Weber, Charisma, and “Selling Out”

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Max Weber's concept of "routinization of charisma" explains the process of legitimization of charismatic authority, but fails to explain the overwhelmingly negative reaction to a successful musical artist "selling out." However, I propose that a synthesis of his more basic ideas on power and status that frame the role of the fan as a member of a comparatively high-status in-group, with membership providing the ability to delineate between fan and non-fan as a form of power use. I examine the career arcs of two very successful modern acts while plotting critical and fan reception throughout their careers in order to demonstrate that the negative perception of "selling out" is due to a feeling of being on the receiving end of negative power use as a fan. In addition, I introduce a method of measuring "authenticity" as a status characteristic that incorporates theoretical work from outside the sociological discipline.

Introduction

German sociologist Max Weber contributed a great deal to the field of sociology, and while it is difficult to characterize any one of his many works as being more important than others, his theories on power, status and authority continuously find applications throughout the discipline, even in ways that might not appear to be explicitly linked to his original intentions.

Weber characterized power as the ability to gain compliance through the threat or use of coercion, while authority was considered to be the legitimate right to make decisions and expect those decisions to be carried out without resorting to the use of coercion. It is important to note, however, that power is not merely the threat or the use of force – it can also be the control of access to resources (in other words, if one person desires something and the other person controls or possess that particular material or good, the one in possession of the desired good is in a position of power over the person desiring the resource.)

When applied to the world of popular music, it may not be immediately clear that Weber's theories, which were originally developed to explain socioeconomic and political stratification, have any legitimate cache. Music trends would seem to be largely a matter of personal tastes writ large, with no relation to power, and the success of various artists would seem to be due more to some mystical combination of musical talent and good marketing than any particular type of authority or status. After a closer look, however, the connections do become more readily apparent.
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Popular music, especially of the rock and hip-hop genres, has always been required to walk somewhat of a tightrope between ensuring commercial success and maintaining an “outsider” image. The conflict here can be seen as the difference between someone of high social status and low economic power (for example, a “wise elder,” whose instructions you would react to in a positive manner since they benefit you and do not require you to act against your desires, which would be an example of positive power use) and someone of low social status and high economic power (an example of this might be a wealthier person, such as a superior at work or a customer, whom you may find personally repugnant but must tolerate because they have access to the resources you require – in these cases, employment or money.) This dichotomy between these two facets of an artist’s career may seem trivial to a disinterested outsider, but to the artist and a diehard or even a casual fan, these can be the defining characteristics in determining both the continuance of the artist’s career and the fan’s interest in that particular artist.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the theories of Max Weber on power, status, and authority, and to apply these theories, originally conceived of in application to social structures and organizations, to that most fundamental organization of modern popular music – the band. I will show that Weber’s theory on the routinization of charisma does not adequately explain the outcry generated by the label of “sell-out,” and demonstrate that this instead can be explained in much simpler terms of power and status for both a band and its fans.

Theorist and Background

Max Weber’s significant impact on the field of sociology was very much the product of both his upbringing and his academic background. Weber was born on April 21st, 1864 to Max Sr. (a lawyer and politician) and Helene (a religiously-devoted but fairly well-educated housewife) and was raised in the suburbs of Berlin (Weber 1946). His formidable academic aptitude resulted from his poor health as a child (which included contracting meningitis at the age of 4) and a general indifference towards athletics or social concerns that found him studying history and philosophy both on his own time and in secret during the course of his regular classes (Calhoun et al. 2007; Weber 1946). He enrolled at the University
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of Heidelberg at the age of eighteen as a law student, following closely in the footsteps of his father, including joining a dueling fraternity to which Max Sr. had belonged in his youth (Weber 1946), which led to the younger Weber’s gradual entry into the normal social life of a young university student (Weber 1946). After a year of mandatory military service, he returned to finish his education in law at the University of Berlin; he managed to earn both his law degree and his Ph.D. at roughly the same time (Calhoun et al. 2007) and married his wife (a great-niece of Max Sr.) shortly thereafter (Weber 1946). In keeping with his characteristic scholastic vigor, he took on a heavy workload that included filling in for an esteemed but ill-stricken economics professor, presiding over state law exams and government consultation work in addition to his own academic pursuits (Weber 1946). However, within three years, under the strain of his workload and the sudden death of his father (Weber 1946), he fell into a deep depression that effectively crippled his work ability (Calhoun et al. 2007). Once recovered sufficiently enough to begin work again, he redirected his energies away from historical economics and into the contemporary theoretical fields of the social sciences – and it is from this time onwards that his influence upon sociology began to make itself known (Calhoun et al. 2007).

