

Was this Man the Founding Father of Fascism?

Have you heard of the “great man” theory of history?


The meaning is obvious from the words. The idea is that history moves in epochal shifts under the leadership of visionary, bold, often ruthless men who marshal the energy of masses of people to push events in radical new directions. Nothing is the same after them.

In their absence, nothing happens that is notable enough to qualify as history: no heroes, no god-like figures who qualify as “great.” In this view, we need such men. If they do not exist, we create them. They give us purpose. They define the meaning of life. They drive history forward.

Great men, in this view, do not actually have to be fabulous people in their private lives. They need not exercise personal virtue. They need not even be moral. They only need to be perceived as such by the masses, and play this role in the trajectory of history.

Such a view of history shaped much of historiography as it was penned in the late 19th century and early 20th century, until the revisionists of the last several decades saw the error and turned instead to celebrate private life and the achievements of common folk instead. Today the “great man” theory history is dead as regards academic history, and rightly so.

Carlyle the Proto-Fascist

The originator of the great man theory of history is British  philosopher [Thomas Carlyle](#) (1795-1881), one of the most revered thinkers of his day. He also coined the expression “dismal science” to describe the economics of his time. The economists of the day, against whom he constantly inveighed,

were almost universally champions of the free market, free trade, and human rights.

His seminal work on “great men” is [On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History](#) (1840). This book was written to distill his entire worldview.

Considering Carlyle’s immense place in the history of 19th century intellectual life, this is a surprisingly nutty book. It can clearly be seen as paving the way for the monster dictators of the 20th century. Reading his description of “great men” literally, there is no sense in which Mao, Stalin, and Hitler – or any savage dictator from any country you can name – would not qualify.

Indeed, a good case can be made that Carlyle was the forefather of fascism. He made his appearance in the midst of the age of laissez faire, a time when the UK and the US had already demonstrated the merit of allowing society to take its own course, undirected from the top down. In these times, kings and despots were exercising ever less control and markets ever more. Slavery was on its way out. Women obtained rights equal to men. Class mobility was becoming the norm, as were long lives, universal opportunity, and material progress.

Carlyle would have none of it. He longed for a different age. His literary output was devoted to decrying the rise of equality as a norm and calling for the restoration of a ruling class that would exercise firm and uncontested power for its own sake. In his view, some were meant to rule and others to follow. Society must be organized hierarchically lest his ideal of greatness would never again be realized. He set himself up as the prophet of despotism and the opponent of everything that was then called liberal.

Right Authoritarianism of the 19th Century

Carlyle was not a socialist in an ideological sense. He cared nothing for the common ownership of the means of production.

Creating an ideologically driven social ideal did not interest him at all. His writings appeared and circulated alongside those of Karl Marx and his contemporaries, but he was not drawn to them.

Rather than an early “leftist,” he was a consistent proponent of power and a raving opponent of classical liberalism, particularly of the legacies of Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill. If you have the slightest leanings toward liberty, or affections for the impersonal forces of markets, his writings come across as ludicrous. His interest was in power as the central organizing principle of society.

Here is his description of the “great men” of the past:

“They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world’s history...”

One comfort is, that Great Men, taken up in any way, are profitable company. We cannot look, however imperfectly, upon a great man, without gaining something by him. He is the living light-fountain, which it is good and pleasant to be near. The light which enlightens, which has enlightened the darkness of the world; and this not as a kindled lamp only, but rather as a natural luminary shining by the gift of Heaven; a flowing light-fountain, as I say, of native original insight, of manhood and heroic nobleness;—in whose radiance all souls feel that it is well with them. ... Could we see them well, we should get some glimpses into the very marrow of the world’s history. How happy, could I but, in any measure, in such times as these, make manifest to you the

meanings of Heroism; the divine relation (for I may well call it such) which in all times unites a Great Man to other men...

And so on it goes for hundreds of pages that celebrate “great” events such as the Reign of Terror in the aftermath of the French Revolution (one of the worst holocausts then experienced). Wars, revolutions, upheavals, invasions, and mass collective action, in his view, were the essence of life itself. The merchantcraft of the industrial revolution, the devolution of power, the small lives of the bourgeoisie all struck him as noneventful and essentially irrelevant. These marginal improvements in the social sphere were made by the “silent people” who don’t make headlines and therefore don’t matter much; they are essential at some level but inconsequential in the sweep of things.

To Carlyle, nothing was sillier than Adam Smith’s pin factory: all those regular people intricately organized by impersonal forces to make something practical to improve people’s lives. Why should society’s productive capacity be devoted to making pins instead of making war? Where is the romance in that?

Carlyle established himself as the arch-opponent of liberalism – heaping an unrelenting and seething disdain on Smith and his disciples. And what should replace liberalism? What ideology? It didn’t matter, so long as it embodied Carlyle’s definition of “greatness.”

No Greatness Like the State

Of course there is no greatness to compare with that of the head of state.

“The Commander over Men; he to whose will our wills are to be subordinated, and loyally surrender themselves, and find their welfare in doing so, may be reckoned the most important of Great Men. He is practically the summary for us of all the various figures of Heroism; Priest, Teacher, whatsoever of

earthly or of spiritual dignity we can fancy to reside in a man, embodies itself here, to command over us, to furnish us with constant practical teaching, to tell us for the day and hour what we are to do."

Why the state? Because within the state, all that is otherwise considered immoral, illegal, unseemly, and ghastly, can become, as blessed by the law, part of policy, civic virtue, and the forward motion of history. The state baptizes rampant immorality with the holy water of consensus. And thus does Napoleon come in for high praise from Carlyle, in addition to the tribal chieftains of Nordic mythology. The point is not what the "great man" does with his power so much as that he exercises it decisively, authoritatively, ruthlessly.

