

Great Man Theory and its Implications on Modern Society

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Abstract

The Great Man Theory, articulated in the nineteenth century by Thomas Carlyle, posits that history is shaped by extraordinary individuals endowed with innate leadership traits. This paper examines the theory's foundations, assumptions, and relevance to modern society. It outlines two central claims: that leaders are born with inherent superiority, and that such figures emerge in times of societal need. Through historical illustrations—including figures like Napoleon Bonaparte and Suleiman the Magnificent—the study evaluates whether leadership is intrinsic or socially constructed. The paper critiques the theory's lack of scientific grounding and highlights counterarguments from thinkers such as Herbert Spencer, who emphasized the formative role of social context. It further explores how modern leadership theories challenge the deterministic and elitist assumptions of Carlyle's model. The findings suggest that leadership is not solely a product of innate qualities but emerges through complex interactions between individuals and their socio-cultural environments. Consequently, blind adherence to the Great Man Theory may undermine democratic values and collective societal development in contemporary contexts.

Keywords: Great Man Theory; Leadership; Thomas Carlyle; Social Context; Historical Influence; Leadership Traits; Modern Society; Criticism

Introduction

History is the product of actions, agreements, wars, battles, dialogues, discussions, and deeds of the warriors, rulers, kings, counselors, lords and the leaders. These people have always influenced the course of history and have left the lasting effects on the generation since time immemorial. Hence, a notion has been developed among the historiographers, researchers,

philosophers, readers and writers that history is the great man's narrative in which there lies no room for the unprivileged class and the common masses to have their mention in the most profound sense. The history of subcontinent is equipped with the special mention of births, deeds, rebellions, wars, invasions, throning and dethroning and deaths of all Mughal rulers and their nobles; the history of independent Pakistan begins in the same manner where we hardly find any special mention of the common public save those who won prominence by staging protests and demonstrations against the ruling elites, and in this way, the situation goes alike every nook and corner of the world in terms of history talking of the noble elites of any empire, dynasty, tribe, clan or country.

In this scenario, the historians developed a notion in nineteenth century which they called 'The Great Man Theory'. It is defined by all reliable sources that according to this idea, all noble and great people leave a profound effect on history, and these are the people who possess the immense leadership qualities by birth to rule the people and solve their problems. According to this theory, the great people influence history on basis of their natural talent such as superior intellect, natural instinct of leadership, chivalry, and inspiration (Wikipedia n.d.) The general opinion of this theory states that the great people have dramatic effect on the history of the world, and thus they are prone to problem solving and bringing peace and order in the world.

Great Man Theory: An overview and background

The creation of this theory dates back when a popular idea prevailed which stated that great leaders are born not made. This notion paved way for creation towards 'Great Man Theory', and is considered as the basic tenet for it. In the modern terms, Carlyle (1840) is considered as the founder of this theory who in the series of his lectures entitled '*The Hero and Hero worship*' proposed that the history was the biography of great men. It is further believed that history discusses the ideas, works, deeds and characters of great heroes which are divided into six categories such as hero of divinity, prophet, poet, philosopher, priest and king like Odin, Muhammad (p.b.u.h.), Shakespeare, Rousseau, Martin Luther and Napoleon respectively (Carlyle, 1882, p.2.) Carlyle developed this theory in the period of great unrest and chaos which took place in England before, after and during the period of Industrial Revolution; parliament had become dysfunctional to cure the social ills; the condition of working class worsened; mechanization was considered as an effective tool to suppress human freedom; heavy taxes were imposed on proletariats, and the ideals of honesty and morality were no longer prevailing (Carlyle, 1831) He further clarifies the picture of English society:

The King has virtually abdicated; the Church is a widow, without jointure; public principle is gone; private honesty is going; society, in short, is in fact falling to pieces; and a time of unmixed evil is come on us. (Carlyle, 1843)

In such prevalent evils, Carlyle presented the idea to study deeply the works and deeds of great men in history to know what role they did play for their people. In this way, he proposes the idea to select the great men and follow them to bring about positive change in the society, instead of asking for parliamentary reforms and crying for legislation to protect the rights of working class.

Two Assumptions of Great Men Theory

The theory asserts that great men are the torchbearers of human history and their experiences could be helpful in creating a harmonious society. Based on this, two assumptions of this theory are presented which are given below:

- Great leaders are born possessing certain traits that enable them to rise and lead.
- Great leaders can arise when the need for them is great. (Villanova University, 2021)

If we discuss each of the assumptions separately, we may reach to a substantial conclusion for developing a holistic approach on this theory.

The first assumption presents a notion:

- ❖ Great heroes are great by birth.
- ❖ Great heroes possess intellectual qualities superiority over other common individuals.
- ❖ The qualities within them are the fundamentals to lead, and thus no other social factors contribute to their growth and rise.
- ❖ Such ingenious qualities and attributes enable them to become leaders, and owing to them, they overcome all the problems coming in their way. Besides sooner or later, from any circumstances, they would certainly grow to the position of power and would lead the masses.