As previously mentioned, Weber’s training and initial work was heavily influenced by the historical school of economics that was prevalent in economics departments in Germany at that time (Powers 2004). In contrast to utilitarian economics theories that were en vogue in England and the United States, historical economists made their analyses with the understanding that individually recognizable economies were unique to particular cultures and heavily influenced by their sociocultural histories, which ultimately determined the values of each economy (Powers 2004). In a more general sense, it was argued that the social sciences ought to only analyze social actions in historical context, which ran counter to a significant faction of social scientists who felt that sociology needed to search for general laws about human behavior in manner similar to the natural sciences (i.e., physics, chemistry, etc.), using causal explanations for objectively-determined social conditions (Calhoun et al. 2007). A frustration of Weber’s regarding his academic training was that the historical school was loath to make any sort of
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theoretical generalization about human nature as they studied it. Consequently, Weber’s attempts to rectify this lack of progress may very well have been a significant factor in his initial mental health crisis (Powers 2004). He would eventually temper his frustrations at not being able to build universal laws of human society by developing a method that combined seeking causal relations that could be generalized beyond specific cases (in keeping with the methods of the natural sciences) with acknowledging the context in which social actions occurred – what he referred to as “verstehen,” an interpretive understanding of subjective motivations (Calhoun et al. 2007).

To accomplish this task, he created a conceptual tool that he could use for comparison of common phenomena among differing social settings and situations – ideal-types (Kelley 3/25/2011). Weber saw this as a way to guard against the subjectivity of individual researchers who might not either use the same term for the same form, or use the same term in referring to differing phenomena (Calhoun et al. 2007); in addition, if it was not possible to recreate concrete reality (i.e., in experimental form, like the natural sciences), ideal-types would provide a way of looking at reality and discerning the basic principles defining a particular system (Kelley 3/25/2011). From 1903 until his death in 1920, Weber used this method as he created a large and significant body of work that touched on a number of sociological issues and is still regularly referenced today (Powers 2004).

Assumptions of the Theorist

Weber understood that the existence of any society or social organization was nothing without the individuals who made up the group – and to properly study the sociology of a group, one had to to consider the actions of individuals directed towards other individuals (Hughes, Sharrock, and Martin 2003). In his 1914 essay “Basic Sociological Terms,” Weber lays out the following definition for determining social behavior: “We shall speak of ‘action’ insofar as the acting individual atttaches a subjective meaning to his behavior ... Action is ‘social’ insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course” (Calhoun et al. 2007). The “subjective meaning” that he speaks of can be best explained as “done with an intention or purpose in mind”
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(Hughes, Sharrock, and Martin 2003) – and in the case of social action, the intention or purpose is conceived of in recognition and anticipation of other individuals. However, these meanings aren’t simply generated by the individual in question by his or her own volition – rather, they’re motivations that are derived from the values hierarchy of the group, institution, or society of which the individual is a member, the things that are considered to be both important and real, learned from other individuals or the life experience of the individual himself (Kelley 3/28/2011). At the same time, social structures would not only reflect and embody social values, but would serve to reinforce them in a manner defined by Charles H. Power as the values axiom: “As a system of values becomes more deeply embedded and more uniformly held by people in a society, then institutional forms and relational patterns are progressively modified in ways that maximize adherence to core values” (Powers 2004). This process was known as legitimation (Kelley 3/25/2011).

Within a given group or society, Weber, like Karl Marx, recognized that there were layers of stratification; however, where Marx was fixated on how the control of the means of production was set the different layers apart, Weber believed that there were multiple, separate but interlinked strata that determined an individual’s place in society (Hughes, Sharrock, and Martin 2003). First, there was power, defined by Weber in his essay “Class, Status, Party” as “the chance of a man or number of men to realize their own will ... even against the resistance of others” (Weber 1946). From an economic standpoint, Weber expanded upon this further, saying that power also existed as access to resources – those who had access to desired resources would necessarily have power over those who did not, and those who desired those resources would often be forced to act in ways that were unfavorable to them, the essence of power use (Weber 1946). This, in a way, agreed with Marx’s theory of the bourgeois and the proletariat classes; but where Marx was content to make this his sole distinction, Weber added a second component – status, or social honor. Status was not necessarily explicitly linked to power, but rather, was based more on lifestyle and the reciprocal recognition of individuals within a status group (Hughes, Sharrock, and Martin 2003). However, status could entail power, because power use by higher-status individuals was a
privilege by virtue of being higher-status – it was considered to be legitimate (Kelley 3/28/2011). There is also another form of legitimate power use, known as authority, wherein the social structure determines what is the legitimate use of power – in other words, where “the entitlement of the powerful to the obedience of others is accepted by the latter” (Hughes, Sharrock, and Martin 2003), and “without having to resort to the use of coercive force” (Powers 2004).

