership and the tactics of the Civil Rights movement. His break with the NOI allowed him to become an active participant in the Afro-American liberation struggle. Malcom's criticisms and radicalism represent his most important contributions to the Civil Rights movement. He forced both followers and leaders to re-evaluate the progress and strategies of the struggle. In his speeches he often used the analogy from the slavery period of the "field Negro" and the "house Negro" to illustrate the social, historical and cultural origins of the debate between integrationists and nationalists. For Malcom X, Black nationalism was the natural political expression of the field Negro tradition in African

American political culture. This field Negro tradition was predicated on a profound hatred of the slave master and all his works. Moreover, it was oriented toward the destruction of slavery by “any means necessary”. The demands and activities of the House Negro were defined by the needs and desires of the master, ie, the white population. This mentality was at the root of the “Uncle Tom” Civil Rights leadership that was, in Malcom’s opinion, selling out the masses of black people, and allowing the white population dictate the terms under which black citizens could attain their rights. His critique of integrationist ideology and Civil Rights leadership was the first effective challenge to the monopoly those forces had over intellectual discourse in the black community. The effectiveness of his critique forced more creative thinking throughout the African American community and prodded the established Civil Rights leadership to rethink its most cherished precepts, and acknowledge its responsibility to respond to the agenda of urban street forces, whose interests it had consistently failed to represent.

### The Organisation of Afro-American Unity

*“How is the black man going to get civil rights before first he wins his human rights? If the American black man will start thinking about his human rights, and then start thinking of himself as part of one of the worlds great peoples, he will see he has a case for the UN”<sup>31</sup>.*

After his break with the NOI, Malcom X established two organisations; Muslim Mosque Inc, and The Organisation for African American Unity (OAAU). The main emphasis of the organisations would be Black nationalism as a political concept and form of social action against oppression. The OAAU was a non-religious, non-sectarian group organised to unite Afro-Americans for a constructive program toward attainment of human rights, and was an attempt to give the previously domestically based CRM more of the form, content, and personality of a legitimate national liberation movement. As opposed to the thinking of the NOI, there was a distinct international component in the black nationalism of Malcom X and his human rights agenda. By spring 1964, he defined the African American nationalist

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<sup>31</sup> X, Malcolm (with the assistance of Alex Haley), *The Autobiography of Malcom X*, New York, Penguin, 1968, pp. 274.

tradition as a revolutionary one, a violent struggle for land and self-determination. More than any other Civil Rights leader, he saw African American nationalism as an integral part of the worldwide revolution of Afro-Asians against white domination.

Malcom X made the hajj (Islamic pilgrimage) to Mecca in the spring of 1964 to discover the true Sunni Islam. This journey had a profound impact on his political thinking. During the trip, he saw people of all colour united in true Brotherhood. It convinced him that he was fighting not white people in general, but the system of racism and oppression which taught whites to believe themselves inherently superior to non-whites. In two trips to Africa in the spring and summer of 1964, he became the first major African American leader to go to Africa and present a detailed description and explanation of racism in the United States. It was his intention to garner the support of Africans everywhere behind the struggle of the African American and to take the US government before the United Nations for violating the human rights of 22 million African Americans. The Negro case should be taken up in the UN Malcom advised; *“The Negro will never get justice in Uncle Sam’s Courts”* but will be forced to *“take Uncle Sam into the world court”*<sup>32</sup>.

Malcom X spent the last year of his life trying to internationalise the struggle for African American liberation, and reorient the focus and goal of the movement from civil rights to human rights. He visualised the OAAU as the organisational vehicle for achieving this aim. It was also the first major attempt in the 1960’s by Pan-African Internationalists to form a black united front in the fight against oppression. Malcom’s brave and revolutionary strategy to bring the African American case against the US to the United Nations saw him continuously forging international links and garnering support for the project. He wanted the OAAU to represent the united front of a national liberation movement, thereby attaining international legitimacy, and enabling African Americans to speak to international human rights bodies with one voice. Unfortunately, his plan was never to be realised. After his death, the Black Liberation movement lacked another charismatic leader who could pursue and successfully lead such a revolutionary agenda. Malcom X was assassinated in New York’s Audubon Ballroom in February 1965. Muslim gunmen pulled the trigger but the available record, including government

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<sup>32</sup> X, Malcolm (with the assistance of Alex Haley), *The Autobiography of Malcom X*, New York, Penguin, 1968, pp. 72.

documents, strongly suggests that Malcom X was the victim of a government-inspired political assassination.

### **Charismatic credentials**

To what extent does Malcom X correspond to the literature on charismatic leadership? Malcom X emerged as a charismatic figure (from within an organisation- the Nation of Islam) during a time of crisis in the United States. During the 1960's Civil Rights Movement, black people were questioning not only the performance and orientation of the federal government, but also the fundamental character of the US state itself, i.e., was this a racist state in conception and structure? African Americans were experiencing feelings of alienation, deprivation and low self-esteem. Faced with state violence, a racist and intolerable status quo which left them at a distinct social and economic disadvantage, black people in America (especially in the urban ghettos), were amenable to the charismatic leadership and revolutionary rhetoric of Malcom X.

*“Malcom said aloud those things which Negroes had been saying among themselves. He even said those things Negroes had been afraid to say to each other. His clear uncomplicated words cut through the chains on black minds like a giant blowtorch”*<sup>33</sup>.

Like all charismatic leaders, Malcom X offered a vision to his followers; both to imbue his followers with hope and motivation, and to rouse the masses to action. While his politics were constantly evolving, his tactics growing more and more sophisticated, Malcom X offered one consistent vision to African Americans: freedom from racial oppression. During the last two years of his life, Malcom's vision had evolved into the attainment of the full range of fundamental human rights for Afro-Americans. Unlike other charismatic leaders, Malcom's message was rarely highly embellished or idealistic. Rather his responses to the African American situation were based upon scrupulous scrutiny of facts. His strategies for vision attainment were highly revolutionary and challenging to America's

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<sup>33</sup> Sales, William, *From Civil Rights to Black Liberation: Malcom X and the Organisation of Afro-American Unity*, Boston,

white elite. He was among the first African Americans who seriously discussed the possibility of the revolutionary option for black people. The revolutionary flavor of his vision was a major factor contributing to his charisma, as many African Americans conceived of Malcom as a symbol of uncompromising, unconventional leadership. He channelled a lot of his energy into stirring up discontent among African Americans. Discontent with their disadvantaged situation, discontent with an unjust status quo, and discontent with black leadership that was failing to address their needs. These strategies are consistent with theoretical descriptions of how charismatic leaders discredit convention, and encourage followers both to reject the status quo, and embrace a new vision for the future.

Malcom's legacy demonstrates clearly the strong link between powerful rhetoric and charismatic leadership. His speech was shocking, vivid, graphic, and visceral but always precise. He was an extremely powerful public speaker and his rhetoric reflected an activist style that was a product of the macho orientation of Black street culture, the "university of the penitentiary", and themes of the quest for manhood and rebellion that were an essential element of Black political culture. Martin Luther King continuously avoided public debating with Malcom X and was said to be intimidated by his debating skills. His inflammatory rhetoric and dedication to "saying it like it is", was one of the principal reasons he attained charismatic status, particularly from the poorest, most underprivileged blacks in the ghettos.

