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# Political Legitimacy in Crisis: A Weberian Reading of W. B. Yeats's "The Second Coming"

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**Abstract**

*W. B. Yeats's "The Second Coming" (1919) has long been regarded as a prophetic reflection on political and social unrest. This article examines Yeats's poem within the framework of Max Weber's theory of political authority. Weber categorises legitimacy into three forms: traditional, legal-rational, and charismatic. Yeats's evocative image, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold", conveys the fragmentation of both traditional and legal-rational structures and thus corresponds to Weber's notion of legitimacy in crisis. In "The Second Coming", the haunting vision of a "rough beast" approaching Bethlehem implies the emergence of a new charismatic force that is unpredictable, radical, and potentially destructive. However, while charismatic authority can serve as a means of renewal, Yeats's apocalyptic tone in the poem suggests scepticism about whether such figures restore order or merely accelerate disintegration. By portraying the transition from a crumbling system to an uncertain future, the poem raises a critical question: Does the collapse of legitimacy inherently invite the rise of tyranny rather than transformation? Combining Yeats's apocalyptic vision with Weber's socio-political concepts, this study explores how "The Second Coming" anticipates the conditions under which charismatic leaders rise in times of upheaval. It also considers Yeats's own ambivalence towards this transformation and asks whether charismatic authority in the poem represents a necessary renewal or a descent into deeper disorder. The Weberian reading of "The Second Coming" emphasises the continuing importance of understanding the fragile and cyclical nature of political legitimacy in moments of unprecedented crisis.*

**Keywords:** Charisma, Legitimacy, Max Weber, The Second Coming, W. B. Yeats.

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## Introduction

> *The last act is the greatest treason. To do the right deed for the wrong reason.*
>
> – T.S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935)

W. B. Yeats's "The Second Coming" (1919) has been widely interpreted as a prophetic meditation on the political and social upheaval. The poem was composed in January 1919, shaped by the aftermath of World War I and the Russian Revolution, and foreshadowed the onset of the Anglo-Irish War (Greenblatt, 2006, 2036). In addition to these turbulent events, the immediate context for "The Second Coming" was the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, which not only ended the war but also imposed punishing sanctions on Germany, setting the stage for the collapse of the Weimar Republic (Preston, 2020, p. 6). Yeats conveys a feeling of historical disruption and existential uncertainty by portraying a world in turmoil, where established systems are disintegrating, giving way to an impending and foreboding future. The poet's famous declaration, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold", has remained relevant for generations and is usually used to describe moments of crisis and transformation in political, social and cultural spheres. While much critical attention has been paid to the apocalyptic symbolism in the poem, its treatment of political legitimacy remains an area with rich interpretive potential.

This study examines "The Second Coming" from the perspective of Max Weber's theory of political authority to explore how the poem anticipates the conditions under which new and unpredictable forms of leadership emerge in times of unrest. The significance of the study lies in the unique interweaving of literary analysis and political theory, particularly through a Weberian perspective, which demonstrates how "The Second Coming" serves both as a poetic meditation on historical transformation and as a theoretical case study of Weberian authority in times of chaos. Building on this intersection, the article represents the first systematic analysis of W. B. Yeats's "The Second Coming" through the framework of Max Weber's concept of political authority. By doing so, it offers an original contribution to Yeats scholarship, situating the poem within a discourse on legitimacy and charismatic crisis. Weber's theory thus functions as a robust tool for literary analysis, especially when examining works that focus on political or social upheaval, the nature of authority, and how legitimacy is constructed or deconstructed.

Max Weber developed a tripartite classification of legitimate rule: traditional, legal-rational, and charismatic. In a traditional type of ruling, authority emanates from "long-established traditions and the legitimacy of those whose authority derives from these traditions" (Weber, 2019, p. 342). In a rational type, authority is based on "the legality of statutory orders and the right of those appointed to exercise rule to give directions" (Weber, 2019, p. 341). Charismatic authority is based on the extraordinary sanctity, heroic attributes, or exemplary character of an individual, as well as the orders established by this person (Weber, 2019, p. 342). While legal and traditional authority possesses strong stabilising forces, charismatic authority is fundamentally unstable (Weber, 2019, pp. 336-337). This instability does not stem from its unpredictability but rather from the process of routinisation. Over time, charisma transitions into a routine, becoming ordinary and losing its exceptional quality (Weber, 2019, pp. 336-337). This transformation creates an inherent tension, as the