Due to Weber’s training in the historical school of economics, his analysis frequently began by looking at the historical record. He noted that there was a historical tension between mysticism and logic (Kelley 3/25/2011): “the extent and direction of ‘rationalization’ is thus measured negatively in terms of the degree to which magical elements of thought are displaced, or positively by the extent to which ideas gain in systematic coherence and naturalistic consistency” (Weber 1946). In other words, the more complex a society’s development became, the less likely it was to believe in supernatural or unexplainable structures and causes – “fictitious superstructures” (Weber 1946) – and the more likely it was to embrace values and methods that were based in finding the most efficient way of doing things, a process called rationalization (Kelley 3/25/2011). Rationalization, among other things, makes the use of power much more predictable by defining (according to cultural values) who is allowed to use power in a legitimate fashion, or as a legitimate authority (Hughes, Sharrock, and Martin 2003). Legitimate authority, according to Weber, existed in three forms: traditional, legal, and charismatic (Calhoun et al. 2007).

Traditional authority was defined by Weber as “if legitimacy is claimed for it and believed in by virtue of the sanctity of age-old rules and powers. The masters are designated according to traditional rules and are obeyed because of their traditional status” (Calhoun et al. 2007) – in a simpler form, rules are legitimate because they are the way a society has always done things, and those in power are there because these rules say they should be. New rules, as necessary, might in fact be innovative, but their justifications would always be based in the authority’s recognition of the rule as being legitimate, and with support from tradition (Calhoun et al. 2007). Legal authority, on the other hand “rest[ed] on a belief
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in the ‘legality’ of patterns of normative rules and the right of those elevated to authority under those rules” (Kelley 3/25/2011). Weber noted that this type of authority tended to be part of a culture’s rationalization process (Kelley 3/25/2011) – the rules were developed “on grounds of expediency or value-rationality or both ... consist[ing] essentially in a consistent system of abstract rules which have been normally been intentionally established” (Calhoun et al. 2007). Authority is legitimate here because the rules in place, in keeping with rationalization, are based in finding the most efficient means to the ends, and those in positions of power are there because they are qualified based on these rules (Kelley 3/25/2011) – Weber states that “the members of the organization, insofar as they obey a person in authority, do not owe this obedience to him as an individual, but to the impersonal order” (Calhoun et al. 2007). While Weber was not the first to use the word “bureaucracy,” his detailing of the rational-legal authority in connection with this word is considered to have popularized its usage (Powers 2004) – he saw it as “the purest type of exercise of legal authority” (Calhoun et al. 2007). Finally, there is charismatic authority – “the absolutely personal devotion and personal confidence in revelation, heroism, or other qualities of individual leadership” (Weber 1946). In practical terms, this is usually an individual whose authority is solely predicated on the personal appeal of that individual to those who hold that individual as an authority – what we might refer to as a “cult of personality” (Powers 2004). Power use is considered to be legitimate in charismatic authority as long as “the conception that it is the duty of those subject to charismatic authority to recognize its genuineness and to act accordingly” (Calhoun et al. 2007) – an interestingly unstable position, because, “if proof and success elude the leader for long ... above all, if his leadership fails to benefit his followers, it is likely that his charismatic authority will disappear” (Calhoun et al. 2007). Having laid out Weber’s assumptions, we shall now proceed to his application of his theories.

Original Argument of the Theorist

As previously mentioned, Weber’s first inclination in laying out his theories was to start by looking at history and analyze the historical facts. Initially, traditional authority was the most widespread
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and longest-lasting of the three forms (Hughes, Sharrock, and Martin 2003). But rationalization seemed to be evident in many social orders – inevitably, as rationality became more prevalent, authority of the traditional type tended to give way to the rational-legal type, albeit gradually (Calhoun et al. 2007) – Weber saw rationalization as revolutionary in a way, but characterized it as working from the outside in: “by altering the situations of life and hence its problems, finally in this way changing men’s attitudes toward them” (Calhoun et al. 2007). Charismatic leaders could appear under either system and if they became powerful enough, had “powerful potential in initiating important social changes, for they are typically disruptive and innovative ... characteristically confront and change the existing order” (Hughes, Sharrock, and Martin 2003). Once again referring to the historical record in his essay “The Types of Legitimate Domination,” Weber noted that, “in prerationalistic periods, tradition and charisma between them have almost exhausted the whole of the orientation of action” (Calhoun et al. 2007) – charismatic authority was generally the only alternative to traditional authority.

However, in keeping with Weber’s assumptions, charismatic authority suffers from a problem of stability – assuming that a charismatic leader can prove that his powers are still intact (which is risky, because a bad turn of events can destroy the credibility of his authority), the legitimacy of power is essentially limited to the lifetime of the charismatic leader, since the unique powers are vested in that particular individual and cannot be transferred (Hughes, Sharrock, and Martin 2003). Even during the time period in which it dominates, it is highly fluid – as Weber notes in his essay “The Sociology of Charismatic Authority,” “Genuine charismatic domination therefore knows of no abstract legal codes and statues and of no ‘formal’ way of adjudication. Its ‘objective’ law emanates concretely from the highly personal experience of heavenly grace and from the god-like strength of the hero. Charismatic domination means a rejection of all ties to any external order in favor of the exclusive glorification of the genuine mentality of the prophet and hero” (Weber 1946), and as John Hughes, Wes Sharrock and Peter Martin note, “the administration of the charismatic group is also unstable. The charismatic is surrounded by ‘disciples’ ... not usually chosen for their administrative skills ... Administrative decisions will tend to
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be short-sighted and superficial, run by the dictates of someone with continually changing aims and with little interest in the details of how they are to be implemented” (Hughes, Sharrock, and Martin 2003). The common thread in all of this is that there is a toleration for the unpredictable power use, because of the charismatic leader – but since this runs counter to the tendency of social structures to evolve towards rationality, and this kind of legitimacy is decidedly finite, the only way for a power structure created under charismatic authority to survive the loss of its leader is to change to either a rational-legal or traditional form of authority (Powers 2004).