Malcom X is often credited with reawakening an interest in black history. Emerging charismatic movements often draw on their own traditional heritage, presenting them in a new perspective. This represents a confirmation of fundamental values and historic memories which have, in recent times, been neglected or forgotten. The ability to refer to one's past and cultural heritage puts many cognitive and value-related resources at the disposal of actors. In the absence of reference to one's own history and to the particular nature of one's own roots, an appeal to something new risks seeming inconsistent and, in the end, lacking in legitimacy. In this vein, Malcom X strove to rehabilitate black people spiritually by restoring to them a sense of their Africanness and the superiority of traditional African institutions and values. His speeches were littered with references both to the great African civilisations

the victims of slavery left behind, and visions of future greatness for the black race. This strategy, which was particularly pronounced during his time with the Nation of Islam, had several outcomes. It offered a source of positive group identity for a population which had greatly internalised feelings of inferiority foisted upon it by the white race; it made black Americans realise their common heritage thereby undermining disunity and providing a source of group cohesion; and it provided a vision for a more equitable future. Malcom X frequently referred to the slave trade as one of the greatest crimes against humanity ever committed. He made black Americans aware of their history, highlighted past injustices which had previously been “hidden” from the black population, and conveniently “written out” of the American history curriculum.

*“The only persons who really changed history are those who changed men’s thinking about themselves. Hitler as well as Jesus, Stalin as well as Buddha”<sup>34</sup>.*

Malcom X tried to change how Afro-Americans thought about themselves. He was greatly concerned for the self-image of his race. After centuries of subjugation under a system which taught black people they were inferior, Malcom X stressed the need to understand the ideological tactics used by whites to maintain supremacy, and the necessity of instilling pride and esteem in his race. Ideological hegemony of the ruling elite is often the basis of the false consciousness of those they rule. The ability to impose negative and stigmatised definitions of the identity of other groups constitutes a fundamental mechanism of social domination. The negative impact of other’s definitions of identity contributes, for example to explaining the low capacity for collective action often found among residents of urban ghettos, a phenomenon which Malcom X struggled to overcome. African Americans experienced a duality of consciousness characterised by Dr. Du Bois as a “double consciousness”<sup>35</sup>. The two ideological orientations of the American Dream (which caused black disunity, raising the needs of the individual above the group), and the etiquette of race relations (whereby whites dictated the conditions under which blacks could access resources) worked in tandem to facilitate ruling class strategies of cooption or repression, and caused confusion and indecisiveness in black people. Malcom X tried to

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<sup>34</sup> X, Malcolm (with the assistance of Alex Haley), *The Autobiography of Malcom X*, New York, Penguin, 1968, pp. 280

<sup>35</sup> Dr. Du Bois, quoted in, Sales, William, *From Civil Rights to Black Liberation: Malcom X and the Organisation of Afro-American Unity*, Boston, South End Press, 1994, pp. 135.

make black people aware of the ideological oppression they faced, and dedicated his life to “*telling the white man the truth about himself*”. Hence, one of Malcom X’s most important contributions to the Civil Rights movement was an ideological one. As a precondition for developing an effective movement for black liberation, he insisted that black people rethink their entire experience in the US. He repeatedly called for a cultural revolution to “*un-brainwash an entire people*”<sup>36</sup>, and saw culture as an indispensable weapon in the freedom struggle.

If Malcom X is a charismatic leader, what characteristics or behaviours did he exhibit which justify that charismatic status? While he was undoubtedly a courageous and exemplary individual, one can detect elements of the social formation of charisma in Malcom’s case. Both his followers and the publication of his autobiography in 1965 were instrumental in mythologizing and emphasising his criminal past. This aspect of his past was played up to demonstrate that the “street elements” were capable of emancipation. Indeed, he has come to represent transcendent personal development and the possibilities of individual redemption. Malcom X experienced a “vision” while he was in prison. While he refers to this experience only once in his autobiography, it has helped generate an air of the extraordinary around him; that there was divine legitimacy for his mission. Malcom was extremely committed to his cause and demonstrated personal sacrifice characteristic of true charismatic individuals. In the face of threats which ultimately took his life, Malcom never flagged in maintaining a regal deportment. His was a lasting example of championing what he believed to be true no matter what the costs. Because of his deportment in the face of death, he became an icon of the black freedom struggle and a symbol of black manhood.

*“People believed and followed Malcom X not out of an emotional attachment to his charisma. The basis of his leadership was that he gave back to his followers, in a more highly refined and clarified form, ideas and in sights which in fact were rooted in their experiences”*<sup>37</sup>.

Malcom’s charisma and leadership were based on a very low-keyed method of personal contact and

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<sup>36</sup> Ibidem, pp. 107.

<sup>37</sup> Sales, William, *From Civil Rights to Black Liberation: Malcom X and the Organisation of Afro-American Unity*, Boston, South End Press, 1994, pp. 57



one-on-one encounters with the black masses. Promenading the avenues of Harlem was an old black tradition used to meet friends and renew old acquaintances. Malcom X frequently engaged in these activities to spread his “vision” and to keep in touch with the urban street population. He maintained this grassroots quality throughout the duration of his leadership. In an era of media image-making, and “pseudo-charisma”, Malcom retained the ability to use older more traditional methods to reach and move people.

Malcom X understood both the power of his charisma, and the effects of “the routinisation of charisma”. In setting up the OAAU and Muslim Mosque Inc., Malcom demonstrated understanding of the advantage of creating institutional structures which would formalise the interests of the charismatic community. While he exploited and harnessed his status to gain publicity for the black liberation cause, he recognised that organisations based on charisma were in jeopardy of falling apart if the leader was removed. He often emphasised the need for his organisation- the Organisation of Afro-American Unity, to develop effective programs which could replace charisma as the basis for holding its constituency. The evening before his assassination, he told an associate *“I did not want an organisation that depended on the life of one man. The organisation must be able to survive on its own”*<sup>38</sup>. However, while he encouraged democratic decision making inside of the OAAU and admonished his followers not to build a cult of personality around him, he remained the ratifier of all organisational decision.

Malcom’s charisma was affected as he became less of an outlet for the pent-up anger and frustration of the Black masses in the way he had been in the Nation of Islam. He had to talk peace and abandon the incendiary rhetoric, undercutting the dynamic of hate which was the NOI’s vital force. What he was trying to accomplish in the OAAU period was to replace the hatred of white people characteristic of the NOI with the more acceptable hatred of oppressive social systems. Many interpreted this development and increasing sophistication in his political outlook as a softening up on white people.

In terms of his correspondence with the models of charisma in the theoretical literature, Malcom X is a classic charismatic leader. When we observe the radical tactics and the revolutionary rhetoric of

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<sup>38</sup> Sales, William, *From Civil Rights to Black Liberation: Malcom X and the Organisation of Afro-American Unity*, Boston,

Malcom, the unconventional style of the charismatic leader becomes apparent. Malcom was fiery, controversial and utterly unconstrained by convention. His emergence from within an organisational setting suggests that contrary to Weber's assertion, charisma is not necessarily inimical to institutional and organisational structures. However, Weber's insights into the routinisation of charisma seem to hold true in Malcom's case. Additionally, we can see how organisations based on charisma can wane with the removal of the charismatic leader. His organisation, the OAAU, could not survive without Malcom's charisma, and quickly faded after his assassination. The case study also demonstrates how charismatic individuals can disseminate the language of rights in society, and harness radical energies behind revolutionary strategies for social change. This is evident in how Malcom's revolutionary ideology and use of rights rhetoric influenced the Black Power phase of the Civil Rights movement which occurred after his assassination.