very essence of charisma gradually becomes "an everyday matter" (Weber, 2019, pp. 336-337). Yeats's "The Second Coming" is particularly relevant to the study of charismatic authority because it vividly portrays a moment of legitimacy in crisis, a condition under which charismatic leadership emerges. The apocalyptic vision in the poem suggests that the dissolution of traditional and legal-rational legitimacy paves the way for the emergence of a new force, since the existing structures of authority are losing their capacity to govern effectively. Through a Weberian reading of "The Second Coming", this study sheds light on the ongoing relevance of the text in contemporary discussions of political instability, leadership, and the shifting grounds of legitimacy.

Yeats is described as an "occultist and mage, a mystical patriot, whose search for images involved magical visions as well as literary tropes" (Allison, 2006, p. 185). The poet's early work was strongly influenced by Romanticism and was inspired by English poets such as Edmund Spenser, Percy Shelley and later William Blake, whose works he edited (Greenblatt, 2006, p. 2020). Irish folklore also influenced his writing and contributed to his lyrical and mystical style, representing themes of Irish mythology and Romantic ideals (Greenblatt, 2006, p. 2020). Notable works from this period include *The Wanderings of Oisin* (1889) and *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* (1890). Later in his poetic career, Yeats "compressed and embodied his personal mythology in visionary poems of great scope, linguistic force, and incantatory power" as in the poem "The Second Coming" (Greenblatt, 2006, p. 2021). The poem symbolises the main features of modernist literature, including fragmentation, ambiguity and a sense of historical rupture. It also deals with history, mysticism and his concept of "gyres", cyclical historical patterns that serve as important symbols, expressing "paradoxes of time and eternity, change and continuity, spirit and the body, life and art" (Greenblatt, 2006, p. 2021). The "gyre", otherwise called the "vortex" or "funnel" and "reported in many mystic visions of the other world", was adapted by Yeats "for his historical system" (Surette, 1994, p. 137). He explains that the "whirl-swirl" in his poetry is "no longer a mere word" (Surette, 1994, p. 137). Yeats elaborates on his notion of gyre as follows:

> [gyre] has this deeper magic that will show you, not only the thoughts you knew about before but other thoughts you did not know of, old, drowned thoughts, hereditary thoughts; it will awaken the slumbering ancestral ghosts that haunt the brain; you will remember things you used to know and feel long, long ago. (as cited in Surette, 1994, p. 198)

Bloom (1972) suggests that "Yeats's gyres rise rather out of an entirely cyclic movement that he held to be present in every human consciousness, a movement of pure process, in which subjectivity and objectivity constantly interpenetrate, and then spin around, each within the other" (p. 223). Accordingly, Yeats's concept of the "gyre" represents a spiralling historical progression in which civilisations rise and fall in patterned cycles, ultimately signalling the end of an era and the onset of chaos. Moments of political transition, such as the fall of empires, authoritarian takeovers, or social upheavals, not only represent Yeats's vision but also explain Weber's concept of the crisis of legitimacy. Reading "The Second Coming" from a Weberian perspective points out how the gyre becomes a powerful symbol of political collapse and the unpredictable emergence of new authority structures.

**A Weberian Reading of W. B. Yeats's "The Second Coming"**

"The Second Coming" (1919) consists of two stanzas. The first stanza describes a world spinning into chaos, while the second envisions the emergence of a new, enigmatic force. The poem opens with a powerful image of disorder:

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre
> The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. (Yeats, 1919, 1-4)

By focusing on the imagery of disintegration and chaos that Yeats presents in the opening lines, the poem "announces the birth of the antithetical era that will replace the Christian era" (Ross, 2009, p. 140). Yeats's concept of history, which he developed as a cyclical system characterised by roughly two-thousand-year epochs initiated by the arrival of an Initiate or Messiah, lends "startling force" to the poem to depict an impending historical transformation (Jeffares, 2001, pp. 184-185). The poem conveys a moment of transition in which the old world is losing its grip and a new force, potentially charismatic but also dangerous, is taking shape, reflecting Weber's theory of historical transformation and political crisis. The falcon and falconer symbolise the disconnection between authority and those it rules. In the Weberian sense, this moment represents the decline of traditional and legal-rational authority as societal structures disintegrate. Weber (2019) argues that all forms of rule are based on a belief in the legitimacy of the ruler, whether this belief is derived from tradition, legality, or charisma (p. 401). For their part, all rulers "seek to arouse and foster belief in their legitimacy" (Weber, 2019, p. 339). However, when this belief is undermined due to a failure to uphold tradition or legal principles, charismatic rule emerges, taking over other forms of governance, particularly during times of crisis, upheaval, or radical transformation (Weber, 2019, p. 401). In "The Second Coming," the image of the falcon losing touch with the falconer conveys the breakdown of the connection between authority and its subjects. This parallels Weber's concern that legitimacy fails when authority is no longer viewed as justified by those it governs. This detachment, particularly in traditional or legal-rational systems, results in "things falling apart", leading to what Weber (2019) defines as "Legitimitätsglaube" (belief in legitimacy) breaking down (p. 339).

