



## Two models of political leader cults: Propaganda and ritual\*

Xavier Márquez 

Political Science and International Relations Programme, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand

### ABSTRACT

Personality cults of political leaders can be conceptualized in one of two different ways: as propaganda that portrays the leader positively, or as rituals of leader worship. The first model stresses the forms of communication that make possible the transformation of bureaucratic state power into charismatic (extra-bureaucratic) authority, while the second emphasizes the forms of participation that make possible the construction of charismatic authority in micro-interaction contexts. These two ideal types are not mutually exclusive, since leader-focused propaganda and rituals of leader worship can interact and amplify each other. But each of these ideal types has distinctive origins and political consequences. Moreover, each conceptualization leads to distinctive scholarly emphases: on the persuasive aspects of cult messages, on the one hand, or on the diversity of reasons for participation in rituals and the signaling function of such participation, on the other hand. In this paper I argue for a greater focus on the signaling and ritual aspects of leader cults, and show how it pays dividends in understanding these multifaceted phenomena. I illustrate this argument with a case study of the cult of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela.

### Introduction

Ruler cults, personality cults, cults of personality, leader cults: these are all terms for poorly defined but striking phenomena involving the apparent worship of political leaders.<sup>1</sup> Such cults are not uncommon in history—practices of ruler worship can be found in many pre-modern monarchies—but they are puzzling when they occur in modern contexts that stress the equality of citizens and the role of the people as the only source of legitimacy for political order, as happened in much of the Communist world during the twentieth century. And despite a great deal of historical scholarship on these phenomena, we lack general models of their emergence and development.

**CONTACT** Xavier Márquez  xavier.marquez@vuw.ac.nz  Political Science and International Relations Programme, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand

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<sup>1</sup>For a history of the modern terminology of 'personality cults', with its roots in the Romantic 'cult of genius', see the useful discussion in Jan Plamper, 'Introduction: Modern Personality Cults' in Klaus Heller and Jan Plamper (eds) *Personality Cults in Stalinism—Personenkulte Im Stalinismus* (Göttingen: V & R unipress, 2004), pp. 13–42, pp. 22–33.

In this paper, I describe and evaluate two implicit models of modern leader cults found in both scholarly and popular writing: a ‘propaganda’ model and a ‘ritual’ model. Many accounts of modern leader cults stress their propagandistic aspects: the construction of images of the leader, the saturation of public space with these images, the hyperbolic praise of the leader in official print or broadcast media. They focus on the processes through which leader representations are produced and the effects they are designed to have in particular contexts.<sup>2</sup>

From this point of view, the essential functions of a leader cult are, loosely speaking, persuasive or rhetorical. They are political ‘marketing’ activities to ensure that a population has a high degree of affective attachment to a leader, and they are carefully crafted to communicate a specific image of the leader stressing his or her legitimacy as a ruler.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, leader cults are meant to transform bureaucratic power—the power to direct propaganda departments, hire artists, plaster entire cities with posters, commission biographies and textbooks, mass-produce and sell leader busts, and censor unapproved representations—into a sort of ersatz charisma by multiplying the positive representations of the leader, producing displays of praise, and preventing the production of alternative representations or displays of displeasure. Leader cults are thus to be primarily analyzed as strategies of symbolic legitimation for particular regimes and their leaders.<sup>4</sup>

But there is a different way of thinking about leader cults that stresses their *cult* character: as a set of rituals of leader worship or veneration, ranging from great mass meetings to regular ceremonies in schools or workplaces and improptu events where people display their loyalty to the leader. From this point of view, what is most striking about leader cults is not the production or over-production of particular positive representations of the leader, the exclusion of alternative images, or even the excessive praise addressed to the leader in official media, but the degree to which many people participate in rituals of leader worship, where they are expected not merely to consume leader propaganda passively but to act in ways that credibly indicate high levels of respect, or even adoration, for the leader. Here, as we shall see, the key function of a leader cult as a political strategy is *coordination*, and the main question of interest concerns the way in which *participation* in such rituals signals support or enhances commitments to the leader or some larger group, including the state.

These two conceptualizations of leader cults are not mutually exclusive. Leader propaganda and rituals of leader worship have coexisted and interacted in complex ways in particular historical examples, as we shall see below in more detail. Leader images and forms

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<sup>2</sup>For an account of the construction of Stalin’s image in the 1930s, primarily in the visual arts, in the 1930s, see Jan Plamper, *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power* (Stanford; New Haven: Hoover Institution; Yale University Press, 2012). For scholarly accounts of the cult of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il in North Korea using the ‘propaganda’ model, see Fyodor Tertitskiy, ‘The Ascension of the Ordinary Man: How the Personality Cult of Kim Il-Sung was Constructed (1945–1974)’, *Acta Koreana*, 18:1 (2015), pp. 209–231. and B.R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why It Matters* (Melville House, 2010). For similar ‘propaganda’ accounts of the cults of the leaders of the Soviet Union and the Eastern European Communist regimes, see many of the essays in Balázs Apor et al., eds, *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

<sup>3</sup>Some scholars even speak of cults in terms of ‘branding’ strategies for a regime. See, on the early Mao cult, Daniel Leese, *Mao Cult: Rhetoric and Ritual in China’s Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 17, and on the cults of the fascist dictators, Steven Heller, *Iron Fists: Branding the 20th-Century Totalitarian State* (New York: Phaidon Press Inc., 2008).

<sup>4</sup>On cults as forms of symbolic legitimation, see E.A. Rees, ‘Leader Cults: Varieties, Preconditions and Functions’ in Balázs Apor et al. (eds) *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships: Stalin and the Eastern Bloc* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 3–26; Plamper, ‘Introduction’; Carol Strong and Matt Killingsworth, ‘Stalin the Charismatic Leader?: Explaining the ‘Cult of Personality’ as a Legitimation Technique’, *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 12:4 (2011), pp. 391–411, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2011.624410>; and Yves Cohen, ‘The Cult of Number One in an Age of Leaders’, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 8:3 (2007), pp. 597–634, <https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2007.0032>.

of propaganda characteristic of personality cults need not be produced in a centralized way, or as part of a conscious political strategy, but may instead emerge from rituals of worship. Conversely, rituals of worship have often been intentionally produced as part of strategies of symbolic legitimation, and served as forms of persuasive communication to audiences within and beyond them. Much scholarly work is increasingly sensitive to the ritual dimensions of leader cults.<sup>5</sup> But cults as propaganda and cults as ritual are nevertheless analytically distinct phenomena, with different logics, origins and consequences. In particular, propaganda models of leader cults entail a (primarily, though not exclusively) ‘top-down’ logic of social agency, whereas ritual models of leader cults put greater stress on the participation of the ‘cult public’ in the process of cult construction.<sup>6</sup> I argue in this paper that greater attention to the differences between propaganda and ritual, as well as a greater emphasis on the study of the ritual aspects of leader cults, is warranted, and illustrate the payoffs of this approach to the study of leader cults with examples from several twentieth- and twenty-first-century political leaders.

Some (partial and incomplete) evidence for two more specific claims about the functions and mechanisms of leader cults is also advanced. First, I suggest that, by itself, increases in leader-focused propaganda often indicate little more than the consolidation of a leader’s power within a narrow elite, and need not produce genuine popular legitimation. I hypothesize that while such propaganda can have a marginal effect on popular attachment to a leader or a regime, in general transformations of bureaucratic power into charismatic authority appear to be remarkably *inefficient*; their main outcome in the absence of rituals of worship seems to be ‘preference falsification,’<sup>7</sup> not emotional connection and popular legitimation. By contrast, I hypothesize that the widespread emergence of rituals of worship typically signals a more profound change in the relationship between regime and society. And while ‘cults as propaganda’ are typically found only in highly authoritarian regimes, ‘cults as ritual’ can develop even in relatively open political contexts.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Scholarly work that is particularly sensitive to the ritual dimensions of personality cults include: Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983); Alexey Tikhomirov, ‘Symbols of Power in Rituals of Violence: The Personality Cult and Iconoclasm on the Soviet Empire’s Periphery (East Germany, 1945–61)’, *Kritika*, 13 (2012), pp. 47–88; Leese, *Mao Cult*; as well as many of the essays in Apor et al., *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships* and Klaus Heller and Jan Plamper, eds, *Personality Cults in Stalinism—Personenkulte Im Stalinismus* (Göttingen: V & R unipress, 2004).

<sup>6</sup>To be sure, rituals can be created ‘from above’; for example, studies of Soviet celebration and ritual have shown that many Soviet rituals were created by specialists. See Malte Rolf, *Soviet Mass Festivals, 1917–1991* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013); Karen Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades: Celebrations in the Time of Stalin* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); and Christel Lane, *The Rites of Rulers: Ritual in Industrial Society* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981). But rituals, unlike mere propaganda, which can be consumed passively, *require* active participation from ordinary people.