## **Conclusion**

*“Master spell-binder that he was, Malcom X in death cast a spell more far-flung and more disturbing than any he cast in life”<sup>39</sup>.*

Malcom X greatly influenced, and continues to influence the African American struggle. He established in the Civil Rights movement the principle that street elements could rise to leadership in the struggle for Black liberation. His own life demonstrated that this social stratum was capable of self-emancipation. The source of his charisma was his ability to help others break with the paradigm of ruling-class thought, challenging both oppressed and oppressors to reflect on their place in a racist and unjust system which characterised 1960's America. His lack of formal education allowed his street constituency to see clearly the essence of the intellectual endeavor, without the mediation of formal academic institutions. Malcom X's legacy continues to challenge every ghetto youth to be a serious intellectual.

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South End Press, 1994, pp. 113.

<sup>39</sup> Roy Wilkins, quoted in X, Malcolm (with the assistance of Alex Haley), *The Autobiography of Malcom X*, New York, Penguin, 1968, pp. 47.

Malcom X is an excellent example of a charismatic leader who used the rhetoric of human rights to frame his demands for the African American struggle. In the last years of his life, Malcom tried to internationalise the African American struggle, and reorient it from a civil rights to a human rights perspective. He placed the attainment of human rights for African Americans above the struggle for civil rights, the latter which could not be guaranteed by an inherently racist government, while the former were universal and inalienable. He showed considerable foresight and perception in his adoption of a human rights perspective.

Malcom X was constantly keeping abreast of new developments which could be of use to the Afro-American struggle, and showed perception and creativity in his employment of a rights perspective. Human rights law was one of the newest components of international law and organisation. Complicating the development of this branch of international law were questions of respect for the territorial integrity and domestic jurisdiction of member states. Violations of human rights were in the first instance to be corrected by domestic processes wherever possible. Malcom continuously argued that the Afro-American struggle was not a domestic problem, but a facet of the world wide anti-imperialism movement. His express wish to bring the US before the United Nations for violating the human rights of 22 million African Americans was a bold and exciting strategy. After his assassination, there was a lack of sufficiently charismatic candidates who could continue on this radical path which represented a huge departure from the ideology of the mainstream Civil Rights movement. While history is full of “what ifs”, one cannot help wondering what shape the Afro-American struggle would have taken had Malcom lived to pursue his revolutionary path.

*“If something is yours by right, then fight for it or shut up. If you can’t fight for it, then forget it”<sup>40</sup>.*

## **6. Nelson Mandela: A Tiger For Our Times**

*“People often ask me what difference one person can make in the face of injustice, conflict, human rights violations, mass poverty and disease. I answer by quoting the courage, tenacity, dignity and magnanimity of Nelson Mandela”*<sup>41</sup>.

Nelson Mandela has been honoured, awarded, feted, and revered all over the world in an unprecedented, sustained chorus of love and respect. A string of honorary degrees, human rights awards, honorary citizenships, and even statues are testament to the worldwide recognition of his monumental leadership<sup>42</sup>. When conducting research into Mandela’s reign and charismatic leadership, one is immediately struck by the dearth of critical material on him, and the truly extraordinary levels of adulation to which he is subjected. Material on Mandela at times descends into a religious-like reverence, and references to him as “a Messiah”, “a Saint”, an “African Jesus Christ” are by no means uncommon. Has Mandela’s charismatic status resulted in the suspension of all critical judgement, or is he truly “an extraordinary human being”, a model for humanity, worthy of the adoration he receives? Mandela himself has continuously tried to undercut and admonish the cult of personality which has built up around him, reminding us that he is “*an ordinary man who had become a leader because of extraordinary circumstances*”.

His charisma today remains undiminished, and he has become a potent symbol of courage, liberty, and humanity. He has assumed a massive symbolic importance for both the people of South Africa and indeed, for humanity as a whole. As Kader Asmal recently observed, “*Nelson Mandela belongs to the world*”. However, we must guard against the danger of appropriating this man’s legacy, and reducing it to a series of slogans and symbols. Such a strategy eclipses true understanding of the struggles in which

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<sup>40</sup> X, Malcolm (with the assistance of Alex Haley), *The Autobiography of Malcom X*, New York, Penguin, 1968, pp. 215.

<sup>41</sup> Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations, quoted in, *Mandela, Nelson, In His Own Words: From Freedom to the Future*, London, Abacus, 2003, pp. xiii.

he engaged, and the sacrifices he has had to endure in pursuit of his vision for a non-racial democratic South Africa.

This section is divided into two parts; a biographical account which includes details of his early life and his role in the anti-apartheid struggle; followed by an examination of Mandela's "charismatic credentials", or the extent to which he corresponds with theoretical ruminations on the nature of the charismatic leader.

## **Biography**

### Early Childhood

Nelson Rolihlahla<sup>43</sup> Mandela was born near Umtata, South Africa, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of July, 1918. He was the eldest son of a proud and rebellious Tembo chief. As one of the royal family of the Transkei, Nelson was groomed from childhood for respectability, status and sheltered living. It was envisaged that he, like his father, would eventually counsel the rulers of the tribe. His father died when he was nine years old, after which his upbringing and education were taken over by his uncle, who was Regent of the Thembu tribe. It was here that Mandela was introduced to many things that were to have a profound impact on him. Sitting around the fire listening to the tribal elders tell stories of great African kings and warriors, instilled in him a great pride and interest in African history. Mandela's later notions of leadership were greatly influenced by observing the Regent and his court, which he regarded as "*democracy in its purest form*"<sup>44</sup>. The court was to be instrumental in the development of Mandela's leadership style, characterised by the realistic assessment of options, extensive debate with colleagues in order to arrive at consensus, and informed, pragmatic decision-making.

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<sup>42</sup> Mandela won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993 for his work for the peaceful termination of the apartheid regime.

<sup>43</sup> "Rolihlahla", the prophetic name given to Mandela at birth, translates into English as "troublemaker", or more specifically "one who pulls on the branch of a tree". He has been referred to as Nelson since his schooldays- it was then customary to replace a child's African name with the name of a British war hero.

<sup>44</sup> Mandela, Nelson, Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela, London, Little, Brown and Company, 1994, pp. 24.

The education he received was a British education, in which British ideas, British culture and British institutions were automatically assumed to be superior. He attended Fort Hare from the age of 16, where he studied court interpreting. Mandela later studied law and received his qualification in 1942. Although quite a reserved child, he soon showed a rebellious streak when he ran away from the Transkei to escape a tribal marriage his cousins and uncles were trying to arrange for him. In Johannesburg, his new home, he had his first encounter with the lot of the urban African in the teeming African townships. The area he lived in, a township called Alexandra was a cauldron of discontent, and living testimony to the neglect of the authorities. In Johannesburg, Mandela worked for a law firm during the day and studied for his law exams at night. According to Mandela, this was the most difficult period of his life. Hungry, poor, hard working and dressed in a threadbare hand-me-down suit, he eked out a living in the harsh post-war city. During this time, he became acutely aware of the day-to-day injustices that were an inevitable and indeed deliberate consequence of the system soon to be formally known as apartheid.