The exercise of such power necessarily requires the primacy of the nation state, and hence the protectionist and nativist impulses of the fascist mindset.

Consider the times in which Carlyle wrote. Power was on the wane, and humankind was in the process of discovering something absolutely remarkable: namely, the less society is controlled from the top, the more the people thrive in their private endeavors. Society needs no management but rather contains within itself the capacity for self organization, not through the exercise of the human will as such, but by having the right institutions in place. Such was the idea of liberalism.

Liberalism was always counterintuitive. The less society is ordered, the more order emerges from the ground up. The freer people are permitted to be, the happier the people become and the more meaning they find in the course of life itself. The less power that is given to the ruling class, the more wealth is created and dispersed among everyone. The less a nation is directed by conscious design, the more it can provide a model of genuine greatness.

Such teachings emerged from the liberal revolution of the previous two centuries. But some people (mostly academics and would-be rulers) weren't having it. On the one hand, the socialists would not tolerate what they perceived to be the seeming inequality of the emergent commercial society. On the other hand, the advocates of old-fashioned ruling-class control, such as Carlyle and his proto-fascist contemporaries, longed for a restoration of pre-modern despotism, and devoted their writings to extolling a time before the ideal of universal freedom appeared in the world.

The Dismal Science

One of the noblest achievements of the liberal revolution of the late 18th and 19th centuries – in addition to the idea of free trade – was the movement against slavery and its eventual abolition. It should not surprise anyone that Carlyle was a leading opponent of the abolitionist movement and a thoroughgoing racist. He extolled the rule of one race over another, and resented especially the economists for being champions of universal rights and therefore opponents of slavery.

As David Levy has [demonstrated](#), the claim that economics was a “dismal science” was first stated in an [essay](#) by Carlyle in 1848, an essay in which non-whites were claimed to be non-human and worthy of killing. Blacks were, to his mind, “two-legged cattle,” worthy of servitude for all times.

Carlyle's objection to economics as a science was very simple: it opposed slavery. Economics imagined that society could consist of people of equal freedoms, a society without masters and slaves. Supply and demand, not dictators, would rule. To him, this was a dismal prospect, a world without “greatness.”

The economists were the leading champions of human liberation from such “greatness.” They understood, through the study of market forces and the close examination of the on-the-ground

reality of factories and production structures, that wealth was made by the small actions of men and women acting in their own self interest. Therefore, concluded the economists, people should be free of despotism. They should be free to accumulate wealth. They should pursue their own interests in their own way. They should be let alone.

Carlyle found the whole capitalist worldview disgusting. His loathing foreshadowed the fascism of the 20th century: particularly its opposition to liberal capitalism, universal rights, and progress.

Fascism's Prophet

Once you get a sense of what capitalism meant to humanity – universal liberation and the turning of social resources toward the service of the common person – it is not at all surprising to find reactionary intellectuals opposing it tooth and nail. There were generally two schools of thought that stood in opposition to what it meant to the world: the socialists and the champions of raw power that later came to be known as fascists. In today's parlance, here is the left and the right, both standing in opposition to simple freedom.

Carlyle came along at just the right time to represent that reactionary brand of power for its own sake. His opposition to emancipation and writings on race would emerge only a few decades later into a complete ideology of eugenics that would later come to heavily inform 20th century fascist experiments. There is a direct line, traversing only a few decades, between Carlyle's vehement anti-capitalism and the ghettos and gas chambers of the German total state.

Do today's neo-fascists understand and appreciate their 19th century progenitor? Not likely. The continuum from Carlyle to Mussolini to Franco to Donald Trump is lost on people who do not see beyond the latest political crisis. Not one in ten thousand activists among the European and American "alt-right"

who are rallying around would-be strong men who seek power today have a clue about their intellectual heritage.

And it should not be necessary that they do. After all, we have a more recent history of the rise of fascism in the 20th century from which to learn (and it is to their [everlasting disgrace](#) that they have refused to learn).

But no one should underestimate the persistence of an idea and its capacity to travel time, leading to results that no one intended directly but are still baked into the fabric of the ideological structure. If you celebrate power for its own sake, herald immorality as a civic ideal, and believe that history rightly consists of nothing more than the brutality of great men with power, you end up with unconscionable results that may not have been overtly intended but which were nonetheless given license by the absence of conscience opposition.

As time went on, left and right mutated, merge, diverged, and established a revolving door between the camps, disagreeing on the ends they sought but agreeing on the essentials. They would have opposed 19th-century liberalism and its conviction that society should be left alone. Whether they were called socialist or fascists, the theme was the same. Society must be planned from the top down. A great man – brilliant, powerful, with massive resources at his disposal – must lead. At some point in the middle of the 20th century, it became difficult to tell the difference but for their cultural style and owned constituencies. Even so, left and right maintained distinctive forms. If Marx was the founding father of the socialist left, Carlyle was his foil on the fascist right.

Hitler and Carlyle

In his waning days, defeated and surrounded only by loyalists in his bunker, Hitler sought consolation from the literature he admired the most. According to many biographers, the

following scene took place. Hitler turned to Goebbels, his trusted assistant, and asked for a final reading. The words he chose to hear before his death were from Thomas Carlyle's biography of Frederick the Great. Thus did Carlyle himself provide a fitting epitaph to one of the "great" men he so celebrated during his life: alone, disgraced, and dead.

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