Weber termed this process (the shift from charismatic authority to one of the other types, in order to maintain power) the routinization of charisma (Hughes, Sharrock, and Martin 2003). Recalling that Weber was trained as an economist, it should not come as any surprise that he finds an economic delineation to determine the point at which charisma becomes routinized: “For charisma to be transformed into an everyday phenomenon, it is necessary that its anti-economic character should be altered. It must be adapted to some form of fiscal organization to provide for the needs of the group and hence to the economic conditions necessary for raising taxes and contributions” (Calhoun et al. 2007). But routinization, he notes, is not merely economic in character: “When a charismatic movement develops in the direction of prebendal provision, the ‘laity’ becomes differentiated from the ‘clergy’ ... It follows that, in the course of routinization, the charismatically ruled organization is largely transformed into one of the everyday authorities ... Its original peculiarities are apt to be retained in the charismatic status honor acquired by heredity or office-holding. This applies to all who participate in the appropriation, the chief himself and the members of his staff” (Calhoun et al. 2007). To sum it up: in general, those who held positions of esteem in a charismatic authority must find a way to transition along with the rest of the movement to a more predictable type of hierarchy, and if the organization survives this process, it only retains few unique characteristics that once set it apart – it otherwise will look very similar to any other entrenched social structure.
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Application of Theory: The Musical Career Arc

It is not enough to simply rehash what Weber theorized – we must apply his theories in order to test their validity. In the following section, I will examine the careers of two well-known bands through the lens of Weber’s theories on authority to see if his hypothesis is supported or disproven. First, however, I will explain the specific application of his theories that I will be using in this section.

It will appear that I have modified the starting “position” for the type of authority a band or artist has upon starting a successful career, as I am starting with the assumption that any emerging band’s authority is one of a charismatic nature, and there is nothing of Weber’s explicitly saying that charismatic authority emerges from a blank canvas (so to speak.) However, if we take the music industry prior to an artist’s arrival to be either a traditional or rational-legal authority (in a sense, it could probably be represented as both), then the emergence of the artist in question would indeed be charismatic: “Charisma knows only inner determination and inner restraint. The holder of charisma seizes the task that is adequate for him and demands obedience and a following by virtue of his mission. His success determines whether he finds them. His charismatic claim breaks down if his mission is not recognized by those to whom he feels he has been sent. If they recognize him, he is their master – so long as he knows how to maintain recognition through ‘proving’ himself. But he does not derive his ‘right’ from their will, in the manner of election. Rather, the reverse holds: it is the duty of those to whom he addresses his mission to recognize him as their charismatically qualified leader” (Weber 1946).

While the circumstances surrounding the rise of the charismatic authority – in this case, the band – are, frankly, less dire than the ones Weber alludes to in the previous passage, there are still parallels apparent between an emerging charismatic and an emerging band. In a general sense (ignoring, for now, the changes that technology has brought to parts of this process), there is no qualification exam or meritocracy for artists that exists as in a bureaucracy – there are numerous instrumental virtuosos who are only as famous as their bedroom jams allow them to be, for example, and plenty of well-regarded cover bands and even fully-original bands that never make it beyond their hometown tavern or regional venues,
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despite their apparent objective “skill.” Instead, what separates these “wannabes” from the achievers is frequently either a relentless drive (“inner determination”) or, more rarely, fitting into a previously unrecognized niche that becomes something valuable (“recognition through proving,” “the duty of those ... to recognize him as their charismatically qualified leader.”) While it is not within the scope of this paper to determine what drives the feeding patterns of a fickle listening public, suffice it to say that the latter situation could be considered as answering the call in Weber’s “times of ... distress” (Weber 1946) – where the efforts provided by the current authority (the music industry) are simply not enough, and thus, a band or artist rises to meet that need as a charismatic authority.