### The African National Congress (ANC)<sup>45</sup> and anti-apartheid struggle

*“I cannot pinpoint a moment when I became politicised, when I knew that I would spend my life in the liberation struggle. To be an African in South Africa means that one is politicised from the moment of one’s birth...I had no epiphany, no singular revelation, no moment of truth, but a steady accumulation of a thousand slights, a thousand indignities and a thousand unremembered moments produced in me an anger, a rebelliousness, a desire to fight the system that imprisoned my people”<sup>46</sup>.*

Mandela’s politicisation was slow, and he remained somewhat aloof from the mass struggle initially. While Mandela had joined the African National Congress (ANC) by 1944, a number of critical events

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<sup>45</sup> The African National Congress is the oldest political organisation not only in South Africa but on the continent as well. Founded in 1912, the ANC has consistently and persistently given voice to African aspirations for a fairer and more just South Africa.

<sup>46</sup> Mandela, Nelson, Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela, London, Little, Brown and Company,

in 1946 were to profoundly shape his political development, and draw him toward the heart of the African struggle. The state's ruthless retaliation of the mineworkers strike of that year, and the passing into legislation of several acts which represented the beginnings of a policy of apartheid, roused South Africa's non-white population into action<sup>47</sup>. After the horrors of World War 2, racism as a system was thoroughly discredited. The general trend was to remove institutionalised racial barriers at the same time as the old colonial empires were being dismantled. However, from 1948, South Africa moved in the opposite direction, as an apartheid regime was consolidated through legislation and organisational forms, developing into a brutal regime of oppression based on criteria of race alone<sup>48</sup>. The system of apartheid, literally meaning "apartness", represented the codification in one oppressive system of all the laws and regulations that had kept Africans in an inferior position to whites for centuries. The struggle against this "apartness" became an all-consuming aspect of Mandela's life, and he began to pay an increasing personal toll for his political involvement<sup>49</sup>.

Mandela and fellow freedom fighter Walter Sisulu, were perhaps the fastest to get to grips with the harsh realities of the African struggle against the most powerful adversary in Africa: a highly industrialised, well-armed state, manned by a fanatical group of white men determined to defend their privilege and their prejudice, and aided by the complicity of American, British, West German and Japanese investment in the most profitable system of oppression on the continent. Nelson was a key figure in the thinking, planning and devising of tactics against this highly repressive government. By 1960 nearly every African leader was muzzled and restricted by government decree in an attempt to crush opposition to white supremacy. The ANC was declared illegal along with the other major African

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1994, pp. 110

<sup>47</sup> In 1946 the Smuts government passed the Asiatic Land Tenure Act, which curtailed the free movement of Indians. This law, also known as the "Ghetto Act" was a grave insult to the Indian community, and was predecessor to the Group Areas Act, which would eventually circumscribe the freedom of all South Africans of colour. The effected community mounted the Indian Campaign which would become a model for the type of protest the Youth League of the ANC were calling for at the time.

<sup>48</sup> The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act, The Immorality Act (sexual relations between white and nonwhites illegal), The Population and Registration Act (labelling of all South Africans by race, making colour the single most important arbiter of an individual) and The Group Areas Act (requiring separate urban areas for each racial group) were all introduced in 1949.

<sup>49</sup> Mandela's marriage to Evelyn Mase was beginning to suffer, and he was spending increasing amounts of time away from his children. Also, his mother's state of destitution led him to wonder "*whether one was ever justified in neglecting the welfare of one's own family in order to fight for the welfare of others*".

political party, the Pan Africanist Congress. In the wake of the Sharpeville killings<sup>50</sup> in 1960, and following the banning of the ANC, Mandela began to realise that if peaceful protests were put down by force, then the people would be forced to use other methods of struggle. He was instrumental in convincing the ANC that tactics of non-violence had ceased in their usefulness. Mandela and his colleagues forged ahead with a military structure, Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation) to up the ante in the struggle. After Mandela's final acquittal on treason charges in 1961, he went underground to work full time at the building of these military structures, of which he was commander in chief. Here began the legend of the "Black Pimpernel", whereby he lived in hiding, meeting only his closest political associates, travelling around the country in disguise, popping up here and there to lead and advise, disappearing again when the hunt got too hot. *"He was to become more famous in the shadows than he had ever been in broad daylight"* <sup>51</sup>.

Mandela survived 17 months underground before he was betrayed and handed over to the police. As a result, he was sentenced to 5 years imprisonment for leadership of the 1961 strike <sup>52</sup> and for leaving the country illegally <sup>53</sup>. Soon after, Mandela, along with eight others were back in court for the famous Rivona Trial, charged with sabotage and conspiracy to overthrow the government by force. The world knows the verdict of guilty and the sentence of life imprisonment which was handed down to Nelson Mandela in 1962. His famous statement from the dock, delivered on Monday 20 April 1964, echoed around the world. It was destined to inspire generations of oppressed people, and demonstrated the calibre of leader that Mandela had become.

*"During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a*

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<sup>50</sup> The tragedy of Sharpeville in which police opened fire on an unarmed crowd of peaceful African protesters, killing sixty nine people. The incident caused extensive political upheaval- a state of emergency was declared as a result of widespread rioting. Protest was put down by brutal state repression.

<sup>51</sup> Anthony Sampson, quoted in Mandela, Nelson, Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela, London, Little, Brown and Company, 1994, foreword.

<sup>52</sup> The 1961 Strike was called in the name of Nelson Mandela to protest at the banning of non-white participation in a national referendum over whether South Africa was to be declared a National Republic.

<sup>53</sup> Mandela was under government ban during the Black Pimpernel phase- his movements and political activities had been severely restricted by the apartheid government.



*democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But, if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die”*<sup>54</sup>.

### Mandela's years on Robben Island

On June 12<sup>th</sup> 1964, Mandela evaded the death penalty, but received a life sentence. His monumental prison sentence, which would total some 27 years, had begun in earnest. The story of Mandela's prison sentence is one of great hardship mixed with great endeavour. The struggle against apartheid for Mandela and his colleagues shifted realms from the public to the private. Instead of defiance against the police and against apartheid laws, they waged a continual struggle with the prison authorities for better conditions and more rights. In the process they created a cohesive prison community which came increasingly into the public eye. Robben Island became like an “open university” in which prisoners of all political persuasions engaged in vigorous political debate. Mandela, its most prominent leader, became a focus of attention and a symbol of an African nationalism that could not be suppressed. Robben Island became fixed in African consciousness as a symbol of black resistance to white domination. Long before he was released, it was becoming clear that Mandela would mark his epoch as few others could. Over the nearly three decades of his incarceration, an national and international “Free Mandela” campaign was gathering pace, and stories were continually emerging of Mandela's remarkable leadership skills in prison. During his incarceration, he accrued a reputation of near-Messianic dimensions, becoming a symbol of courage, hope and uncompromising revolutionary leadership for oppressed Africans. He consistently refused to compromise his political position to obtain his freedom. In a speech delivered by his daughter Zindzi in 1985, Nelson Mandela reaffirmed that he would rather remain in prison than sacrifice the birthright of freedom that would be the inheritance of all the people of South Africa. *“What freedom am I being offered when my very South African citizenship is not respected? ...I cannot sell my birthright, nor am I*

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<sup>54</sup> Mandela, Nelson, In His Own Words: From Freedom to the Future, London, Abacus, 2003, pp. 42.

*prepared to sell the birthright of the people to be free”*<sup>55</sup>. Not only was he a symbol of resistance against overwhelming odds, but also a living representative of a distinguished and tested leadership that could not be denied participation in any negotiations about post-apartheid society.