<sup>7</sup>The term ‘preference falsification’ (the idea that people’s ‘public’ preferences may differ from their ‘private’ preferences due to coercive social pressures, especially in authoritarian regimes) comes from Timur Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). But the idea is of course much older; Vaclav Havel spoke of much the same phenomena in his classic ‘The Power of the Powerless’ essay; see Vaclav Havel, ‘The Power of the Powerless’ in Paul Wilson (ed.) *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965–1990*, 1st Vintage Books (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), pp. 125–214.

<sup>8</sup>Most of the evidence for these claims comes from historical studies of cults of leaders of the ‘left’, though evidence from the cults of fascist leaders is also discussed. This is partly because these cults have been extensively studied, but I do not mean to suggest that left-wing regimes are uniquely prone to the emergence of cults, or that the cults of right-wing leaders are produced by different processes (though they have often been easier to justify ideologically). On the contrary, I assume that cults in both right-wing and left-wing regimes can emerge via similar processes: campaigns of propaganda to legitimate the regime, or signals of support produced by participation in rituals.

The paper is structured as follows. In the first section, I describe the propaganda model of leader cults. I then provide evidence for the idea that leader propaganda is generally inefficient at transforming bureaucratic power into mass legitimacy on a ‘charismatic’ basis. To the extent that it is adopted as a conscious political strategy, it seems to operate by increasing the pressures to ‘signal’ support for the leader and accentuating coordination problems among potential opponents, without producing much by way of genuine attachments. I then show how the notion of ‘signaling’ links models of cults as propaganda to models of cults as rituals, since propaganda messages can help coordinate costly signals of support for leaders within rituals of worship. In the ‘ritual’ model, a cult is a set of interaction rituals focused on leader symbols, whose widespread emergence tends to be associated with social upheavals that provide incentives for people to clearly identify with particular groups. The final section illustrates the argument through an examination of the cult of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela.

### Cults as propaganda

By propaganda I mean the systematic production and dissemination of representations of the world by powerful agents for the explicit purpose of changing the beliefs of a large group of people. Propaganda differs from other forms of persuasive communication insofar as it is intended to affect the beliefs of *large* groups of people through the manipulation of information. Propaganda in this sense is also typically (but not exclusively) produced and disseminated by agents of the state and meant to be consumed passively instead of being part of a two-way process of communication.<sup>9</sup>

Leader cults can be conceptualized as forms of propaganda designed to legitimize both a leader and a regime that emerge when official agencies produce and disseminate (or encourage the production and dissemination of) an unusually high volume of carefully-crafted representations of a leader as a charismatic figure. The mere presence of leader propaganda is typically insufficient to speak of a cult, since almost all stable political regimes produce or encourage the production of positive images of their leaders. The ‘cult as propaganda’ model requires that such representations (1) dominate the public space to an unusual extent (‘high volume’) and (2) give the leader an atypically high and positive *status* relative to the rest of society, that is, portray the leader with qualities that are supposed to grant him ‘charisma’ in the Weberian sense: a set of exceptional, even superhuman qualities that, if believed by the audience, grant the leader *authority*.<sup>10</sup>

At present, we do not have good measures of when the production of positive propaganda about a leader by state agents shades into the production of a ‘cult’, and it is possible

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<sup>9</sup>Xavier Márquez, ‘Propaganda’ in Fathali Moghaddam (ed.) *The Sage Encyclopedia of Political Behavior*, (London: Sage, 2017).

<sup>10</sup>The production of leader representations is not always tightly controlled by the state (even if, in authoritarian contexts, it is at least sanctioned by it). See, e.g. the production of Putin cult objects in a ‘free market’ context, described in Julie A. Cassidy and Emily D. Johnson, ‘A Personality Cult for the Postmodern Age’ in Helena Goscilo (ed.) *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 37–64. Relatively free markets in cult objects (likenesses of the leader, for example) can also be found in many other contemporary cases (e.g. Venezuela – see last section) and in historical examples: Kaiser Wilhelm II, as described in Eva Giloi, *Monarchy, Myth, and Material Culture in Germany 1750–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Queen Victoria, as described in J. Plunkett, *Queen Victoria: First Media Monarch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Tsar Nicholas II, as noted in Malte Rolf, *Soviet Mass Festivals, 1917–1991*, p. 18.

that no such measures exist, since what counts as ‘excessive’ glorification may well depend on contingent cultural and historical factors. Nevertheless, simple measures of the degree to which a leader monopolizes specific forms of media (e.g. number of mentions of the leader in newspaper headlines) and of the ‘sentiment’ associated with these mentions have been used as a proxy for what we might call the ‘propaganda effort’ on behalf of a leader. For example, the number of headlines mentioning the rulers of North Korea (Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, and Kim Jong Un) on the Japanese-hosted website of the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) during the 1997–2014 period was not only orders of magnitude larger than the number of headlines mentioning any other political leaders, but comprise a high *absolute* percentage of the total number of headlines (more than 20% of all headlines over this entire period), all of them highly positive in sentiment.<sup>11</sup> Similar quantitative evidence of ‘cultic’ propaganda (though not always nearly as strong) could be adduced regarding the number the mentions of Mao in Chinese media during the 1960s,<sup>12</sup> pictures of Stalin in Pravda during the 1929–1953 period,<sup>13</sup> mentions of Mobutu in Zairian newspapers, especially during 1974–1975 (when ‘for one period of several weeks in early 1975 official media were forbidden to mention by name any other figure but Mobutu’),<sup>14</sup> or mentions of Franco in *Arriba* (the newspaper of the Falange) in the early 40s.<sup>15</sup>

In all these instances, the term ‘cult’ is used by scholars due not only to the unusual degree of prominence of representations of a political leader in diverse media, but also to the high status these representations give him. This is most obvious in the case of communist leaders, whose status in propagandistic representations seemed to be *prima facie* incompatible with the theoretical basis of communist ideology, as indeed many communists recognized, leading to attempts to rationalize their cults in terms compatible with Marxism-Leninism.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, most *republican* systems of rule have difficulty accommodating theoretically leaders of unusual status and prominence. By contrast, in most non-republican political systems the ruler (the king, emperor, emir, tsar, etc.) *already* possesses a singular status; whether, therefore, it is useful to speak of a ‘leader cult’ in such contexts might depend more on the existence of rituals of veneration (see below) than on the presence (even the omnipresence) of positive representations of the ruler.

The basis for the high status of the leader in these representations varies.<sup>17</sup> All these representations nevertheless attribute qualities to the leader that are typically extraordinary, and thus represent the (alleged) basis of the leader’s charisma (the ‘gift of grace’ legitimating his authority). On the conception of the cult as a form of legitimizing propaganda, however, it is necessary to ask the question of whether these portrayals of the leader are persuasive: in what

<sup>11</sup>Xavier Márquez, ‘Propaganda as Literature: A Distant Reading of the Korean Central News Agency’s Headlines’, 2017, [https://xmarquez.github.io/KCNA/Reading\\_KCNA\\_headlines.html](https://xmarquez.github.io/KCNA/Reading_KCNA_headlines.html).

<sup>12</sup>Leese, *Mao Cult*, p. 130.

<sup>13</sup>Plamper, *The Stalin Cult*, pp. 227–233.

<sup>14</sup>Crawford Young and Thomas Turner, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian state* (Maddison: University of Wisconsin Pres, 1985), p. 169.

<sup>15</sup>In 2014 I collected some data on mentions of Franco in the headlines of *Arriba* during 1939–1947 at the Biblioteca Nacional de España. Franco is clearly mentioned very frequently relative to other political leaders (his only rival in this respect is the dead founder of the Falange, José Antonio Primo de Rivera), though he is not mentioned nearly as frequently as the Kims are mentioned in KCNA.

<sup>16</sup>Plamper, ‘Introduction’, pp. 25–33.

<sup>17</sup>For a thorough discussion of the varieties of cult representation among communist leaders, see Kevin Morgan, *International Communism and the Cult of the Individual: Leaders, Tribunes and Martyrs Under Lenin and Stalin* (London: Springer, 2016).

sense, and under what conditions, must regime propaganda be *credible* to its audience if it is to successfully produce the charisma of the leader and thus legitimate the regime?

