

The "great man" theory of history essay sample

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Two famous writers have presented us with opposite theories about the influence of leaders. Thomas Carlyle wrote most passionately: “ Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here.” Heroes teach us right and wrong, he said; heroes give us great inventions and discoveries. It is the great few who transform society; the multitude follows them. Modern democracy, he believed, has produced millions of fools who vote, other men who go to Parliament and palaver, and, inevitably, the few who act.

TOLSTOI’S INFINITESIMAL ELEMENTS

By contrast, Count Leo Tolstoi asserted that there is no greater fool than he who thinks he makes history and believes others when they assure him he does. Not even a leader like Napoleon Bonaparte, according to Tolstoi, has any part in determining the course of history. Napoleon was the tool of vast social forces beyond his control. “ Studying the laws of history,” Tolstoi declared, “ we must absolutely change the objects of our observation, leaving kings, ministers, and generals out of the account, and select for study the homogenous, infinitesimal elements that regulate the masses.”

Both Carlyle and Tolstoi are representative of long rosters of illustrious writers. Those who share Carlyle’s view of the role played by men of genius tend also to be aristocratic in political viewpoint. Among the most enthusiastic have been men who believed that they themselves were to be among the great of history and that their indomitable wills could overcome all obstacles-Hitler and Mussolini, for example.

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By contrast, those who have agreed with Tolstoi have often been socialists. For socialism, as Marx taught it, was a triumph of the masses over the few, and of irresistible historical tendencies over individual effort-socialism being the irresistible tendency of the modern age. Tolstoi's less specific determinism has also received support from most social and natural scientists, who have hoped that by applying the theory of determinism to all events they may explain history far better than can the biographers of greatness.

LEADERS ARE BOTH UNIQUE AND TYPICAL

Like many other puzzling problems in political science, the conflict between these rival theories dwindles in importance if we ask an appropriate methodological question: Why are we interested in the argument? What do we want to know? First, we want to discover the consequences of the acts of particular men; second, we want to explain the interaction of social forces-economic wants, nationalism, religious beliefs, and so on. If we are to understand the first problem, the peculiar combination of qualities that particular men undeniably possess become objects of serious attention. Men are the actors of politics; some men are more active than others; and the shape and direction of their activities earn them leadership, great or minor. If we are interested in the second problem, the interaction of social forces, the leaders become nameless carriers of influence, instruments of the environment, helpless products of their times. We then select abstractions such as the idea of freedom, or social movements such as the industrial revolution, or indeed any social force in which we are interested, and assess

its contribution to the power of the leader. We see the leader as caused, like all things. He becomes an instrument.

Both kinds of information are valuable. Let us take the study of Napoleon as an example. Clearly he was the product of forces outside his own will. He owed his being to his parents, and was conditioned by his family life. He was, we are told, deeply influenced by his inferiority to the upperclass group at his military school. He was certainly deeply affected by the French Revolution. At the same time, only he had his particular parents, was born at that certain time, had that peculiar relationship to his fellow students at military school, and had many other distinct experiences all to himself.

It would seem, then, that Napoleon-a unique character encountered various deterministic social forces throughout his life. Thus one may study him, like any other event, in his uniqueness, or, also like any other event, as a statistic. But one cannot say that only his uniqueness or only social forces at work upon him are of importance. We must understand both in order to understand Napoleon.

GREAT AND MINOR LEADERS CAN BE STUDIED TOGETHER

What is true of the " great" leaders is true of the minor. No grand principle distinguishes one from the other in political science. A psychological " halo"-to be treated later-surrounds the " great" leader and seems to distinguish him from others. But there is no more reason for thinking a different principle is at work than for thinking that the sound that bursts an eardrum is different in kind from the sound that brings pleasing harmonies to the ear or even from the sound that is not heard at all.

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DANGERS OF OVER EXTENDING THE ANALYSIS OF CHARISMA

Caution is necessary, for charisma may be used to explain too much. Max Weber was careful to state that charisma is often mixed with the traditional kinds of authority, and that charismatic leaders, for all their contempt of rules and regulations, frequently utilized existing channels of ascent. Despite his messianic pretensions, for example, Hitler revered "legality" and sought to cloak many of his most radical acts in the garments of pre-existing law and political order. Jawaharlal Nehru, leader of India after Gandhi, is, by his own words, of uncertain character; though at one moment rational, skeptical, and impatient of the adulation he receives as a "miracle man," he is at another swept into telling himself: "I drew these tides of men into my hands and wrote my will across the sky in stars."

Furthermore, essentially noncharismatic offices may acquire charismatic occupants. For example, thousands of Americans stood in the rain to pay their last respects to the cortege of Abraham Lincoln. Obviously, the meaning of Lincoln to his followers transcended the meaning of his office. He was much more than the President.

Besides, purely charismatic leaders cannot arise anywhere at any time. Charisma, which convinces followers of the leader's miraculous gifts, depends on the followers' receptivity. The mission of the leader must have psychological meaning to the follower. The French Revolution had to precede Napoleon, the Versailles Treaty and the depression, Hitler. Sebastian de Grazia has gathered a variety of evidence on the permanent, lurking, immanent, and transcendent character of charisma in his book on

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the Political Community. Both in tranquility and crisis, he writes, religious and political rulers fulfill a role identical in significant respects with that of the parents and attendants of infancy and childhood. In crisis we find exclamations such as the following about Hitler from the pen of Peter Drucker:

It was not Hitler who made himself a demi-god; it was the masses who pushed him on this pedestal. For only a demon, a superman and magician who can never err and who is always right can resolve the contradiction between the need for a miracle and the impossibility of producing one. Only unquestioning belief in the Fuhrer can give the security of conviction which the masses crave in order to be spared from despair Hitler must be right because otherwise nothing is.

According to De Grazia, charisma is more often present in subdued form. The death of a ruler may reveal that he had charisma for many of his subjects. Thus when George V of England died, a psychoanalyst, Dr. W. R. D. Fairbairn, reported that one patient dreamed that he had shot a man resembling his father, another was exceedingly depressed by memories of his father's death, and a third dreamed that her own father was dead. All three showed aggravated nervous symptoms. Even for the week of crisis before the abdication of Edward VIII in 1936, Professor De Grazia reports signs of public turmoil. " An increase in absenteeism and a spectacular fall in trade were apparent. People seemed to have left off buying, going to the theaters, or attending meetings."

De Grazia has also made a study of how thirty patients under psychoanalysis behaved when Franklin D. Roosevelt died in 1945. The findings are not surprising to those who recall the event, but they are rendered impressive by the objective nature of the materials.

All persons expressed great initial incredulity that the event had actually occurred and some related the unusual measures they had taken to verify the news. Once belief was defined, all persons felt for a time that "the world" had changed. Absence of direction in the environment was a dominant fear. "What will we do?" Another remark was, "What is there to live for now?" Or, "Now we're all alone." The environment was pictured as potentially hostile. "Who will save us now?" Or, "Who's going to save the world? Everything's stopped."

All persons reported abdominally-located sensations and most of them had gastric disturbances. At the news, they said, their stomach knotted or tensed, or their stomach seemed to drop, or they had a sinking feeling. The gastric disturbances were mainly of a diarrhoetic character.