In April 1982 he was moved off Robben Island, and transferred to Pollsmoor Prison on the mainland. In South Africa, unprecedented levels of civil insurrection and resistance were being met with similar levels of state military force. South Africa during the 1980's became a battleground, and Mandela increasingly was being considered the route out of the abyss. Discussions began between Mandela and a range of officials of the apartheid state over how to move forward. On February 2<sup>nd</sup> 1990, President FW de Klerk met the conditions necessary for the negotiations about the future of South Africa to begin in earnest.

#### Post release to today

*“He walked free and, with him, a nation began the walk to freedom. He became head of state, and it seemed as if patience and justice had created a new politics for the people, one without bigotry or repression...he has been much more than a great leader - he has become a saintly icon for the world”*<sup>56</sup>.

Nelson Mandela served nearly 28 years of his sentence before being unconditionally released on the 14<sup>th</sup> of February, 1990. For the next four years, the negotiations between the ANC, the apartheid government and other party leaders and organisations in South Africa continued. At times they were close to collapse. Political violence and uncertainty plagued ordinary people and convinced the world that a racial civil war was imminent. Then, on 27 April 1994, millions of South Africans voted in the first non-racial, democratic election in the country's history. Mandela was elected President with overwhelming support from the nation and from his party. The five years in which Mandela held the supreme post were far from easy. Criminal violence, the developmental backlog of three centuries of

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<sup>55</sup> Mandela, Nelson, In His Own Words: From Freedom to the Future, London, Abacus, 2003, pp. 47.

<sup>56</sup> Brink, Andre, Mandela: A Tiger For Our Time, published in the Mail & Guardian, vol. 15, no. 22, 4 June 1999, pp. 1

racial oppression and the demands of governing a modern state at the turn of the twentieth century amounted to the severest of tests. After a single term, Mandela stepped down as President of South Africa, as he had promised at the start of his reign.

Throughout his political reign, Mandela strove to build a multi-racial democracy, a “rainbow society”. He was seeking to embody a new society rather than merely preside over the death of an old one. His speeches from this era show the recurring themes of reconciliation, lowering crime, reducing poverty, and a new emphasis on gender equality. The formidable task he faced in trying to build such a society should not be underestimated considering the legacy he inherited from the previous apartheid government. While difficulties were inevitably encountered, his achievements in turning around the fate of South Africa is cited by many commentators as nothing short of “a miracle”.

Nelson Mandela turns 87 this July and is probably the world’s most respected elder statesman. He continues his life-long work as a freedom fighter, only now his conception of freedom has greatly expanded. He regularly uses human rights discourses to frame demands and to highlight global injustices. He is engaged in bold action combating today’s global apartheid of “haves” and “have nots”. Third World debt cancellation and poverty reduction are issues which he campaigns relentlessly for. Having recently lost a son to the disease, the HIV/AIDS epidemic which is ravaging the African continent features particularly high on his agenda. He has repeatedly chided African political leadership for their piecemeal approach to the killer disease, and the international community for its failure to respond adequately or swiftly enough to one of the greatest moral challenges of our time.

### **Charismatic Credentials**

Nelson Mandela's status as a charismatic leader is to many commentators taken for granted. As such, it is fruitful to examine to what extent he corresponds with the theoretical literature on charisma. What is the source of his charisma, and how does it shape perception of Mandela? A glance at the internet birthday greetings posted for Mandela's 85<sup>th</sup> birthday reveal how Mandela is perceived by the public, both South African and international. References to him as "the world's most loved elder statesman", "global icon for peace and reconciliation", "South Africa's national treasure", "the people's hero", "a Saint", "[representing] hope for mankind", are all evidence of public recognition of his charisma, and a deep reverence on a scale ordinarily reserved for the dead.

Mandela emerged as a charismatic leader during a period of unprecedented social upheaval. Once again the link between charisma and crisis is demonstrated. Mandela himself seems to recognise that crisis and charisma are dynamic and interlocking forces. In his autobiography, when praising the leadership, courage, wisdom and generosity of leaders like Oliver Tambo, Walter Sisulu, Chief Luthulis and others, he states "*...perhaps it requires such depths of oppression to create such heights of character*"<sup>57</sup>. Towards the end of the 1940's, the bonds which had traditionally provided social cohesion in South Africa, and sustained white supremacy, were no longer sufficient to stem the tide of dissatisfaction rising among "the natives". Black pride leaders like Steve Biko had recently encouraged black South Africans to reject white supremacy ideologies which taught them they were inferior, and to question a social structure which relegated them to a distinctly disadvantaged position. Like Malcom X, Nelson Mandela emerged from within an organisational setting (the ANC). Mandela has always portrayed himself as a loyal member of the ANC, continually underplaying his own charismatic status, and pledging his subservience to the democratic party process. He proclaims publicly that his first act after arrival in the next world will be to look for the nearest ANC branch office!

In section 3 of this paper, Weber's theory of charisma was outlined. For the sociologist, "charisma is...an undercutting force which is opposed to all institutional routines and those subject to rational management". This aspect of Weber's theory does not correspond to Mandela's legacy, who emerged from within an organisational setting, and demonstrated a leadership style which placed emphasis on

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<sup>57</sup> Mandela, Nelson, Mandela, Nelson, Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela, London, Little,

rational assessment of social context, careful strategising, and decisions based on democratic process. Mandela derived his authority from rational-legal sources when he served as President of South Africa, but primarily from the charismatic profile which he had steadily accrued, primarily during his imprisonment. Hence, Mandela demonstrated an ability to draw legitimacy from two, and arguably three of Weber's categories <sup>58</sup>. This corresponds with critiques of Weber's typology that it demonstrates inflexibility when confronted with contemporary forms of leadership characterised by a combination of two or more of the elements/classifications.

While Mandela was a prominent and respected anti-apartheid leader from the mid to late 1940's, his charisma did not receive widespread recognition until later in his career. He was a flamboyant, larger than life figure in his younger days, but considered somewhat vain and hot-headed. As an attorney, he frequently used "unorthodox tactics", "often played on racial tensions...made sweeping gestures and used high-flown languages" when in court. As such, Mandela, at an early stage, displayed theatrical and rhetorical flair; key behavioural traits in the formation of a charismatic identity. An early indication of public recognition of his charisma comes during the Black Pimpernel phase, when he assumed a kind of "Robin Hood" image for South Africa's oppressed peoples. His outlaw existence caught the imagination of the press and the public. Many wild and embellished stories emerged about his experiences underground, mythologizing his situation. Mandela, as well as his followers, engaged in image building, in the social formation of charisma;

*"I would even feed the mythology of the Black Pimpernel by taking a pocketful of 'tickeys' (threepenny bits) and phoning individual newspaper reporters from telephone boxes and relaying stories of what we were planning or of the ineptitude of the police. I would pop up here and there to the annoyance of the police and to the delight of the people" <sup>59</sup>.*

During the Black Pimpernel phase, we see clear evidence of the social formation of charisma.

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Brown and Company, 1994, pp. 748.

<sup>58</sup> Mandela may also derive respect from "traditional authority sources" because of his membership of the Tembu royal family. He is regularly addressed with his clan name "Madiba" as a sign of respect, and recognition of tribal hierarchy.

<sup>59</sup> Mandela, Nelson, Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela, London, Little, Brown and Company,

Mandela's own behaviour was demonstrative of what Gardner and Avolio (1996) term "impression management behaviour", which aims to create and maintain identities as charismatic leaders. Similarly, the mythologizing of his adventures by the South African public demonstrates how followers are also active players in impression management, and complement the work of the leader in constructing his or her charismatic identity.