### The inefficiency of cult propaganda for legitimation

A simple functional theory of leader cults as legitimizing propaganda would suggest that political elites invest resources in such propaganda to the extent that it actually *does* legitimate the leader and the regime for specific target audiences, that is, enhances their normative commitments to accept the authority of political elites. Indeed, in studies of leader cults the claim is sometimes made that ‘states beset by economic failure and by social conflict invariably respond by seeking to strengthen symbolic legitimation.’<sup>18</sup> To this extent, regime propaganda about the leader must be at least credible and in fact *believed* by some fraction of the intended audience in order to *actually* legitimate the regime, especially if other sources of legitimation are not producing the desired effects.<sup>19</sup> By the same token, this functional theory implies that regime propaganda should not be generally unbelievable or ridiculous, and leaders will attempt to discourage cult manifestations that are easily disproved or ‘over the top’, since leader propaganda that is not actually believed or internalized by enough of the target audience cannot legitimate the regime.

There is evidence that at least some cult-building efforts responded to legitimation crises. For example, the beginning of Stalin’s cult is conventionally dated to his 50th birthday celebrations in December 1929, at the height of the collectivization drive, when the legitimacy of the regime would have been imperiled but before Stalin’s authority was fully consolidated within the Politburo.<sup>20</sup> The Mao cult in the 1960s seems to have been in part a reaction to the disasters of the Great Leap Forward and the failures of the ‘Hundred Flowers’ campaign, which damaged the legitimacy of both Mao and the regime he led.<sup>21</sup> And the Franco cult in the 1940s emerged under conditions of severe scarcity after the Civil War.

Moreover, in at least some prominent historical cases, leaders tried to limit the more ridiculous manifestations of the cult,<sup>22</sup> and the kinds of leader representations that many cults authorized were not immediately falsifiable, tending towards the identification of the leader with vague narratives of national unity.<sup>23</sup> And while systematic public opinion data is non-existent for most regimes where we can speak of leader cults, historians’ qualitative judgments do suggest that at least some of these leaders became genuinely popular, probably partly as a result of their positive representations in multiple media.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>18</sup>Rees, ‘Leader Cults’, p. 4. An anonymous referee of this paper notes that cult production requires real resources that would have to be diverted from other efforts, which suggests that cult-building efforts for legitimation purposes will be more likely to happen after the immediate ‘legitimation crisis’ has passed.

<sup>19</sup>Xavier Márquez, ‘The Irrelevance of Legitimacy’, *Political Studies*, 64:1, suppl (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12202>.

<sup>20</sup>On the dating of Stalin’s cult, see Plamper, ‘Introduction’, p. 21. On the dating of the consolidation of Stalin’s personal power, see Oleg V. Khlevniuk, ‘Stalin as Dictator: The Personalisation of Power’ in Sarah Davies and James R. Harris (eds) *Stalin: A New History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 108–121.

<sup>21</sup>Leese, *Mao Cult*, chapter 4.

<sup>22</sup>Stalin’s ‘editorial’ interventions in his own cult typically tried to tamp down some of the more ‘over the top’ language; see Sarah Davies, ‘Stalin and the Making of the Leader Cult in the 1930s’ in Balázs Apor et al. (eds) *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorship: Stalin and the Eastern Bloc* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 29–46.

<sup>23</sup>For example, leader propaganda in North Korea tends to associate the leader with the unity of the nation; see Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why It Matters*.

<sup>24</sup>See, e.g. on Hitler Ian Kershaw, *The ‘Hitler Myth’: Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press, 1987). Kershaw’s explanation for Hitler’s popularity is nevertheless more complex than a simple functional theory of legitimation via propaganda would indicate.

One key assumption of this simple model of symbolic legitimation is that most people exposed to cult rhetoric find the representations of the leader embodied in such messages credible, even when the leader acts in ways that are detrimental to their interests or when the representations of the leader are highly implausible, perhaps because they are not exposed to alternative messages or frames, or because they trust the source of the message. But the psychology and political science literature on persuasion and belief change contains only limited evidence for such ‘strong gullibility.’<sup>25</sup> Most experimental research on persuasion suggests that individuals tend to reject information that does not fit their prior beliefs and do not blindly accept implausible messages, especially if accepting such messages implies engaging in costly behaviors that go against their interests. In particular, trust in messages from authority figures (including the state) is *reduced* when these messages do not fit people’s experience or strongly held prior beliefs. We should thus expect cult propaganda to be limited in its ability to ‘legitimate’ a leader in the absence of specific achievements that can be plausibly attributed to the leader.

Accordingly, wherever systematic evidence of the effectiveness of ‘legitimizing propaganda’ in authoritarian states exists, it typically finds that its *direct* effects are small or non-existent. For example, careful survey work in contemporary China suggests that people more exposed to regime propaganda are not more likely to support the regime than people who are less exposed, though they may be more likely to think that the government is ‘strong’ (and hence not worth opposing).<sup>26</sup> More generally, people living in authoritarian regimes do not necessarily trust the source of ‘legitimizing’ messages; indeed, the need to induce trust *in* the government’s messages is a recurrent problem for authoritarian systems where the default assumption is that the government can lie with impunity.<sup>27</sup> And in any case many people can misinterpret,<sup>28</sup> ignore, or tune out the content of these messages as boring, formulaic, or simply inaccessible as they have been doing since ancient times: much propaganda is ‘without viewers’, as the historian Paul Veyne once noted, and hence simply cannot ‘legitimate’ anything in any interesting sense.<sup>29</sup>

The qualitative historical evidence of the effectiveness of leader propaganda in legitimating leaders across a broad fraction of the population is in any case at best mixed.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup>See the extensive review by Hugo Mercier, ‘How Gullible Are We? A Review of the Evidence from Psychology and Social Science’, *Review of General Psychology* 21:2 (2017), pp. 103–122, <https://doi.org/10.1037/gpr0000111>. Mercier discusses not only studies of gullibility in the laboratory but also some of the historical evidence of susceptibility to demagoguery and propaganda in a wide variety of contexts, and finds that in most cases audiences are *not* gullible and reject implausible claims made in propaganda campaigns.

<sup>26</sup>Haifeng Huang, ‘Propaganda as Signaling’, *Comparative Politics*, 47:4 (2015), pp. 419–444; Xueyi Chen and Tianjian Shi, ‘Media Effects on Political Confidence and Trust in the People’s Republic of China in the Post-Tiananmen Period’, *East Asia*, 19:3 (2001), 84–118. Similarly, a recent experimental study finds that exposure to leader iconography in the United Arab Emirates has no meaningful effects on political support for the regime; see Sarah Sunn Bush et al., ‘The Effects of Authoritarian Iconography’, *Comparative Political Studies*, 49:13 (2016), pp. 1704–1738, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414016633228>.

<sup>27</sup>Xavier Márquez, *Non-Democratic Politics: Authoritarianism, Dictatorship, and Democratization* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 137–141.

<sup>28</sup>The propaganda symbols of a cult are not unambiguous, and they can be interpreted very differently by different audiences. For some striking examples of the multivalent reception of cult symbols (e.g. the placement of Soviet leaders on the reviewing stand, or the carrying of leader ‘icons’ during demonstrations), see Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades*, chapter 2, especially pp. 41–45.

<sup>29</sup>Paul Veyne, ‘Conduct Without Belief and Works of Art Without Viewers’, *Diogenes*, 36:143 (1988), pp. 1–22. Some propaganda is also self-legitimation, designed to reassure *the rulers* of their own right to rule, without much affecting what their subjects think; see Rodney Barker, *Legitimizing Identities: The Self-presentations of Rulers and Subjects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>30</sup>See, e.g. on Syria: Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (University of Chicago Press, 1999); on Stalin: Davies, ‘Stalin and the Making of the Leader Cult in the 1930s’; Sarah Davies, ‘The

Where cult representations conflict with lived experience (such as, for example, in 1980s Romania, or in the countryside in 1930s Russia, where the realities of economic privation and the brutal policies of collectivization could not but conflict with the symbolic legitimation of the leaders as great and caring geniuses), they seem to be less effective.<sup>31</sup> When Stalin declared in 1935 that ‘life has become better, comrades, life has become more cheerful,’ this could not have improved the overall credibility of cult rhetoric among those for whom life had *not* become better.<sup>32</sup> And there is only limited evidence that Mao was able to use his ‘charismatic’ authority to direct the course of events during the Cultural Revolution; everyone referred to Mao’s extraordinary gifts but did not necessarily behave in ways contrary to their own perception of their interests.<sup>33</sup>