According to Weber, once this band has established itself as charismatic authority, it will continue to exist as such until it loses its legitimacy by no longer convincing its subjects (fans) that it is worthy of their recognition, or until the finite existence of a charismatic leader comes to an end. Regarding the former ending, this is not uncommon, especially in the music industry – the bins of record stores (or, I suppose, a more modern equivalent, the archives of YouTube) are littered with products of artists who briefly commanded charismatic recognition and lost it just as quickly as they originally claimed it. To the latter situation, this would likely be characterized by a band breaking up or an artist hanging it up (and this is not necessarily separated from the first ending I mentioned, either.) However, if they do manage to survive beyond the period of charismatic authority and establish a long-lasting career, Weber’s theories would predict that a band has no choice but to engage in the routinization of charisma in order to maintain their authority – and since the music business is, in fact, a business, eschewing economic benefits and making administrative decisions in the shortsighted, careless manner that is considered to be legitimate for a charismatic leader is simply not a good business plan; therefore, in keeping with the process of rationalization (to make power use – in this case, access to resources – predictable), a band will necessarily transition from power of personality to power of position. The end result is that a band that succeeded on the strength of its charismatic authority has become a different kind of authority – in this instance (and for our purposes, all instances), a rational-legal authority, where rules
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exist to ensure the most efficient means to the end (Kelley 3/25/2011). It is at this point that a band or artist might be labeled a “sell-out” – yet, if we are to consider fans as “followers” or “disciples,” as Weber would likely refer to them, it stands to reason that they too would have a stake in ensuring a band’s continued success, including the routinization of charisma: “Only the members of the small group of enthusiastic disciples and followers are prepared to devote their lives purely idealistically to their call. The great majority of disciples and followers will in the long run ‘make their living’ out of their ‘calling’ in a material sense as well. Indeed, this must be the case if the movement is not to disintegrate” (Calhoun et al. 2007). In essence, Weber is suggesting that fans of an artist would not disapprove of this transition of authority types, and yet this seems not to be the case. I will address this apparent failing of Weber’s theory in a later section; until then, I would ask that you keep this discrepancy in mind as we explore the career arcs of two well-known bands in this next section.

U2 and Metallica: Case Studies of the Musical Career Arc

The career arcs and band/fan relations of Irish post-punkers U2 and San Francisco thrash metal progenitors Metallica seem to fit well to the way that Weber’s theories would predict. Both bands were launched by middle-class individuals in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and despite their presently disparate styles, both groups were strongly influenced by the sounds and the ethos of the punk rock movement of the late 1970s. Their initial success flew in the face of popular music trends at the time – for U2, their heartfelt and atmospheric pop rock denied the larger-than-life, demigod-like status that was accorded to hard rock and pop metal bands at the time, and had an earnest urgency that was lacking in the synthesizer-dominated dance music that ruled the pop charts; Metallica, who actually started in Los Angeles but found it impossible to meet the image-driven standards of the pop-metal bands who dominated the L.A. club scene, found their niche in combining the speed of hardcore punk with the technical prowess of British metal bands like Judas Priest and Iron Maiden, and thrived in the San Francisco rock scene – in part because they appealed to audiences by appearing to be no different than the people watching the show (Pillsbury 2006), and in part because of their active participation in a network
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of cassette tape trading that existed in the early 80s that allowed them to gain significant distribution and a wider audience on their own (Christe 2003). Both bands built cult followings on the strength of their shows – U2’s anthems were perfect for their expressive, larger-than-life frontman Bono to make a genuine connection with audiences, while Metallica’s aforementioned apparent solidarity with their audiences lent the band an authenticity that stood out in an era of glam and excess in “hair metal.” Both groups even managed to hit true superstar status within a few years of each other – U2 did so with 1987’s *The Joshua Tree*, which became one of the top-selling albums of all time and led *Rolling Stone* to declare them “the only band that matters” (Macnie 2009), while Metallica broke into the mainstream with their self-titled album (sometimes also referred to as “the Black Album”) in 1991. *Metallica* entered the charts at number one, and its songs appealed to mainstream music fans who might not have otherwise been caught dead listening to heavy metal.

Thus far, the rise in status for both bands seems to fit with Weber’s conception of how charismatic authority develops and displaces the other types of authority. U2 seemed to eschew the blatantly commercial and party-oriented attitude of the music industry in the 1980s, and in so doing, unwittingly met a (heretofore unknown) need for music fans – authenticity and a steadfast, idealistic consciousness that found itself at odds with the materialistic Regan years. In a similar vein, Metallica managed to unite fans of “serious” metal – previously a more obscure genre and, for that matter, difficult to even define – who were dissatisfied with the “good times” focus of glam metal, and alienated by the industrial-like uniformity of a genre that claimed to be a form of rebellion, into a serious commercial force that could not be ignored. If the music industry would not bend to meet their desires, then this disruptive force of charismatic authority would be the one to bend the industry.