Mandela's courage and unorthodox leadership methods during the Black Pimpernel period captured the public's imagination, raising him to further prominence as an anti-apartheid leader. Unconventional, spontaneous leadership methods are often instrumental in winning follower trust and allegiance. His own assertion that "*there are times, when a leader must move out ahead of the flock, go off in a new direction, confident that he is leading his people the right way*"<sup>60</sup>, suggests that Mandela understands the importance of courageous, visionary and unconventional leadership. Similarly, the extraordinary self-sacrifice he undertook in leaving his wife and children showed him as a dedicated leader who placed the needs of the oppressed above his own. This inspired trust and encouraged others to subsume their own self-interests to those of the group.

During the Rivonia Trial of 1962, Mandela once again displayed the courage and commitment that would become his trademark. Using the trial as a platform upon which to air the grievances of non-white South Africans, and to get international coverage for their struggle, he and his comrades came across as dignified leaders of an extremely high calibre. Mandela's closing speech at the treason trial received considerable national and international coverage and merits repetition here. It was rhetorically powerful, morally challenging, and underlined his extraordinary commitment to the liberation struggle.

*"During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But, if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am*

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1994, pp. 316.

<sup>60</sup> Mandela, Nelson, Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela, London, Little, Brown and Company, 1994, pp. 167.

*prepared to die”<sup>61</sup>.*

This excerpt demonstrates the strong link between charisma and oratory. Mandela often displayed powerful oratorical skills. Although not as rhetorically controversial as Malcom X, Mandela’s speeches were frequently as morally challenging and displayed the defiance of convention which helps rouse the masses to action. Mandela’s use of powerful words to create discontent and orient action towards change of an unjust status quo, is a classical strategy used by charismatic leaders to rally forces behind their vision. The above quotation also highlights the extraordinary levels of commitment and personal sacrifice to which charismatic leaders are prone in pursuit of their vision. Mandela’s biographer Anthony Sampson contends that true charisma comes only from leaders who have made serious sacrifices that demand respect from both enemies and friends. His personal sufferings, and his ability to temper his strong beliefs with patience, charm, self-discipline and an ability to forgive, has earned him both worldwide respect and a universally recognised charismatic identity.

*“He is tremendous. The way he walks, the way he talks. When one is rock bottom one looks for something to lift you, to warm you, and I often think to myself that Nelson and Walter [Sisulu] have this power to lift others”<sup>62</sup>.*

Like Malcom X, Mandela understood how under white domination the people had internalised an impoverished sense of their own potential. His understanding of ideological oppression informed the “vision” he offered to black South Africans. He used African history, particularly tales of African warriors and heroes, to instil a sense of pride in his African contemporaries. Malcom X and Nelson Mandela share this common strategy of returning to the past for inspiration and strategies for the future. In terms of physical and behavioural characteristics, Mandela could be considered an archetypical charismatic leader. He “fits” the charismatic personality type in his demonstration of energy, confidence, endurance, assertiveness, a tendency to dominate, ability to “uplift” and inspire others, and the relentless pursuit of a vision. Reference is often made to Mandela’s physical authority, his

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<sup>61</sup> Mandela, Nelson, *In His Own Words: From Freedom to the Future*, London, Abacus, 2003, pp. 42.

<sup>62</sup> Eddie Daniels, Mandela’s fellow prisoner on Robben Island, quoted in Sheridan, Johns, and Hunt Davis, R., *Mandela, Tambo and the African National Congress*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991, pp. 158.

“presence”.

*“He has a natural air of authority. He cannot help magnetising a crowd: he is commanding with a tall, handsome bearing”* <sup>63</sup>.

*“We were first struck by his physical authority...and his commanding presence. In his manner he exuded authority and received the respect of all around him, including his gaolers”* <sup>64</sup>.

Mandela’s charisma became most pronounced during his imprisonment. Ironically, he became more prominent, and more charismatic when he was away from the public eye. Accounts of Mandela as a “leader among prisoners” filtered out to the public, building upon his “extraordinary” reputation. Many prisoners, on release from the island testified to Mandela’s inspirational leadership. Mac Maharaj stated in 1976 that *“Nelson has been outstanding. He has the confidence of all prisoners, whatever their political persuasion, and has been accepted by all as a spokesman of the whole prisoner community”* <sup>65</sup>. Mandela’s legacy became highly symbolic, abstracted and mythologized during this period. Now a national hero, he became a symbol of uncompromising revolutionary leadership, courage and moral integrity for the liberation struggle. His silence from prison grew more eloquent than words, and the scarcity of information about him provoked media fascination, both at the national and international level. These factors led to a *“cultural production of the Messianic Mandela”* <sup>66</sup>.

*“Mandela’s story is so like a fairy tale that it is very easy to become sentimental about it...he is the ultimate hero, imprisoned by the wicked witch in a dungeon, who is magically released and turns out to be a prince. It’s always dangerous to get sentimental about politics”* <sup>67</sup>.

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<sup>63</sup> Tambo, Oliver, *Nelson Mandela, 1965*, at [www.anc.org](http://www.anc.org)

<sup>64</sup> Excerpt from the Report of the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group who visited Mandela in prison in 1986, report in, Mandela, Nelson, *In His Own Words: From Freedom to the Future*, London, Abacus, 2003, pp. 174.

<sup>65</sup> Mac Maharaj, quoted in Sheridan, Johns, and Hunt Davis, R., *Mandela, Tambo and the African National Congress*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991, pp. 150.

<sup>66</sup> Nixon, Rob, *Mandela, Messianism and the Media*, in <<Transition>>, no. 51, year, pp.43.

<sup>67</sup> Anthony Sampson, *Nelson Mandela’s Sway comes From True Charisma*, quoted at <http://news-service.stanford>.



Mandela has striven to dismantle the cult of personality that has been constructed around him. This is evident in his efforts to subordinate his prestige to that of the ANC, and repudiate the idolatry that could invite autocracy, or lead to a one-leader model that Mandela has cited as a hindrance to democracy. Mandela's first public speech after his release made it clear that he, better than anyone, understood the necessity of "deconsecrating" himself. *"I stand here before you not as a prophet but as a humble servant of you, the people"*, not a messiah, *"but an ordinary man who had become a leader because of extraordinary circumstances"* <sup>68</sup>. He was at pains to remind his audience that he was not an elected leader of the ANC and that, in any case, only "disciplined mass action", not individual genius could assume the task of unifying the country. He has continuously displayed this deference to party politics and to grass roots power.

Even if there can be little doubt about Mandela's fingerprints on the last decade, there is a danger of over-simplification in trying to read any era through the lens of a single personality. Such an approach can lead to metaphysical and magical qualities being attributed to the leader, elevating him or her above critique. The dearth of critical material on him seems to suggest this trend is already evident in Mandela's case. For many, he is a potent symbol of courage, spokesman for the oppressed, the hero who saved South Africans from the cancer of race discrimination. At times, the struggles of other actors and the contribution of other factors are eclipsed by the "monumental Mandela". This illustrates the importance of analysing charismatic leadership with a keen awareness of the social, political and historical context from which they emerged. In the South African case, Mandela's charismatic leadership was part of a strong movement for which he was a powerful symbol. Within the movement itself, were diverse set of actors united in a common cause; the destruction of the apartheid regime. This diversity allowed for checks and balances within the movement. As such, it could be argued that Mandela served as an amplifier of the movement's energy for change but was not the sole determinant of the outcome. This is consistent with the theoretical literature which stresses the importance of situational factors which can provide both opportunities and obstacles for charismatic leaders. The environment, the social context is "the chessboard on which leaders play and have to play" <sup>69</sup>, and as

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<sup>68</sup> Release from Prison speech, 11<sup>th</sup> February 1990, quoted in Mandela, Nelson, *In His Own Words: From Freedom to the Future*, London, Abacus, 2003, pp. 59.