Even charismatic leaders (in the sense of leaders with a talent for generating emotional connections in mass situations, or what Randall Collins has called ‘frontstage’ charisma) require real successes (‘success’ charisma) if they are to maintain high levels of support; pure propaganda cannot easily substitute for general improvements in living standards, victory in war, or other visible achievements. Even support for Hitler seems to have ebbed after the final defeat of the German armies at Stalingrad.<sup>34</sup> Conversely, there is some evidence that Stalin’s cult was more successful in the 40s due to his association with Soviet victory in the war.<sup>35</sup> Charisma, as Max Weber argued, is in part due to perceptions of genuine success, and the ability to saturate the public space with representations of the leader cannot compensate for a lack of such successes.<sup>36</sup> Cult propaganda by itself, in the absence of other sources of support, thus at best enhances the appeal of existing sources of legitimation, but seems to be ineffectual when it conflicts with existing values too much.<sup>37</sup>

## Cult propaganda and the production of flattery

Propaganda can nevertheless induce behavioral conformity—and in particular, signals of support or adherence to the regime—without ‘belief’ in its content. In particular, both

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Leader Cult: Propaganda and its Reception in Stalin’s Russia’ in John Channon (ed.) *Politics, Society, and Stalinism in the USSR* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 115–137; on Mussolini’s Italy: Paul Corner, ‘Fascist Italy in the 1930s: Popular Opinion in the Provinces’ in Paul Corner (ed.) *Popular Opinion in Totalitarian Regimes: Fascism, Nazism, Communism* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 122–146. and Paul Corner, ‘Italian Fascism: Organization, Enthusiasm, Opinion’, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 15:3 (2010), 378–389, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13545711003768584>; on East Germany and Poland: Jan Behrends, ‘Exporting the Leader: The Stalin Cult in Poland and East Germany (1944/45–56)’ in Balázs Apor et al. (eds) *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships: Stalin and the Eastern Bloc* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 161–178; on East Germany: Tikhomirov, ‘Symbols of Power in Rituals of Violence: The Personality Cult and Iconoclasm on the Soviet Empire’s Periphery (East Germany, 1945–61)’; on Bierut in Poland: Izabella Main, ‘President of Poland or ‘Stalin’s Most Faithful Pupil’? The Cult of Bolesław Bierut in Stalinist Poland’ in Balázs Apor et al. (eds) *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships: Stalin and the Eastern Bloc* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 179–193. Cult reception is an intrinsically difficult thing to measure, however, especially in totalitarian contexts, so we should take both the historical evidence of enthusiastic agreement with cult rhetoric *and* of rejection of cult symbols with a grain of salt.

<sup>31</sup>Vladimir Tismaneanu, ‘The Tragicomedy of Romanian Communism’, *East European Politics & Societies*, 3:2 (1989), pp. 329–376, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325489003002007>; Davies, ‘Stalin and the Making of the Leader Cult in the 1930s’.

<sup>32</sup>Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 188.

<sup>33</sup>Shaoguang Wang, *Failure of Charisma: The Cultural Revolution in Wuhan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), esp. chapter 12.

<sup>34</sup>Kershaw, *The ‘Hitler Myth’*, pp. 189–193.

<sup>35</sup>Elena Zubkova, *Russia After the War: Hopes, Illusions and Disappointments, 1945–1957* (New York: ME Sharpe, 1998), pp. 2–4.

<sup>36</sup>Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 241–246.

<sup>37</sup>E.g. in the GDR or Poland, where the Soviet Union was generally perceived as an occupying power. See Behrends, ‘Exporting the Leader’.



rational-choice and computational (agent-based) models suggest that if enough people have motivations to conform with norms others seem to accept (e.g. if they expect punishment for violating the norm), only a small minority needs to believe for *everyone* to act ‘as if’ they believed.<sup>38</sup> From this point of view, not much genuine legitimation needs to be produced by explicit leader propaganda in order for nearly unanimous signals of support to be expressed by a target audience.

Propaganda here serves less a *persuasive* than a *coordination* function: it describes *what people need to be seen to believe* to avoid social sanction, and thus the kinds of signals of support for the leader that need to be produced by particular audiences in response to propaganda. Moreover, propaganda can itself be produced as a signal of support for a leader by elites who have reason to fear that others will denounce them for insufficient loyalty.<sup>39</sup> Not all signals of support for a leader should be described as propaganda (since they are not necessarily produced in a centralized way or by agents of the state), though if they are public and pervasive they amplify ‘official’ propaganda messages, and they can establish norms for others to follow in producing their own signals of support.

These signals of support can be called ‘flattery’, given their typically insincere and excessive character. Rulers therefore have good reason to distrust them.<sup>40</sup> In order to be credible as a signal of loyalty, flattery needs to be *costly*, binding the flatterer reliably to the leader in ways that cannot be easily disclaimed, even if this cost is measured only in terms of a loss of status for the flatterer.<sup>41</sup> We should therefore expect that when power is highly personalized and intra-party competition for leadership-allocated resources is fierce, flattery will tend to become even more excessive and insincere, since the fact that everyone *else* is flattering the leader means that ‘ordinary’ praise tends to be devalued as ‘cheap talk’ and discounted accordingly. Flattery ‘inflation’ should lead to typical cultic phenomena.<sup>42</sup>

In accordance with this expectation, much cult production in both the Soviet Union and China seems to have been driven by incentives to flatter leaders in the context of poorly institutionalized party structures riven by patronage. Career concerns and intra-

<sup>38</sup>The terminology of ‘as if’ belief is from Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*. A rational choice model of conformity without (much) belief is presented in Andrew T. Little, ‘Propaganda and Credulity’, *Games and Economic Behavior*, 102 (2017), pp. 224–232, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geb.2016.12.006>. An agent-based model of conformity can be found in Damon Centola, Robb Willer, and Michael Macy, ‘The Emperor’s Dilemma: A Computational Model of Self-Enforcing Norms’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 110:4 (2005), pp. 1009–1040.

<sup>39</sup>For example, Kaganovich was one of the first members of the Politburo to produce extravagant public eulogies to Stalin, a practice apparently disliked by other members of the politburo, but which nevertheless they felt compelled to follow. See Benno Ennker, ‘Struggling for Stalin’s Soul: The Leader Cult and the Balance of Social Power in Stalin’s Inner Circle’ in Klaus Heller and Jan Plamper (eds) *Personality Cults in Stalinism—Personenkulte Im Stalinismus* (Göttingen: V & R unipress, 2004), pp. 161–195, p. 181. Both Ordzhonikidze and Mikoian appear to have preferred the previous norm of equal treatment, but they did not actively resist the new norm.

<sup>40</sup>Consider Mao’s advice to Ho Chi Minh in 1966: ‘I advise you, not all of your subjects are loyal to you. Perhaps most of them are loyal but maybe a small number only verbally wish you “long live”, while in reality they wish you a premature death. When they shout “long live”, you should beware and analyze [the situation]. The more they praise you, the less you can trust them. This is a very natural rule’. Quoted in Leese, *Mao Cult*, p. 186.

<sup>41</sup>A paper by Shih (Victor Chung Hon Shih, “Nauseating” Displays of Loyalty: Monitoring the Factional Bargain through Ideological Campaigns in China’, *The Journal of Politics*, 70:4 (2008), 1177–1192, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381608081139>) is especially interesting in this respect, since it argues convincingly that it is precisely the existence of a norm *against* cults of personality in today’s China (an informal but powerful understanding, post-Mao, to preserve collective leadership) that makes flattery from subordinates credible as a signal of support for particular patrons. In these circumstances, the stigma of violating the norm (and being known as a groveller) is a sufficient cost to ensure that the ‘praise’ really is a credible signal of loyalty to a patron.

<sup>42</sup>The term ‘flattery inflation’ comes from Aloys Winterling, *Caligula: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), p. 188. Winterling describes how this process worked to push Senators to deify the emperor Caligula.

party competition drove (and still, in some cases, drive) lower-level cadres to compete in offering ever more elaborate flattery to superiors.<sup>43</sup> They had multiple reasons (ranging from fear of denunciation for insufficient loyalty to expectations of patronage) to send telegrams of congratulation on birthdays, rename factories or cities,<sup>44</sup> produce monumental statues, display portraits of the leader in visible spaces or wear badges bearing the image of the leader,<sup>45</sup> give ‘stormy and prolonged applause’ during official speeches by the leader,<sup>46</sup> and so on. Individual, decentralized flattery thus helped to construct the leader cult in its most typical manifestations.

The need for credibly signaling support under conditions of incomplete information about the beliefs and motivations of others also explains some otherwise puzzling features of at least some personality cults, in particular the use of propaganda that is literally absurd, or praise for the leader so over the top that it cannot be believed. For example, Hafiz al-Assad was said by cult propagandists to be the country’s ‘premier pharmacist,’<sup>47</sup> while *Rodong Sinmun* published an article in 2006 claiming that Kim Jong-il had mastered teleportation to avoid being tracked by American satellites,<sup>48</sup> and in Zaire in 1975, Mobutu was hailed as a new ‘Prophet’ and ‘Messiah’, and proposals were made to replace crucifixes with his image.<sup>49</sup> While such propaganda should be counterproductive from the point of view of mass legitimation (since it is, *ex hypothesi*, unbelievable or ridiculous), creating and repeating extreme representations of the leaders serves as a relatively costly and very public signal of support for the regime, if only to the extent that the person making such extravagant claims suffers a loss of dignity.