The similarities in the two bands’ careers arcs do not end with their ascent to power. Indeed, the process of routinization of charisma began to take hold for both groups at the beginning of the 1990s, as the effectiveness of their “mandates” began to lose strength, and there was now much more at stake than during their rise to authority.
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U2, smarting from critical dissatisfaction with their pious image and their American roots music fascination, began a period of artistic experimentation that would last through the rest of decade with 1991’s *Achtung Baby*. *Achtung Baby* exhibited a U2 that was more willing to embrace the sensual and ironic aspects of rock, in a departure from their straightforward anthems of sincerity, and not only silenced critics but managed to expand the band’s audience. While this was successful initially, the foray into dance and electronic-influenced songs and ironic self-mockery lost its charms as the decade moved forward, culminating in an indulgently over-the-top album entitled *Pop* that ended up being the poorest-selling U2 album in more than a decade (Macnie 2009), and an associated tour fraught with technical issues and cost overruns that would eventually lead U2 manager Paul McGuiness to note, “There were the inevitable post mortems and we came to some conclusions. Mine would have been: Don’t bite off more than you can chew” (McCormick 2006). U2’s next album, *All That You Can’t Leave Behind* (2000), marked a move away from the experimentation of the previous decade and a return to their anthemic form of the 1980s – described by Bono as “applying for … the job of best band in the world” (Macnie 2009), and was generally well-received (it sold over 12 million copies worldwide and earned seven Grammy awards (McCormick 2006)), but some cynics have noted that the decision to return to a familiar sound was motivated by business concerns rather than as a solely artistic decision (DiCrescenzo 2000). Indeed, the *Elevation* tour that followed was the third-highest-grossing tour of all time (up to that point) (Gundersen 2005); the follow-up album, *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb* (2004) would sell 9 million copies and win eight Grammy awards, and the *Vertigo* tour linked to it surpassed their previous peak, as it became the second-highest-grossing tour of all time (Cohen 2007) – thus, it is very hard to deny the possibility of commercial motivation. In addition, a U2-themed Apple iPod was released coincident with the release of *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb*, and U2 received royalties for every U2-themed iPod sold, which drummer Larry Mullen noted led to accusations of selling out (McCormick 2006). At this point, considering that the recent U2 *360* tour (financed in part by a deal with promoter LiveNation and mobile phone maker RIM) is officially the highest-grossing concert tour of all time (Waddell 2011), it is
difficult to dispute that there is not a type of rational-legal structure that exists around the band – it is hard to imagine how the band could otherwise exist at the level it currently does.

Similarly, Metallica when followed up 1991’s *Metallica* with *Load* (1996), it was a marked departure from the formula that had boosted them to the heights they had achieved leading up to *Metallica*. The appearance of a blues rock sound, previously eschewed by the band in favor of a harsher-sounding musical mode that owed more to classical music than contemporary music (Lilja 2004; VanValkenburg 2010) and affectations of contemporary fashion that included hairstyle and clothing changes seemed to be nods to the changes in the rock world that had occurred after the release of *Metallica*. Grunge and alternative rock were the dominant forms in the rock world, and the party metal that Metallica had always distanced itself from was no longer culturally relevant – so who did Metallica have left to “not be?” A case could be made that considering both their and alternative rock’s antipathy to hair metal, Metallica was merely keeping in step with the bands that were currently relevant – but others have suggested that, after the success of *Metallica*, “Metallica was finally dressing to suit its bank account” (Christe 2003). The change in sound and image did not go without notice – while critics appreciated the change, some fans alternately accused the band of selling out or blamed outside influences such as Bob Rock (producer on *Metallica, Load*, and 1996’s *Reload*, whose association with band was controversial from the start, since he had made his reputation producing hair metal acts such as Aerosmith and Motley Crue) and MTV (whom Metallica had almost completely ignored until the Black Album was released) for causing this shift from being the band with whom they had felt solidarity for so long (Pillsbury 2006). In addition, in 1994, the group sued its record label, Elektra, and not only increased its royalty share to 50% (royalties are the revenue earned from the sale of recorded media, split with the label and distributors – most artists receive 10 – 25% royalties), but received the ownership of their master recordings (the original recordings that copies are made from – it is very rare for a major label artist to own these, as these are typically owned by the label in exchange for distributing and supporting the artist financially), which further increased their financial stability (Pillsbury 2006; Serpick 2009); their legal
team was also very quick to shoot down any unauthorized usage of the name “Metallica,” leading to lawsuits against retailers Victoria’s Secret, Pierre Cardin, Neiman Marcus and the manufacturer of a nail file, all of whom sold unrelated products bearing the band’s name (Christe 2003). Ultimately, however, the most apparent case of the band’s charismatic authority giving way to rational-legal authority is the band’s lawsuit against the file-sharing service Napster in 2000, stemming from the discovery of a leaked version of the song “I Disappear” (which was slated to appear on the Mission Impossible II soundtrack later that year) being distributed freely on the Napster file-sharing network. Drummer Lars Ulrich was the face and voice of the band during the legal tussle; in announcing the lawsuit, he stated, “It is therefore sickening to know that our art is being traded like a commodity rather than the art that it is” (Pillsbury 2006); the assertion of artistic integrity and damages, however, rang false, considering that Metallica had built their early audience through sharing their music as part of the tape trading scene (Christe 2003), and as Ulrich appeared on TV shows and in interviews to defend the band’s view, “his responses to the Napster controversy presented an image of someone deeply engaged in running the Metallica corporation … he rarely cast himself as a man of the fans, particularly where the corporate interests of Metallica might be at stake” (Pillsbury 2006). When viewed in this light, it is impossible to consider the band’s motives for pursuing this legal action as an act of charismatic authority. For one, their use of the legal system is an assent to the “abstract legal codes and statutes” that Weber says charismatic authority rejects, and secondly, in attempting to solidify their access to resources (lost revenue), the band is implicitly acknowledging that the primary goal of their art is financial gain – “But charisma, and this is decisive, always rejects as undignified any pecuniary gain that is methodical and rational” (Weber 1946); however, “bureaucracy is fashioned to meet calculable and recurrent needs … bureaucratic domination depends upon regular income” (Weber 1946). Indeed, many dismayed fans chose to recognize this interpretation of Metallica’s drive behind their lawsuit, leading to gestures like Camp Chaos’s parody public service announcement “Napster Bad,” which mocked Ulrich’s attempts at defending the band’s position by portraying Ulrich and vocalist James Hetfield at the extremes of their public personas (Ulrich, with his rapid-fire vocal mannerism and frequent use of obscenities, does most of the talking, punctuated by
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Hetfield’s caveman-like interjections of “Money good! Napster bad!” (Camp Chaos 2000), and “an Internet auction for Metallica’s integrity – ‘slightly used’ – which reached $10 million before being canceled by eBay.com administrators” (Christe 2003). Metallica may not have lost the legitimate claim to use power – surely, the recording industry had no qualms with their actions – but they were definitely no longer a charismatic authority in the eyes of their fans.