<sup>69</sup> Jean Blondel, *Political Leadership: Towards a General Analysis*, New York, The Free Press, 1981, 57

such should not be marginalized in any analysis of the impact of charismatic leadership.

Charismatic leaders who stand out as exemplary such as Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., or Malcom X, rose to eminence in their campaigns for liberation against all odds, and then fell victim to violence, their moral greatness intact. None of them, unlike Mandela, lived to be submitted to the ultimate test: succeeding in their struggle and coping with power themselves. His vision was always the destruction of the apartheid regime, the challenge of the status quo and white supremacy ideologies, and the establishment of a non-racial, democratic state in South Africa. Of all the “great men and women”, universally regarded as spiritual and moral leaders, Mandela is one of the few who actually succeeded in “vision realisation/attainment” in his lifetime. Victory for the anti-apartheid struggle, the election of Mandela to the Presidential role, the task of nation-building, and institutional reform, all ushered in new challenges associated with “the routinisation of charisma”. The anti-apartheid struggle had to reorient itself from a loosely organised national movement, and transform itself into an organisational entity which was capable of governing a nation state in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The transfer of the movement’s values and ideals into state structures and institutions represented a formalisation of the interests of the liberation struggle. Mandela maintained his charisma during his presidential term, managing the metamorphosis from freedom fighter to national leader with remarkable skill and ease.

Like Malcom X, Mandela shows many of the characteristics associated with charismatic leadership. His example undermines Weber’s assertion that charisma and organisational structures are inimical. Mandela’s reign also suggests that leaders can draw their legitimacy from more than one category of Weber’s tri-partite typology. Mandela corresponds to the literature in the following areas: his powerful oratorical skills, his extraordinary level of commitment to the struggle, evidence of personal sacrifice for the sake of others, unconventional leadership methods, energy, a tendency to dominate others and relentless pursuit of vision. Both Mandela and Malcom X showed deep understanding of ideological oppression which maintained white supremacy. Both leaders tried to undercut this dynamic, frequently using history to instil pride in their followers. Mandela is a prime example of the unifying power of charismatic leadership. He was prominent in helping all actors, both on the side of the oppressors and

the oppressed, to shape a new, more egalitarian South Africa.

## **7. Concluding Comments**

In light of both the theory on charismatic leadership and the two case studies, what is the importance of charismatic leadership for the human rights movement? This section will examine the significance of Malcom X's and Mandela's charismatic legacies for the advancement of human rights ideology. It will argue that greater emphasis on charismatic leadership, social movements and history is necessary for a more robust understanding of human rights.

As the most prominent leader of the anti-apartheid movement which saw black South Africans realise the full range of their human rights, Nelson Mandela has greatly advanced the cause of human freedom during his lifetime. He succeeded in attaining his vision for a non-racial, democratic South Africa. Possibly this development would have occurred sooner or later without his leadership. However, Mandela's charisma and political genius undoubtedly influenced the process. Using strategies that are typical of charismatic leaders (communication of a vision, discrediting of the status quo, encouraging mass mobilisation), he unified a diverse set of actors behind the common goal of destroying the apartheid regime.

Mandela began to use rights rhetoric most explicitly during his Presidential term. Human rights were one of the foundations for the new South African "rainbow society". They were a powerful ideological tool which helped him to overcome the racial, gender and class divisions that threatened to undermine his nation building efforts. During the anti-apartheid struggle, Mandela represented the ideals of human dignity, rejection of the "system", and refusal to comply with an oppressive social condition no matter what the personal cost. As such, Mandela and other moral charismatic leaders have been spreading the core values of human rights long before "human rights rhetoric" became fashionable.

The principles which Nelson Mandela represents, and the symbolic power of his anti-apartheid struggle, are valuable to the ideological march of human rights. As the world's most respected elder statesman and human rights activist, he lends powerful moral authority to the rights perspective. In human rights, he has found an ideology which encapsulates his deeply held, instinctive sense of justice.

In Mandela, the human rights movement has found a figure who embodies its most fundamental values. He uses this “tool” in his ongoing fight against the global apartheid of haves and have nots. For example, he consistently presents the HIV/AIDS epidemic as a human rights issue. Not only was Mandela’s charismatic leadership instrumental in helping his people to fight for their entitlements, he continues to use his status and symbolic power to further the human rights cause.

Afro-Americans in the United States suffer from racial discrimination to this day. William Sales (1994) argues that Malcom X’s vision of “*attainment of the full range of human rights for Afro-Americans*” has yet to be realised. While he never saw his “vision” materialise, Malcom’s contribution to the ongoing Afro-American struggle for racial equality should not be underestimated. Malcom X played a key role in the dissemination of rights rhetoric among Afro-Americans. He actively tried to reorient the movement both ideologically and organisationally, from one which was focused on civil rights to human rights. The advantage of this was that the UN Charter, the UDHR and the Genocide Convention unequivocally gave priority to human rights, but the United States law still could not guarantee civil rights to Afro-Americans. Malcom showed creativity and perceptiveness in recognising the power of universal human rights ideology to liberate oppressed peoples.

Malcom’s human rights perspective had a powerful impact on the radical Black Power phase of the Civil Rights movement, which emerged in the mid to late 1960’s. The rights discourse which predominated after his assassination shows how charismatic leaders can open up new political spaces, introduce fresh ideas and educate people about their entitlements. Fowenraker and Landman say that social movements often serve as ‘*schools of rights*’. The two case studies of this paper suggest that Fowenraker and Landman’s hypothesis could be extended to include charismatic leadership. Once this information is disseminated, “*an awareness of rights leads directly to a struggle to vindicate these rights, and so operationalises the content of citizenship through public contestation and public demands for rights*” <sup>70</sup>.

Analysis of Mandela’s and Malcom X’s legacies show how unconventional, creative leadership can

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<sup>70</sup> Fowenraker, J., and Landman, T., *Citizenship Rights and Social Movements: A Comparative and Statistical Analysis*,

challenge society's entrenched power structure. As was highlighted in section 4 (charismatic leadership and social change), elite groups are often loath to change society's institutions; which are usually designed to legitimise their interests. Charismatic leaders can mobilise subjected peoples and force important concessions from the ruling classes. They tend to use non-institutional, creative strategies to make collective demands. These unconventional tactics invite repression because they pose a distinct threat to elite groups; *"[the use of non-institutionalised tactics] communicates a fundamental rejection of the established institutional mechanisms for seeking redress of group grievances; substantively, it deprives elite groups of their recourse to institutional power...elite groups are likely to view non-institutional tactics as a threat to their interests"* <sup>71</sup>. Both Mandela and Malcom X suffered repression because they challenged the established social order. Mandela's prison sentence, the labelling of Malcom X as a dangerous radical, and his assassination, are manifestations of elite strategies of repression which maintain power, and silence opposition. Many charismatic leaders have been victims of similar repression (for example, Che Guevara, Aun San Suu Kyi, Rigoberta Menchu, Martin Luther King). These strategies are testament to the power of charismatic individuals to mount strong challenges to the social elite.