Given that "The Second Coming" was written after World War I, it is essential to consider Yeats's poetic stance on the destruction caused by the conflict. In this context, Kendall (2013) explains that during the Great War, Yeats was reluctant to support Britain fully, as it was an imperialist power that had yet to grant Ireland Home Rule, which was a measure of self-governance long demanded by Irish nationalists (p. 21). To Yeats, the war was not a conflict that directly concerned either himself or Ireland. Instead, he was more deeply affected by the 1916 Easter Rising, an Irish rebellion against British rule that had a significant impact on his thinking (Kendall, 2013, p. 21). Despite the many Irish soldiers who died fighting for Britain in France and Belgium, Yeats did not publicly acknowledge their sacrifices, emphasising his focus on Ireland's struggle for independence rather than its role in Britain's war efforts (Kendall, 2013, p. 21). Taking this perspective into account, "The Second Coming" can be read not only as a response to the devastation of World War I but also as a reflection of Yeats's nationalistic concerns regarding Ireland's turbulent path to independence. Accordingly, the imagery of a collapsing world order, anarchy unleashed upon

society, and the uncertainty of what is to come in "The Second Coming" alludes to both the destruction of the war and the upheaval caused by the Irish nationalist struggle.

Yeats's use of the "widening gyre" as a symbol of historical cycles suggests that an established order stemming from tradition is dissolving. The falcon's break with the falconer symbolises lost authority and overlaps with Weber's view that legitimacy fails when power is no longer valid. This disengagement, particularly in traditional or legal-rational systems, leads to "things falling apart", which Weber refers to as a breakdown in the belief in legitimacy. Moreover, Yeats's phrase "mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" recalls Weber's fear of the consequences of a legitimacy vacuum. When traditional and rational-legal forms of authority collapse, societies can either descend into chaos or turn to charismatic leadership from which a new authority figure emerges that redefines legitimacy based on personal appeal rather than institutional continuity (Weber, 1978, p. 244). This shift towards an antithetical order is precisely what Yeats foresees, suggesting that the world is on the brink of radical change.

The second part of the first stanza is remarkable in relation to Weber's theory of political legitimacy, particularly the transition between different forms of authority:

> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
> The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> Are full of passionate intensity. (Yeats, 1919, 5-8)

These lines symbolise a moment of societal chaos in which established norms and institutions, whether political, legal, or moral, are collapsing. The "blood-dimmed tide" could represent the violent consequences of a breakdown in traditional and legal-rational authority, akin to the disintegration of imperial powers after World War I or the destabilisation caused by the Irish independence movement. The line "the ceremony of innocence is drowned" suggests that previous social or political values, possibly the ideals that once legitimised traditional rulers, are now overwhelmed by the tide of disorder. From a Weberian perspective, when a governing system loses its legitimacy due to war, revolution, or public disillusionment, societies experience turmoil as old structures collapse and new ones struggle to emerge (2019, p. 119). This validates Weber's idea that legitimacy is essential to maintaining order, and when it crumbles, violence and instability follow.

On the other hand, "the best lack all conviction" suggests that those who might uphold legal-rational authority or traditional values, such as intellectuals, moderate politicians, or established elites, become indifferent, disillusioned, or powerless in the face of upheaval. This erosion of authority points to a legitimacy crisis, weakening their ability to inspire trust or maintain order. Consequently, with "the worst are full of passionate intensity", Yeats anticipates the rise of demagogues and populist leaders who rely on charisma rather than institutional legitimacy. Weber (2019) notes that such figures do not derive authority from rational governance but from their ability to mobilise mass sentiment, usually by exploiting societal anxieties and offering radical solutions (p. 407). He further argues that "wherever legitimacy for this kind of rule is sought, it makes use of plebiscitary recognition by the sovereign people", typically elevating leaders "on a charismatic basis from among talented plebeians" (Weber, 2019, p. 407). In this framework, charismatic authority emerges not from

tradition or legal rationality but from belief in the exceptional qualities of the individual leader.