**Interlude: Charisma Sells, But Who’s Buying? A Definition of Authenticity**

Before I make my suggestion of how Weber’s theories might be reconciled with these real-world results, I would like to take a moment to discuss what exactly “selling out” even means, as the term itself suffers from the problem of having a fairly subjective meaning. In doing so, I believe this will help to better illustrate the connection between Weber and modern music culture.

The word “authenticity” is bandied about quite a bit in connection with rock music and in regards to the idea of “selling out.” It is my belief that in the context of the rise of an artist, authenticity is a fan’s subjective measure or perception of relative change from that artist’s beginnings, and in this case, might be framed as status in Weberian terms. Kembrew McCleod, writing on the topic within hip-hop culture, notes that authenticity claims are a way of establishing in-group/out-group distinctions, especially in subcultures where there exists a threat of assimilation by a larger culture (McLeod 1999). Similarly, in writing about rave culture, Sarah Thornton refers to a “subcultural capital … defined against the supposedly obscene accessibility of mass culture,” and defines selling out as “artists or songs sell[ing] beyond their initial market which, in turn, loses its sense of possession, exclusive ownership and familiar belonging” (Thornton 1996). Simon Frith suggests that the embrace of rock music as an experience of community is a way of controlling status (the “honor” of having shared an “experience”) in the absence of having power, in the same way that urban gangs stake out territory as a form of power use in the absence of socioeconomic status (Frith 1981); in a separate work, quoted by McCleod, he identifies an “ideology of rock,” stating: “First, a musician’s career should evolve organically, not in a prefabricated way; second, rock is an expression of a subcultural identity; third, there must be a real connection between the
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musician and audience. [This] ideology of rock emerged during a time when rock was contradictorily both big business and at the epicenter of 1960s rebellion” (McLeod 1999). Finally, Frith presents the idea that popular music, including rock, has a value in producing a “pleasure of identification … the production of identity is also a production of non-identity – it is a process of inclusion and exclusion” (Frith 2007). Thus, it seems clear that whatever authenticity actually is in practice, there is reasonable support for it being a status characteristic, with the determination of authenticity then being, in its own way, a use of power. Having settled on a working definition, I will apply this definition in my corrections to Weber’s theories in the next section.

**Improvements to the Theory**

Earlier, I began with looking at a band’s career arc through the lens of authority and focused solely on the band. I will now include the fan as an agent in the situations we examined earlier.