Moreover, the fact that the regime can compel such displays in turn serves as a credible signal of the strength of the leader, and induces others to engage in similar displays to avoid being seen as disloyal. For example, flattery of both Stalin and Mao ramped up as they increasingly consolidated power within the top leadership, and decreased whenever

<sup>43</sup>See, on Mao-era China: Daniel Leese, ‘The Mao Cult as Communicative Space’, *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 8:3–4 (2007), 623–639, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14690760701571247>; James Kai Sing Kung and Shuo Chen, ‘The Tragedy of the Nomenklatura: Career Incentives and Political Radicalism during China’s Great Leap Famine’, *American Political Science Review*, 105:1 (2011), 27–45, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055410000626>; on the Stalin cult: Ennker, ‘Struggling for Stalin’s Soul’ and Malte Rolf, ‘The Leader’s Many Bodies: Leader Cults and Mass Festivals in Voronezh, Novosibirsk, and Kemerovo in the 1930s’ in Klaus Heller and Jan Plamper (eds) *Personality Cults in Stalinism—Personenkulte Im Stalinismus* (Göttingen: V & R unipress, 2004), pp. 197–206; on leader cults in the Soviet Union more generally: Graeme Gill, ‘The Soviet Leader Cult: Reflections on the Structure of Leadership in the Soviet Union’, *British Journal of Political Science*, 10:2 (1980), pp. 167–186, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123400002088>; Graeme Gill, ‘Personality Cult, Political Culture and Party Structure’, *Studies in Comparative Communism* 17:2 (1984), pp. 111–121, [https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0039-3592\(84\)90008-5](https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0039-3592(84)90008-5); on leader cults in modern-day China: Shih, “Nauseating” Displays of Loyalty: Monitoring the Factional Bargain through Ideological Campaigns in China’.

<sup>44</sup>For a discussion of renaming practices in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, see Rolf, ‘The Leader’s Many Bodies’. Rolf rightly notes the degree to which many of these practices were driven by the desire for patronage or protection.

<sup>45</sup>For a discussion of the inflationary dynamics of Mao-badge-wearing during the Cultural Revolution, see Leese, *Mao Cult*, pp. 216–217.

<sup>46</sup>Solzhenitsyn tells one well-known story about these expectations in *Gulag Archipelago*: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918–1956*, trans. Thomas P. Whitney, vols. I–II (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 69–70. While the Solzhenitsyn story is perhaps not *literally* true, there is reason to believe this concern was not groundless. Davies, for example, documents several instances of Stalin’s annoyance with the practice of excessive clapping during his speeches, suggesting that many people ‘over-clapped’ to avoid being seen as out of step with others. See Davies, ‘Stalin and the Making of the Leader Cult in the 1930s’, pp. 35, 40.

<sup>47</sup>Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, pp. 1, 12.

<sup>48</sup>Ralph Hassig and Kongdan Oh, *The Hidden People of North Korea: Everyday Life in the Hermit Kingdom* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), p. 55.

<sup>49</sup>Young and Turner, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian state*, p. 169.

their position came under threat.<sup>50</sup> In both cases, the intensification of the cults was promoted primarily by figures within the top leadership of the party (Kaganovich in the Soviet case, Lin Biao in the Chinese case) as part of struggles for position, and used (especially in the Chinese case) to eliminate potential opponents (by accusing them of insufficient loyalty to Mao Zedong thought, for example). But this strategy was made possible because the leader's position was becoming unassailable at the time; the lack of any plausible alternatives for leadership meant that 'loyalty to the leader' could be used as a weapon in intra-party struggle.

Increases in leader-focused propaganda thus need not stem from the need for *mass* legitimation in conditions of social conflict (though this may, of course, also happen, even simultaneously), but can occur when factional conflicts within the top leadership of a political regime are resolved by coordinating on a single figure as having the highest status. Such cult propaganda is best understood less as an attempt to legitimate the regime than as itself a signal that power is becoming consolidated in a particular figure.<sup>51</sup>

The view of cults as produced by decentralized flattery is nevertheless incomplete, since it assumes that threats of state coercion or career concerns within ruling parties always provide the main mechanism for the production of cult symbols or praise. But the production of cult paraphernalia—Leniniana, Staliniana, Putiniana, Chaveziana, and the like—or cult rituals is in many cases not controlled or directed by state agents, and at least some forms of cult participation are not driven by fear of social or official sanction, or by expectations of patronage in exchange for loyalty. Many of the cults of the leaders of communist parties in Western Europe in the first half of the twentieth century,<sup>52</sup> or the posthumous cults of Tito in parts of the former Yugoslavia and of Thälmann in East Germany, cannot be fully explained by these signaling mechanisms. As we shall see in more detail in the discussion of the cult of Hugo Chávez below in the mid-2000s, leader cults can emerge in relatively open political systems, where the signaling mechanisms discussed here do not seem to apply. This is where the 'cults as ritual' view provides additional analytic power.

## Cults as ritual and the amplification of emotion

Following Randall Collins,<sup>53</sup> I understand a ritual as any practice involving (1) a group of co-present people who (2) interact while jointly focusing on some particular object or symbol and (3) generally having common knowledge of their attentional focus. 'Ritual'

<sup>50</sup>Benno Ennker, 'The Stalin Cult, Bolshevik Rule and Kremlin Interaction in the 1930s' in Balázs Apor et al. (eds) *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships: Stalin and the Eastern Bloc* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 83–101; Ennker, 'Struggling for Stalin's Soul'; and Leese, *Mao Cult*, especially chapters 4 and 5. Plamper notes that the peak number of pictures of Stalin in *Pravda* was reached in 1939, after the Great Terror, when Stalin had fully consolidated his power; see Plamper, *The Stalin Cult*, p. 228.

<sup>51</sup>For a particularly strong statement of this position, see Milan Svobik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 80–81.

<sup>52</sup>These cults, including the cult of Maurice Thorez (leader of the PCF) in France, Harry Pollitt (leader of the CPGB) in Britain, and Palmiro Togliatti (leader of the PCI) in Italy, are ably discussed in Morgan, *International Communism and the Cult of the Individual*.

<sup>53</sup>Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 7ff. Collins synthesizes Goffman's notion of 'interaction ritual' with Durkheim's account of ritual and 'collective effervescence'. See Erving Goffman, 'Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Interaction', (New York: Routledge, 1967); Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Field (New York: Free Press, 1995).

here has thus a much broader meaning than formal ceremony; many informal practices qualify as rituals, from everyday conversation to sports games and work meetings. In contrast to other definitions of ritual, this account thus does not emphasize the ‘formal’ character of a practice,<sup>54</sup> but the extent to which a group interacts while jointly focusing their attention on some particular set of symbols. To be sure, actual rituals may vary in the degree to which participants have common knowledge of their attentional focus; participants may be distracted, or they may be too young to fully understand what is going on around them. Some rituals are also partly mediated (e.g. broadcast over television), preventing complete joint interaction. The definition is thus presented as an ‘ideal type’, which individual rituals may approach to a greater or lesser extent.

From this point of view, a leader cult exists wherever there are frequent, if not necessarily regular or fully formalized, rituals of worship or veneration focused on the leader or on leader-related symbols. These rituals can be very diverse, ranging from mass gatherings (e.g. the Nuremberg rallies, the eight ‘Mass Receptions’ of the Red Guards in Beijing) to regular ceremonies at work or school (e.g. the workplace ritual of ‘asking for instructions’ of a picture of Mao at the height of the Cultural Revolution) to small-scale occasional rituals of adoration. All of them, however, express the exalted status of the leader in relatively public ways, and they constitute ‘chains’ of interaction where leader-related symbols circulate in a variety of media as focal points of attention.