While this classical understanding emphasises the leader's perceived outstanding traits, some scholars have sought to provide a more layered interpretation or even challenge the conventional reading of Weber's concept of charisma. Notably, Joosse (2014) offers a thought-provoking reinterpretation that draws attention to the social constructionist dimensions of charisma. He argues that while Weber is usually misread as promoting a mystical or trait-based view of charismatic authority, his actual writings suggest tools for understanding charisma as a relational, socially constructed phenomenon, shaped by the acknowledgement and validation of followers (2014, p. 272). Rather than stemming from divine essence or innate qualities, charisma emerges from a dynamic of reciprocal recognition between leaders and their followers (Joosse, 2014, p. 272). This perspective emphasises that charismatic legitimacy is not a fixed attribute, but a flexible and context-dependent construct, built upon collective belief, and particularly effective in times of uncertainty or institutional collapse.

Yeats's second stanza functions as a single, interconnected prophetic vision rather than a collection of independent images. The apocalyptic imagery does not simply describe a fragmented decline but rather presents a coherent narrative of political rupture and the emergence of a new, unsettling order:

> Surely some revelation is at hand;
> Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
> The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
> When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
> Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
> A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
> A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
> Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
> Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
> The darkness drops again; but now I know
> That twenty centuries of stony sleep
> Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
> And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
> Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? (Yeats, 1919, 9-22)

With "Surely some revelation is at hand", the poem marks a decisive moment of change. This points to the failure of the existing world order and is consistent with Weber's concept of a crisis of legitimacy through which traditional and legal-rational authority collapses. The repetition of "The Second Coming" emphasises a transformative event, similar to how Weber describes the transition of societies from a stable government to a charismatic authority in times of turmoil. Weber (2019) argues that,

> "Charisma" is the personal quality that makes an individual seem extraordinary, a quality by virtue of which supernatural, superhuman, or at least exceptional powers or properties are attributed to the individual: powers or properties that are not found in everyone and that are thought to be the gift of God or exemplary, rendering that individual a "leader" (Führer). This extraordinary property was originally applied to prophets, to individuals thought to have special therapeutic powers or to possess legal wisdom, to those who led bands of

> hunters, or to military heroes. As such, magical powers were attributed to these individuals. (p. 374)

In "The Second Coming", Yeats describes the emergence of a "rough beast" that is moving toward Bethlehem to be born, an apocalyptic figure whose arrival forebodes a dramatic shift in the world. The "beast" is described as having a "lion body and the head of a man", with a "gaze blank and pitiless as the sun". This formidable figure, who embodies a sense of power and menace, is unlike any ordinary human being. The image agrees with Weber's concept of charisma, in which an individual is seen as extraordinary, possessing powers or qualities that set them apart from the average person. The "rough beast" could be interpreted as a charismatic leader in Weber's sense, someone who represents an extraordinary power or aura attributed to them by the people or society, potentially signalling a new, disruptive phase in history. The "rocking cradle" evokes the birth of this figure and suggests the arrival of a new force poised to redefine the world. Dramatically, the predatory movements of this creature resemble how charismatic leaders typically exert influence: slowly and with an unsettling certainty that leads to significant change.

Like the charismatic figures described by Weber, the "beast" in the poem seems to possess an inherent power that both fascinates and terrifies. Tratner (2015) argues similarly that even though "we cannot pin down Yeats's 'rough beast' to what any particular political movement was advocating, we can see that his poem is picking up on anxieties and projections in politics which were as uncertain and vague as his 'rough beast'" (p. 73). These anxieties were not only reflective of the global instability following World War I but also echoed Ireland's own political turbulence. The 1916 Easter Rising, which deeply influenced Yeats, exemplifies the kind of rupture and transformation evoked in the poem, mirroring the collapse of old orders and the emergence of uncertain new ones. Therefore, while "The Second Coming" describes a more universal sense of historical upheaval, it expresses Yeats's ambivalent attitude to Ireland's struggle for independence and emphasises his nationalist concerns within a far-reaching historical and poetic framework.