Weber says (as noted earlier) that a charismatic authority earns and maintains legitimacy with the mandate of the people, but not in the sense that they “elect” the authority – rather, they recognize the actions of the charismatic leader as meeting their needs, whatever those might be – and in the case of a band and its fans, fans do not simply “elect,” from a list of “candidates,” to whom they declare their allegiance, but instead find that the artist is worthy of their continued recognition. (While the argument could be made that fans do “vote” by deciding who they spend their money on in terms of recordings, performances and associated merchandise, this is putting the cart in front of the horse – artists are typically not in a position to distribute recordings, book sizeable venues, or have merchandise worth purchasing if there is not a value previously associated with them, and that has to exist and be recognized before any sort of voting with wallets can occur.) Once a charismatic authority is recognized, they are automatically of higher status – this is the relationship between the artist and the fan. The artist doesn’t actively exclude the fan from the in-group (since charismatic authority only cares about its recognition by those it subjects to its authority – to define the boundaries of the in-group would be akin to establishing a set of standards, which, Weber notes, a charismatic authority does not recognize in any case) and this lack
of exclusion feels like a positive use of power to the fan. By virtue of aligning oneself with a particular band or artist, a delineation is made between a fan and a non-fan; within the community of fans, there is a mutual recognition between all those in the in-group that they are of higher status than those who are not in the community of fans. The ability to make this distinction is the use of power (or has the appearance of it): a fan feels the ability to define who is allowed to have access to the artist or the in-group community of fans. They unwittingly create the conditions of a rational-legal authority, however, because they define a standard that determines the rationale for including or excluding others from the in-group – and by doing this, the touchstone for authenticity on the part of the artist is also set in place.

A side effect of charismatic authority being successful is that the pressure of continuing to be worthy of a following necessitates continuing to be successful at the thing that generated the legitimacy of authority in the first place – a vicious cycle that either eventually collapses, or because of the charismatic effect, increases the size of its following. The result of the latter occurrence means more fans, which means a larger in-group; essentially, there are more people attempting to obtain slices of a pie (access to the artist) that has not changed in size. As a result, each piece of pie is smaller (less valuable) because the size of a piece increasingly shrinks towards nothing, and the difference between the in-group and the out-group (who have no access) becomes less and less apparent. Status level drops along with shrinking access, because status is intrinsically linked to power – it becomes harder to deny access to others when you don’t possess enough of it yourself to effectively hoard it, and thus there is little to differentiate an insider from an outsider. The sense of authenticity that was previously established is diminished as access shrinks, because the loss of access increases the stratification between fan and artist, and this distance is viewed by the fan as displacement from the band’s beginnings – relative to the fan, at least – and according to the standards set by the fan, this displacement is a violation of the “rules.” In violating these rules, it reinforces the lack of power on the part of the fan, and additionally, feels like negative power use to the fan.
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Meanwhile, the longer a band exists in a state of charismatic authority, the more likely it is that they will fail to maintain legitimacy of power, and in keeping with rationalization, they must make power use predictable. Administrative decisions are made according to rational procedures and rules in order to protect all they have gained, until they no longer act in a charismatic manner that attracted their initial followers, but rather, provide a sort-of meritocratic manner by which an individual can become part of the in-group – by purchasing a record, for example. The largest change, however, is that they no longer even offer a tacit delineation of who can be a part of the in-group – by far, the largest violation of the initial rules put in place by early followers. Not only does this further diminish the power and status of the earliest fans (who feel like they have lost the most), but this turns the table on them in a way: now, if they want continued access to the band, they have to accept the band as they are now; if the fans cannot accept them, it is only the fans who are denying themselves access – except, to the now-disgruntled fan, this still feels like negative power use against them. At this point (or even earlier), the perceived distance caused by the increase in stratification has become so great that authenticity, as it exists in the minds of these original followers, is destroyed – and thus is uttered the familiar cry: “Sell-outs!”

Hypotheses

There may be multiple ways of testing this modification to Weber’s theories, but one of the foreseeable issues in attempting to test anything is that Weberian analysis tends to better at just that – analysis of the past – than being able to make useful predictions about the future. I do not know how Weber has escaped being accused of post hoc (after-the-fact) fallacy because, from the start, he admitted that his method was better for understanding subjective motives than for building law-like relationships (Calhoun et al. 2007). However, if we stay within the bounds of what ideal-type understanding is good at, I think it would be possible to apply my synthesis of his theories to any situation where a charismatic authority transitions to rational-legal authority – not just in music or art, but also in brand loyalty, sports, politics, and other social movements.
Conclusions

The precarious balance between maintaining authenticity and achieving some sort of commercial success has been a problem for musical artists since the issue was first brought to light in the 1960s (Frith 1981) and given further weight by the ethical influences of punk rock in the late 1970s (Frith 2007). While Weber’s routinization of charisma theory does an adequate job of explaining the processes and motivations behind an artist’s use of rationalism, it does not adequately explain the role of fans in determining authenticity and “sell-out” status. In this paper, I have attempted to bridge the gap in Weber’s theories through a careful reapplication of his views on power, status, and authority, and I have utilized newer theories and explanations of authenticity from the field of mass communication studies to support my modifications. Claims that the commodification of music has ruined the integrity of the art will likely continue to be made every time the authenticity gap becomes more than a fan can bear, but a quote from U2’s Bono may best sum up the reality of the situation: “The relationship between art and commerce has always existed and I have never felt that we were the sacred artists and the people who sold our music had their hands dirtied by the filthy lucre. Artists are as greedy or as selfless as anyone else. We are in business, we are tradesmen who, in the Middle Ages, would wander from town to town selling our wares. Get over it” (McCormick 2006).
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**Bibliography**


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