The fact that leader cult rituals publicly affirm the exalted status of the leader means that participants *by definition* signal support for him, but not all signals of support (for example, writing a leader’s biography or sending congratulatory messages) are expressed in ritual settings, even if they are ‘ritualized’ in the sense that there may be rigid norms governing how or when to send such signals. By the same token, leader cult rituals are distinctive less because of the signals of support for the leader that are expressed there than because participation in rituals also signals *membership* in a particular community and such rituals act as *amplifiers of emotion* relative to a set of leader symbols. We might say that leader cult rituals can *constitute* particular communities united around leader symbols that come to be charged with significance through their being the focal points of interaction.<sup>55</sup>

Not all rituals ‘work’; rituals can misfire and produce boredom or alienation, and participation can be seen as a burdensome duty. But when rituals *do* work, they produce a sense of belonging in a community united around a set of symbols, occasionally accompanied by experiences of sufficient emotional intensity and significance to be

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<sup>54</sup>For example, Rappaport defines ritual in terms of ‘formal acts’ (‘the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers’), and connects it with religion more directly: Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 24. Rappaport’s stress on formality, invariance, and the like does not necessarily fit many leader cult practices involving ephemeral and not fully formalized performances; consider, for example, the ritual practices that emerged in the worship of ‘Mao’s mangoes’ during the Cultural Revolution, described in Adam Yuet Chau, ‘Mao’s Travelling Mangoes: Food as Relic in Revolutionary China’, *Past & Present*, 206:suppl 5 (2010), pp. 256–275, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtq020>. Nevertheless, as noted below, at least some leader cult rituals do fit Rappaport’s definition, and his view is not generally incompatible with a description of many leader cult practices as ‘rituals’.

<sup>55</sup>The idea that rituals constitute communities and generate worldviews of significance is common in the literature on ritual, even if the specific mechanism of integration is not always dependent on joint attention and emotional amplification. See, among others, Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*; Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969); and of course Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*.

called ‘sacred.’<sup>56</sup> Processes of rhythmic entrainment operating at the physiological level produce, if the ritual ‘works’, what Durkheim called ‘collective effervescence,’<sup>57</sup> enhancing the ‘emotional charge’ of the focal symbols of the ritual, and perhaps even increasing dispositions to cooperate afterwards with members of the group.<sup>58</sup> Leader rituals are not an exception here, as at least some modern leader cult rituals have produced such feelings and experiences.<sup>59</sup>

Cult rituals can be designed, and to that extent they can be conceptualized as a form of ‘active’ propaganda, whose explicit messages can also be broadcast to non-participants.<sup>60</sup> And they can also be made compulsory, insofar as state agents are able to monitor participation or encourage attendance. For example, participation in the rituals of mourning after the death of Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung was reportedly ensured by members of the *Inmiban* (neighborhood committees),<sup>61</sup> and at least some people who did not feel particularly well disposed towards the dead leaders felt enormous compulsion to participate, to the point of forcing themselves to cry for the sorts of signaling reasons discussed in the previous section.<sup>62</sup> During the Stalin era, Communist Party cadres exhorted factories and schools to send participants to mass festivals (including cult rituals) and monitored absences, even if sometimes ineffectively.<sup>63</sup> And a wide range of pressures, from purely social sanctions to the threat of formal denunciation, could be applied to people to participate in the ‘quotation gymnastics’ or ‘loyalty dances’ (both unofficial rituals of loyalty to Mao) during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>64</sup>

But compulsory participation in regime-designed rituals does not appear to be always effective as a mechanism of emotional amplification and community integration. Though the historical evidence is unclear, it seems reasonable to conclude that most coerced ritual participation does not fundamentally change the attachments of citizens to leaders, even as they publicly establish status conventions that citizens learn to respect. The more spontaneous rituals of veneration for Lenin in the early 1920s seem to have expressed more genuine attachments to the leader than the more compulsory ceremonies of the 1930s, even if the latter were not without emotional power for at least some people.<sup>65</sup> Without

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<sup>56</sup>Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, pp. 3, 27. It is worth noting that the fact that rituals can produce ‘sacred’ experiences does not necessarily entail a sharp distinction between the sacred and the profane.

<sup>57</sup>Dimitris Xygalatas et al., ‘Quantifying Collective Effervescence: Heart-Rate Dynamics at a Fire-Walking Ritual’, *Communicative & Integrative Biology*, 4:6 (2011), pp. 735–738.

<sup>58</sup>Martin Lang et al., ‘Lost in the Rhythm: Effects of Rhythm on Subsequent Interpersonal Coordination’, *Cognitive Science*, 40:7 (2015), pp. 1797–1815, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cogs.12302>.

<sup>59</sup>Anecdotes about reactions to Stalin’s death suggest the degree to which his image had become ‘sacred’ for some people; see Plamper, *The Stalin Cult*, pp. xiii–xiv. Nazi rituals seem to have been explicitly designed to produce ecstatic experiences of belonging in a pure ‘German’ community unified around loyalty to the Führer, and occasionally succeeded; see Rolf, *Soviet Mass Festivals, 1917–1991*, p. 162. And descriptions of Cultural Revolution rituals sometimes bring out the degree to which leader symbols were experienced as sacred; see Michael Dutton, ‘Mango Mao: Infections of the Sacred’, *Public Culture*, 16:2 (2004), pp. 161–187.

<sup>60</sup>As Rolf and Petrone note, Soviet rituals were explicitly designed to ‘educate’ the population, and thus as part of an overall propaganda strategy; see Rolf, *Soviet Mass Festivals, 1917–1991*, chapter 2, and Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades*, chapter 1.

<sup>61</sup>Barbara Demick, *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2009), p. 101.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>63</sup>Rolf, *Soviet Mass Festivals, 1917–1991*.

<sup>64</sup>Leese, *Mao Cult*, pp. 202–208.

<sup>65</sup>Several scholars have noted the greater ‘spontaneity’ of Soviet ritual in the early 1920s and its increasing control in the late 1920s and early 1930s; see, on Lenin cult rituals, Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 120–121 and Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia*, chapters 4–5.

voluntary participation, the represented charisma of leader iconography may remain inert in ritual settings; in a sense it is only *in* successful rituals that the charisma of the leader is actually *recognized* by followers.

Nevertheless, people sometimes participate in regime rituals (compulsory or not) with enthusiasm, and if the ritual is routinely successful, it produces experiences of belonging to a community united around a series of symbols. Moreover, ritual participation can enhance ‘conformity motivations’ even among those who do not feel particularly drawn to the leader. Because rituals involve emotional amplification, they can enhance the positive affect of free participants towards the focal point of the ritual, *viz.*, the leader in a cult of personality. Thus, for those people who are predisposed to attachment to a particular leader, regular participation in such rituals enhances and strengthens their commitments to the leader *and* the group for which the leader is a focal point of interaction.

This sort of integrative effect is especially clear in the veneration rituals of the leaders of Western communist parties in relatively open societies. For example, the cult of Maurice Thorez (leader of the French Communist Party [PCF]) in the post-war years cannot be explained simply in terms of the need for party members to produce flattery to avoid strong social sanctions, or to legitimize a ruling group in the eyes of a population, simply because the PCF was not in power, the main sanction for violating cult norms would have been exclusion from the community, and Thorez could not legitimate the PCF in France (especially given his absence from France during the war years). Instead, participation in cult rituals seems to have been driven by the fact that the PCF was an ‘oppositional micro-society’ within France,<sup>66</sup> whose integration depended in part on rituals of loyalty to the leader figure. By participating in such rituals, party members affirmed their belonging together in the face of a hostile external environment.

We do not have a systematic theory about the circumstances in which free participation in leader-focused rituals gives rise to a leader cult. But it seems plausible to think that in moments of crisis certain leader symbols ‘resonate’ with larger sections of a population (for example, if the leader is credibly seen as the destroyer of a discredited establishment), so that the leader is therefore recognized as ‘charismatic’ in the strict Weberian sense of the term. What we call the ‘charisma’ of a leader is in this case simply the fact that the leader comes to *represent* some important hope or value of a group of people (embodying the party, the revolution, or the people); and this charisma may in turn be subject to a process of emotional amplification for those who participate in rituals focused on the leader. Leaders can in turn exploit these charismatic connections to try to change the relationships between state and society (as Mao did during the Cultural Revolution, not necessarily successfully), but they cannot simply create them out of whole cloth: charisma is a social, not an individual phenomenon.

Whenever leaders come to represent deep hopes or other important values of particular groups in society, cult rituals can emerge as mechanisms of group integration even in the absence of sanctions for non-participation. Communists outside the Soviet Union and the Eastern block ritually recognized Stalin’s authority as the leader of international communism on the occasion of his 70th birthday.<sup>67</sup> Ritual practices focused on Mao (e.g. lighting

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<sup>66</sup>Morgan, *International Communism and the Cult of the Individual*, p. 8, citing Anne Kriegel. Morgan’s analysis stresses the ‘integrative’ role of Thorez for PCF members in the post-war years.