Ideology emerged as an important resource for charismatic leaders. It informs their vision for a better future, and charismatic leaders understand how elite forces use ideology to legitimise inequality. Oppression is not merely imposed by force. It is most firmly instituted when those in power have established their self-serving ideals as the 'common sense' of society. Individuals or groups among the oppressed who attempt to establish a different definition of social problems, or a different frame of reference for the debate are defined as illegitimate or dangerous. As such, charismatic leaders often find themselves under intellectual as well as physical attack. The sociologist Max Weber recognised that charismatic leaders and social movements are necessary because they provide the strong emotional support necessary to make the initial break with the dominance of oppressive ideas over the thinking of the exploited. Once that break is made, articulation of demands and the push for social change can begin. Both Mandela and Malcom X were pivotal in helping the oppressed to break with the paradigm of ruling class thought. Charismatic leaders offer a "counter hegemony" to the oppressed, making it

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Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 227.

easier for followers to reject the status quo.

From analysis of theory on charisma and case studies, the following conclusions may be made as to the importance of charismatic leadership for the human rights movement:

1. Charismatic leaders encourage and enable people to reject oppression. The communication of a vision of a better future, and their ability to discredit oppressive ruling class ideologies empowers their followers to challenge the status quo.
2. Leaders such as Mandela and Malcom X can generate extraordinary levels of commitment and self-sacrifice from their followers - levels which are needed for the fight for human rights. They can extract and harness “radical energies” to an extent unequalled by conventional forms of leadership.
3. The unifying effect of a charismatic leader enables a diverse set of actors to unite behind a common goal. Charismatic individuals demonstrate the ability to overcome divisions (class, race, gender) that typically disperse and atomise energies for social change.
4. The use of unconventional, non-institutional strategies makes charismatic leadership a particularly potent means of challenging social inequality. Mounting challenges outside the “system” implies rejection of the established institutional mechanisms for seeking redress of group grievances, and it deprives elite groups of their recourse to power. As such, challenges mounted by a charismatic leader pose distinct threats to elite groups.
5. When charismatic leaders use rights discourse, they contribute to the ideological march of universal human rights. Knowledge of entitlements can lead directly to a struggle to vindicate those rights.
6. Because of the values they represent, charismatic leaders often assume great symbolic significance. They embody important principles such as courage, morality, integrity, and commitment. Charismatic

leaders can be a source of inspiration for other freedom fighters.

7. The grassroots, bottom-up quality of charismatic leadership enhances the legitimacy of their demand-making. Leaders who emerge from the oppressed masses understand the needs of their community, and can interpret reality in a way that makes sense for their followers.

*“I often wonder do we not rest our hopes too much on constitutions, upon laws and upon courts. These are false hopes...Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women...when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it”<sup>72</sup>.*

As stated in the introduction, it is unfortunate that “people” are not given more attention in human rights education and discourse. The academic agenda seems to place primary emphasis on judicial manifestations of rights and the international human rights institutions. Does one have to search beyond the established curriculum to find the “human” aspect of human rights? Many academic critics have highlighted how the legal, statist perspective effectively serves to relegate the person from their initial position as agent to the position of subject, or from participant to passive entity upon which rights are conferred by state authority. A positivist perspective has its own distinct form of reasoning and language which is often alien to ordinary forms of political discourse. The exclusionary nature of legal institutions as a consequence of their convoluted process and language makes it more difficult for individuals and social movements to use human rights as a “tool” for social justice. Can a broader conception of rights be found? One which is more accessible to those who are experiencing violations and oppression?

*“There are particular problems with a discourse which only captures the process of development of claims to human rights at the point at which consideration is being given to their possible*

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<sup>72</sup> Respected American Judge, quoted in, O’Connell, David, *Political Empowerment or Impoverishment?*, in European Master’s Degree in Human Rights and Democratisation, *Awarded Theses of the Academic Year 2002/2003*, Venice, Marsilio Editori, 2004, pp. 209 (name of judge not given).



*institutionalisation”*<sup>73</sup>.

There is a tendency to bureaucratise and institutionalise human rights. The international human rights establishment to some extent undermines the necessary public ownership of rights discourse. The promotion of a legalistic and truncated conception of rights under the tutelage of professional ‘gatekeepers’, can diminish the power of human rights. What are the effects of this institutionalisation? Neil Stammers has argued that once institutionalised, human rights often play an ambivalent role in relation to power structures and the generation of social justice. For Weber, the trajectory of institutionalisation is always the same, from “change” to “order”, from challenging the status quo to sustaining it. As such, the institutionalisation of human rights we see evident in international human rights bodies is possibly not the best means of meeting the needs of those experiencing violations. We must be aware of the potential of institutionalised rights to ultimately function against human rights objectives and channel power away from the demos. Daniel O’Connell (2004) contends that human rights have a capacity to both empower and impoverish politics. While rights can inform social movement strategies, the “bureaucratisation of rights” can atomise and de-collectivise energies for social action. Could charismatic leadership and grassroots social movements be more effective in challenging unbalanced power relations and social injustice than the proliferation of laws and treaties?

*“Institutionalised structures are not likely to be fertile soil through which existing relations and structures of power can be effectively challenged...if it is indeed the case that it is in their institutionalised/ legal form that ideas and practices in respect of human rights are most likely to sustain relations and structures of power, is it also the case that it is in their pre-institutionalised, non legal form that we can see claims for human rights most evidently challenging relations and structures of power?”*<sup>74</sup>.

The human rights idea itself can be seen as a social project. If rights are perceived of as abstract,

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<sup>73</sup> Stammers, Neil, *Social Movements and the Social Construction of Human Rights*, in <<Human Rights Quarterly>>, vol. 21, 1999, pp. 992.

<sup>74</sup> Stammers, Neil, *Social Movements and the Social Construction of Human Rights*, in <<Human Rights Quarterly>>, vol. 21, 1999, pp. 998.

universal, all-encompassing ideals, we fail to recognise the power relations that shape both the practice and discourses of human rights. A socially constructed concept such as human rights should not be put beyond social context and power relations. Focusing on real human struggles against oppression can help to re-incorporate social and power dynamics into our understanding of human rights. History can show us the true nature of human rights struggles - by examining real instances of people struggling against domination, we can discover a more fruitful conception of human rights. History is crucial because it presents not the abstractions of naturalism, but the concrete actions and speech of real people in real social contexts. The unending story of events which constitute our past provide information about human domination, exploitation, misery and the will to resist and revolt against domination. It should be recognised that it is historical struggles that have influenced the rise of human rights ideology.

Injustice is a complex phenomenon. The perpetuation of injustice appears as central to the human condition as the continuing fight against it. The historical record shows the unremitting struggle of human beings against domination. The ideology of human rights is simply the latest tool in this ongoing fight for freedom and dignity. Our conception of this new tool must reflect the complexity of human relations, particularly power relations. As such, not just legal, but also historical, sociological, political and psychological perspectives should inform our understanding of human rights. We should never lose sight of the fact that it is people who are on the frontlines of the fight against oppression. A better society cannot be litigated into existence. It will take the efforts of the courageous to take a stand against oppression, to try and instil moral values into the fibre of their societies. Many people will live an ordinary existence, while others will come to set the world on fire. It is these individuals who can point the way for humanity, who can emancipate us from the moral condition of our age. In a world characterised by grave injustices, hope for a better future lies in the fact that some human beings like Mandela and Malcom X refuse to be conditioned, and remain unconquered no matter how deep the oppression they face.

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