Being "suspicious of the political milieu", Yeats's uncertainty is further reflected in his scepticism in the final lines of "The Second Coming", where he asks, "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" (Allison, 2006, p. 187; Yeats, 1919, 21-22). By depicting the transition from a crumbling system to an uncertain future, the poem raises a critical question: Does the collapse of legitimacy inevitably invite tyranny rather than transformation? Yeats implies a transition from one historical epoch to another, but rather than heralding a progressive transformation, the poet hints at an ominous force emerging in the void left by the old order. This coincides with Weber's concern that the breakdown of a rational or traditional order does not necessarily lead to a positive transformation but can instead result in the rise of a new and potentially tyrannical and dictatorial structure (2019, p. 407).

Yeats's understanding of the "gyre" is based on "the essential element of growth and life, representing the cyclical nature of the Ultimate Reality with the recurrent pattern of growth and decay, ebb and flow" (Izzo, 2009, p. 98). Similarly, Weber's view of the validity of legitimacy is "not a fixed state, but something requiring constant renewal" (2019, p. 468). Weber (2019) believes that legitimacy is intrinsically precarious, requiring continuous validation through political, social, and ideological mechanisms (p. 339). In this sense, both

Yeats's gyre and Weber's notion of legitimacy point to the inevitability of change, illustrating how stability is always provisional and subject to historical forces that drive renewal and decay. This sense of inevitable upheaval can also be supported by Donald Weeks's earlier observation that in "The Second Coming", the "association of the hawk with mechanism" and the image of the "widening gyre" may recall for Yeats a passage from *Prometheus Unbound*, thereby intensifying the poem's apocalyptic atmosphere (1948, p. 289). Weeks (1948) also suggests that the final image of the "rough beast slouching toward Bethlehem" straightforwardly invokes the idea of the Anti-Christ, reinforcing the poem's vision of a monstrous birth rather than a redemptive second coming (p. 291). This unsettling vision echoes Yeats's earlier poem "The Magi", where the wise men, "by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied," seek once again in Bethlehem the "uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor" (Weeks, 1948, p. 291). Here, "the bestial floor" signifies not a reaffirmation of sacred order, but the emergence of a more primal and disquieting force, which corresponds to the larger issue of instability and transformation inherent in both Yeats's and Weber's understanding of historical processes.

**Conclusion**

The Weberian reading of W.B. Yeats's "The Second Coming" exposes the instability of political and social legitimacy in which traditional sources of authority have disintegrated. In Weber's terms, the collapse of 'traditional' and 'legal-rational' legitimacy gives way to a chaotic interregnum characterised by uncertainty and the potential rise of new, unpredictable forms of authority. Similarly, Yeats's "The Second Coming" conveys the fragmentation of traditional authority, particularly through the vision of a "rough beast" approaching Bethlehem, which symbolises the rise of charismatic authority. By juxtaposing Yeats's poetic meditation on disintegration with Weber's analytical framework, the present study demonstrates how the poem can be interpreted as a forewarning of charismatic figures who arise in times of crisis. These unpredictable and potentially destructive figures offer a paradoxical solution to the chaos: either by restoring order through unconventional means or by exacerbating the disintegration of societal norms. In this respect, Weber's view that charisma, while a source of renewal, is inherently unstable agrees with Yeats's scepticism about whether the "rough beast" heralds a necessary rebirth or a deeper descent into disorder.

On the other hand, Weber's assertion that legitimacy requires continual renewal parallels Yeats's cyclical concept of history symbolised by the widening gyre. Both suggest that stability is a temporary construct, inevitably undermined by change. Just as Weber warns that the routinisation of charisma can reduce its transformative power, Yeats's depiction of the "rough beast" implies that the emergence of new authority does not guarantee a positive transformation. The poet's use of ambiguous and ominous imagery leaves the question open: Does the collapse of old systems invite a regenerative change, or does it mark the dawn of a more oppressive, tyrannical era? Hence, the significance of this study for the literature lies in its contribution to the understanding of "The Second Coming" as a timeless commentary on political instability, leadership, and the fragility of legitimacy. By combining Max Weber's theories on authority and political legitimacy with Yeats's apocalyptic imagery, this study offers a fresh interpretation of the poem. It not only reinterprets the central themes in light of political thought but also provides a new understanding of Yeats's critique of political power and the cyclical nature of history.

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