<sup>67</sup>On the ritual recognition of Stalin on his 70th birthday in France and elsewhere, see Morgan, pp. 1–2.

incense in front of a picture of Mao) continue today among small groups in today's China, despite a lack of official encouragement and no penalties for nonparticipation (and even some embarrassment for participants).<sup>68</sup> And even in reasonably democratic societies, observers sometimes note that the levels of adoration bestowed on political leaders during election rallies and other ritual occasions approach 'cultic' levels. What these practices have in common is the fact that leader symbols come to embody certain values or hopes for particular communities even in the absence of substantial propaganda efforts or sanctions by governments.

### Cult rituals in Chávez's Venezuela

The view of cults as rituals thus helps account, in conjunction with the signaling view, for the emergence of personality cults in reasonably democratic contexts where the state cannot fully control the media or uniquely provide benefits to participants for signaling loyalty. Consider the case of Venezuela. Even before coming to power in 1993 Hugo Chávez was nurturing a renewed cult of Simón Bolívar, the nineteenth-century leader of Venezuela's independence movement, on which he consciously modeled himself and from which he drew some of his own self-legitimation.<sup>69</sup> After being elected president, Bolivarian symbols were put into renewed circulation through such actions as changing the name of the country to 'Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela,' commissioning a new likeness of Bolívar, staging a mass ceremony where a large crowd repeated the words of a famous oath by Bolívar, and disinterring Bolívar's remains to conduct a televised 'autopsy' to determine whether or not Bolívar (who is thought to have died of tuberculosis) had instead been murdered. Chávez presented himself as the legitimate heir of Bolívar, but there were at first no obvious attempts to encourage a distinct cult of his own person, even if his self-identification with Bolívar tended to promote a certain conflation of the two.

Nevertheless, the ritual context provided by constant campaigning (there were 13 major elections in Chávez' 14 years in power, including elections to a constitutional assembly, a recall referendum, and a referendum on several important constitutional amendments), and Chávez' constant presence in the Venezuelan media (partly through his legal ability to force private TV stations to air his broadcasts) inevitably put Chávez-related symbols into circulation and amplified their emotional charge. Chávez was visible in shows such as 'Aló Presidente' (a call-in show lasting sometimes as much as six hours, where Chávez took calls from ordinary people, gave orders to his ministers, discussed ideas, and sometimes sang or recited poetry); in his theatrical denunciations of other world leaders in international forums, which attracted wide coverage in domestic and international media; on Twitter; and above all in the mass meetings typical of electoral campaigns. Some of these practices, such as 'Aló Presidente', had important ritual aspects (including participation from both ordinary citizens and government officials) but also amplified leader-focused propaganda (since they were broadcast widely).

Electoral rallies in particular are especially well-suited to producing charged symbols of identity, especially in the hands of a skilled practitioner like Chávez, who was routinely

<sup>68</sup>Hans Steinmüller, 'How Popular Confucianism became Embarrassing: On the Spatial and Moral Center of the House in Rural China', *Focaal*, 2010:58 (2010), pp. 81–96, <https://doi.org/10.3167/fcl.2010.580106>.

<sup>69</sup>For a historical account of the cult of Bolívar in Venezuelan history, including its uses by Chávez early in his career, see Elías Pino Iturrieta, *El Divino Bolívar* (Caracas: Editorial Alfa, 2006).

described as ‘charismatic.’<sup>70</sup> Chávez’ charisma, from our perspective here, was simply his ability to reliably produce intense interaction rituals by drawing on pre-existing symbols of communal identity and credibly embodying the hopes for change of large sections of the Venezuelan electorate, who had come to see the existing political elite as terminally discredited. And as the focus of such rituals, he inevitably became an object of intense affection, even adoration, among a subset of participants, especially after major crises like the 2002 coup that nearly pushed him out of power.

Moreover, throughout its time in power, the Chávez government encouraged the formation of a number of popular organizations that, intentionally or not, provided a fertile context for the emergence of Chávez-related interaction rituals. For example, early during his time in office, Chávez called for the formation of ‘Círculos Bolivarianos’ (Bolivarian Circles), each consisting of around 10–20 people (though some were much larger) sworn to defend the revolution in light of the ideals of Simón Bolívar. These ‘Circles’ engaged in community work (e.g. brokering access to government services) as well as political work—demonstrations, participation in mass meetings, etc.—for Chávez, and most members strongly identified with him; they joined in response to his call, and were unified primarily by loyalty to him.<sup>71</sup> Later on, similar groups known as the ‘Unidades de Batalla Electoral’ and the ‘Battalions of the Miranda Campaign’ played an important role in the 2004 recall referendum and the 2006 presidential election, respectively.<sup>72</sup> Members of these groups did not typically control large patronage resources that could be used to force others to participate in the cult, but observers did note very high levels of attachment to Chávez-related symbols among group members,<sup>73</sup> including the spontaneous use of religious language to describe their relationship to Chávez.<sup>74</sup>

Ritual amplification interacted with material resources to promote the cult in a number of other organizations created by the Chávez government, such as the well-known ‘Misiones’ (social programs) providing literacy classes (‘Misión Róbinson’) health services (‘Misión Barrio Adentro’) and subsidized goods (‘Misión Mercal’). There is some evidence that these goods were preferentially allocated to groups and areas that signaled loyalty to Chávez. For example, Hawkins, Rosas, and Johnson report that the location of Misiones was highly correlated with areas of electoral support for Chávez and the PSUV (and not correlated with the socioeconomic status of potential recipients).<sup>75</sup> Moreover, non-supporters of Chávez were at the very least made to feel uncomfortable enough by committed participants to exclude themselves from participation in many of these programs. Finally, most of the teachers in the ‘Misión Róbinson’ were committed supporters of Chávez and the ‘Bolivarian revolution,’ and many used class time to promote the

<sup>70</sup>Jennifer Merolla and Elizabeth Zechmeister, ‘The Nature, Determinants, and Consequences of Chávez’s Charisma: Evidence from a Study of Venezuelan Public Opinion’, *Comparative Political Studies*, 44:1 (2011), pp. 28–54, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010410410381076>.

<sup>71</sup>Kirk Andrew Hawkins and David R. Hansen, ‘Dependent Civil Society: The Círculos Bolivarianos in Venezuela’, *Latin American Research Review*, 41:1 (2006), pp. 102–132, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.2006.0008>. One could also note here the role of small group study rituals in promoting the cult of Mao within the PLA. See Leese, *Mao Cult*, pp. 97–102.

<sup>72</sup>Margarita López Maya and Luis E. Lander, ‘Participatory Democracy in Venezuela: Origins, Ideas, and Implementation’ in David Smilde and Daniel Hellinger (eds) *Venezuela’s Bolivarian Democracy: Participation, Politics, and Culture under Chávez* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 58–79.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>74</sup>Hawkins and Hansen, ‘Dependent Civil Society’, p. 120.

<sup>75</sup>Kirk A. Hawkins, Guillermo Rosas, and Michael E. Johnson, ‘The Misiones of the Chávez Government’ in David Smilde and Daniel Hellinger (eds) *Venezuela’s Bolivarian Democracy: Participation, Politics, and Culture under Chávez* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 186–218.



movement, turning the program into another set of interaction rituals where Chávez-related symbols circulated among an audience that was already predisposed to support Chávez.

In other cases, cult displays grew as a result of signaling dynamics driven by the competition for scarce material goods. For example, community radio stations (whose formation was encouraged by the Chávez government after the 2002 coup) that aligned themselves with the Chávez government (praising him and his movement) found it easier to obtain resources from the state, while stations that maintained a non-partisan attitude or welcomed non-Chavistas have been subject to social pressure, attacked as ‘escuálidos’ (‘squalid ones’, a derogatory term for opposition supporters) or simply viewed with suspicion by other Chavista organizations.<sup>76</sup> More generally, there is also evidence that at least some people who signed the recall referendum petition against Chávez in 2004 were punished by the loss of jobs or the denial of state services,<sup>77</sup> and some anecdotal evidence that in communities that benefited greatly from government programs, expressions of gratitude to Chávez were expected, and people suspected of being opposition supporters found themselves socially pressured to show evidence of loyalty.

But it is worth noting that since the social programs in question already tended to target likely Chávez supporters, and levels of coercion in the Venezuelan public sphere were not very high (public criticism of Chávez and the ‘proceso’ was common; even among Chavistas criticism of Chávez’ government policies was possible and even common among some sectors of the movement, though criticism of Chávez himself by self-identified *Chavistas* was much harder to find), the growth of the Chávez cult was *not* driven primarily by the need for the state to legitimate itself, or the signaling dynamics within a single party. With free entry and exit into rituals, devoted supporters of Chávez tended to gravitate to precisely those organizations where Chávez-related symbols circulated with a positive valence (and where their feelings for Chávez were further amplified), while people who did not identify with Chávez and his revolution tended to gravitate to organizations and ritual contexts where such symbols circulated with negative valence. The result was polarization over the divisive Chávez symbols, not the monopoly over public space characteristic of the cults of Stalin or Mao, for example.

Nevertheless, after Chávez disclosed that he was sick with cancer in 2011, and especially after he left for Havana on 10 December 2012 to seek treatment for the last time (after winning the 2012 presidential election but before taking the oath of office), many observers (including some people sympathetic to the broader goals of the Chavista movement, like the Venezuelan historian Margarita López Maya) began to note that a process of ‘deification’ of Chávez seemed to be underway.<sup>78</sup> There were videos in heavy rotation on state TV where Chávez exclaimed that he ‘demands absolute loyalty’ because ‘he is not an individual, he is an entire people,’ or where people provided testimonials of their gratitude for Chávez and identify themselves with him (‘yo soy Chávez’). United Socialist Party of

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<sup>76</sup>Sujatha Fernandes, ‘Radio Bemba in an Age of Electronic Media: The Dynamics of Popular Communication in Chávez’ Venezuela’ in David Smilde and Daniel Hellinger (eds) *Venezuela’s Bolivarian Democracy: Participation, Politics, and Culture under Chávez* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 131–156.

<sup>77</sup>Chang-Tai Hsieh et al., ‘The Price of Political Opposition: Evidence from Venezuela’s Maisanta’, *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 3:2 (2011), 196–214, <https://doi.org/10.1257/app.3.2.196>.

<sup>78</sup>Sara Carolina Díaz, ‘López Maya: La diosificación de Chávez busca legitimar a Maduro’, Newspaper Article, 13 January 2013, <http://www.eluniversal.com/nacional-y-politica/130113/lopez-maya-la-diosificacion-de-chavez-busca-legitimar-a-maduro>.

Venezuela (PSUV) militants (including senior party members, like Maduro, Disodado Cabello [then president of the National Assembly], Tareck El Aissami [then Aragua state governor], and Elías Jaua [then foreign minister]), issued statements declaring that they were the sons and daughters of Chávez, that they owed everything to him, and that they were eternally loyal to Chávez. Large numbers of ordinary Chavistas tweeted their loyalty and concern for Chávez' health, referring to him as 'mi comandante' (my commander) and emphasizing their subordination and absolute loyalty. The government even staged an entire 'inauguration' ceremony where thousands of Chavistas 'took the oath' for the absent Chávez, symbolically embodying him; and, once Chávez died, the government organized a spectacular funeral where hundreds of thousands of people mourned him. The mausoleum where Chávez is interred immediately became a site of pilgrimage, with government encouragement; several public Chávez shrines appeared in Caracas,<sup>79</sup> one of them in the headquarters of the state oil company; and statues of Chávez, previously unknown, started appearing in many places.

The increase in Chávez-related propaganda was made possible, in part, by the much greater 'hegemony' of the government over the media by 2013 relative to the earlier part of Chávez's time in office;<sup>80</sup> but it also reflected the struggles over succession taking place at the time. Many observers noted a division—the extent and nature of which is a matter of some controversy—between different factions within Chavismo, one of them conventionally associated with then-National Assembly president Cabello, who had roots in the military wing of Chavismo and was seen as more pragmatic, and another conventionally associated with now-president Maduro, who had connections to the labor movement and the 'civilian' wings of the Chavista movement and was often seen as more ideological. With Chávez incapacitated (and soon dead), a struggle was underway to define the future of the movement and the aims of the revolution. But under the circumstances, there was no one who could credibly arbitrate between potentially disparate goals and visions of socialism or revolution. The cult provided the only unifying framework for the party to maintain the support of the grassroots and prevent public divisions; accordingly, all top militants had to dramatize their loyalty to Chávez in sometimes extreme ways.<sup>81</sup>

This was not, however, contrary to the conventional analysis offered in the Venezuelan press and elsewhere, an attempt to secure the 'legitimacy' of Chávez's successor Maduro, whose legal claim to the office of President had been questioned by the opposition. Chávez-related symbols were too divisive in Venezuelan society to secure any sort of acceptance on the part of people who were not already committed to them, especially given Chávez' absence. Moreover, many of the manifestations of the Chávez cult—for example, Chávez-themed mural painting in poorer areas, the creation of Chávez chapels, visits to the Chávez mausoleum—seem to have been spontaneous, led by people who renewed their commitments in rituals with Chávez at their center. The

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<sup>79</sup>Últimas Noticias, 'FOTOS: Inauguran Capilla 'Santo Hugo Chávez' en el 23 de enero', Newspaper Article, 29 March 2013, <http://www.ultimasnoticias.com.ve/Noticias/Actualidad/Politica/FOTOS-Inauguran-capilla-Santo-Hugo-Chavez-en-el-23-asp>.

<sup>80</sup>Javier Corrales, 'The Authoritarian Resurgence: Autocratic Legalism in Venezuela', *Journal of Democracy*, 26:2 (2015), 37–51, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2015.0031>.

<sup>81</sup>For a more general account of this process, illustrated with the example of the Castro succession in Cuba in 2006–2011, see Andreas Schedler and Bert Hoffmann, 'Communicating Authoritarian Elite Cohesion', *Democratization*, 23:1 (2015), 93–117, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2015.1095181>.

intensification of the cult was driven by the exogenous threat to group identity represented by Chávez' impending death and the intensified circulation of these symbols, but it could not legitimate the regime among the 40 percent or so of society who rejected Chávez and his ideological project. At best, it could marginally strengthen the identification of Chavistas with the government.

In sum, it is a mistake to see the emergence of the Chávez cult in the mid to late 2000s primarily through the lens of propaganda. Though propaganda played a role for some manifestations of the cult, in general Chávez worship was the result of processes of ritual amplification at a time of social crisis. Signaling processes also played a role (especially within the PSUV), but in the absence of large sanctions for violating cult norms, people gravitated to rituals that supported their existing commitments, deepening the polarization of Venezuelan society along pro- and anti-Chávez camps.

### Cults as ritual vs. cults as propaganda

The propaganda and ritual aspects of leader cults can either complement or contradict each other. Propaganda—in the sense of a conscious strategy for the saturation of public space with images of a leader—can fuel the growth of rituals of leader worship when the leader symbols credibly embody some form of group identity or important social hopes, and these rituals in turn can increase the effectiveness of propaganda. But propaganda can also *dampen* the success of such rituals if leader symbols do not credibly embody any forms of group identity (as in late Soviet times, for example). The 'success' of leader cults (from a pragmatic-political standpoint) thus turns on the credibility of their 'representativeness': leader charisma is effective insofar as it is a form of representation.

Moreover, we should be able to specify, in particular cases, the specific mechanism driving the emergence of a leader cult: persuasion (in the pure propaganda model), signaling (in the context of quasi-coercive or socially sanctioned patronage relationships), ritual amplification (when sanctions for conformity are weak), or some mixture of these. Scholarship on leader cults cannot be content with pointing out that leader cults as *political strategies* attempt to legitimate leaders, but must also indicate the ways in which such legitimating strategies can fail, either because cults end up working primarily via signaling mechanisms or because their growth has little to do with any conscious political strategy and is instead due to the 'bottom-up' development of rituals of worship.

In particular, the distinction between cults as ritual (driven by both ritual amplification and social signaling dynamics) and cults as propaganda (driven mainly by conscious strategies of legitimation) helps clarify the differences between phenomena like the Mao cult during the Cultural Revolution, when spontaneous rituals of adoration developed in response to pervasive social conflict and were further amplified by enormous social pressures to participate, and the so-called 'cult' of Xi Jinping in contemporary China,<sup>82</sup> which is essentially a byproduct of Xi's consolidation of power within the CCP. Voluntary rituals of worship are the fuel that helps cults grow in potency; in their absence, personality cults are little more than advertising campaigns, even if these are sometimes accompanied by coercive mechanisms. Both conceptualizations of cults, however, put in doubt the too-easy

<sup>82</sup>Luwei Rose Luqiu, 'The Reappearance of the Cult of Personality in China', *East Asia*, 33:4 (2016), 289–307, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-016-9262-x>.

functional interpretation of cult phenomena as ‘legitimizing’ strategies: while cults can legitimize, they sometimes work without legitimation, and can produce effects *beyond* legitimation.

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### **Notes on contributor**

*Xavier Márquez* is a Senior Lecturer in Political Science at Victoria University of Wellington. He is the author of *Non-democratic Politics: Authoritarianism, Dictatorship, and Democratization* (London: Palgrave, 2016).

### **ORCID**

*Xavier Márquez*  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7653-9334>