The second assumption highlights towards a novel idea on which in the following pages, we would present a sound critique. The second notion seemingly argues that:

- ❖ The great leaders take birth only when the conditions are favorable to their appearance.
- ❖ The great minds take birth only when there is dire need of them.
- ❖ No great minds are created when all is well with the world.

Both assumptions are open to challenge and express their hidden contexts which the historiographers and the critical thinkers can adverse for the human society in its general terms. Due to this reason one wonders how an individual does possess the ingenious qualities without encountering his society. It appears antagonist to the objective sense of an individual to start believing that without contribution of society a person may develop into a great leader, philosopher, poet, and warrior. The interaction of society and experience gained by it can never be overlooked in this. William Shakespeare wrote the wonderful tragedies in the period of great unrest amid to the sentimental loss occurred to him by the death of his blood relatives (Hudson,1999); Napoleon's return to France after his exile in Aleppo and retaking the reigns of country speak of his experience learnt during the exile (Dumas,1844), and Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.)'s successful effort in uniting the scattered and divided Arabs and spread his message beyond the Arabian sands would not have been made possible after the interaction of society and mingling with the people (Haq,1977). This may stand as a rebuttal against the first assumption that the great leaders are born great and they have natural attributes to rule and lead. But in fact what we see that great leaders are the product of society and social influences and social settings and conditions greatly contribute shaping their genius.

Discussion:

The scholars believe that the theory under discussion is not scientifically justified and

therefore it is debated among the scholarly circles whether it owes some place in the wellbeing of society in general sense (Halaychik, 2016). But according to Halaychick (2016), the theory has merits in itself – though not as presented by Carlyle (1843) through his idea of hero worship, but in the different way as related to leadership traits. He argues that the theory identifies the basic set of leadership and heroes as mentioned by the founder by giving the references of six different categories as mentioned above: divine, poet, prophet, philosopher, priest and king. The theory also acts as a cornerstone for developing few more theories from historical perspective for studying the principles of leadership and in that context, the theory has left unmatched impact on history which even the founder has not imagined of. The theory also provides an opportunity for the people to imagine how a leader should be.

The social scientist further comment on this theory that the great men theory presented the earliest opinion about leadership and founding principles to find and judge the leadership qualities among individuals (de vries & Baillargeon, 2015).

According to this theory, there are a number of universal characteristics of personality that determine a leader's effectiveness, without regard to behavior in a given situation. Because leadership is viewed as a set of relatively stable and enduring personal traits or physical properties, specific personality characteristics distinguish effective from ineffective leaders. (de vries & Baillargeon, 2015)

According to Chatman & Goncalo (2001), the great men theorists merely discuss the physical features and intelligence traits of a leader as proposed by the theory's founder. The researchers further discuss that the theory leaves many important questions without answers such as whether the personal qualities are important than the organizational or social setting and why do people follow some people as leaders and not others as having the similar qualities. Here, the writer generally perceive to give importance to the social phenomenon that tremendously shape the leaders and makes others to follow them. It is generally a burning question to ask as despite having the qualities alike, some are considered heroes while others not. In this way, it can be deduced that it is actually social phenomenon behind which fosters and betters the existing attributes of an individual to transform him at the level of leadership in whatsoever form.

According to Rüzgar (2019), the great men theory presents a notion that the leadership qualities are intrinsic in the individuals and owing to this, the people start following their leaders. The author justifies the opinion by referring that Sultan Selim died when there was no match of Ottoman Empire in the Europe; except Hungary all was conquered; the only rival to Ottoman Empire was Germany-Spain; the both wanted to conquer Hungary, and finally it succumbed to the Ottomans. This all would not have been made possible without the leadership qualities of Suleiman, the Magnificent. By presenting this example, the author justifies that it was because of the intrinsic qualities of Suleiman that the empire turned out to be the super power of its time leaving behind the countries like Germany, England, France, Spain, Hungary etc. She believes that Suleiman leaves the unsurpassable effect on all his successors and have gained greater significance than the rest of Ottoman Sultans. She argues that the power and wealth come to any nation by its great man only who possess the in-born attributes.

...the leaders that are considered as “great men”; were rescuers, pioneers, heroes in their times. These leaders emerged in times when it was needed to satisfy needs, which were shaped by social, economic and moral feelings. These leaders, because of their strong characteristics and personalities, showed a superior talent to lead the societies. (Rüzgar (2019)

By this, the writer supports the second assumption of theory which asserts that the great men appear only when there is dire need of them. This notion is presented herein with the special reference of an Ottoman Sultan, Suleiman, the Magnificent.

Criticism on Great Man Theory

For leadership and leadership traits, great men theory is not the only cornerstone and a substantial player to be relied upon. Halaychik (2016) argues that the theory is not scientifically validated and justified. Therefore, it has welcome a lot of heated arguments from the scholarly circles- the psychological and political circles few to name. The author does not accept that without social context and socio-cultural setting and experience can an individual reach to the level of leadership so as so to lead the people through their tragic phase.

The social scientists have also forcefully criticised this theory claiming that it was unscientific and inauthentic to believe (Spencer, 1896). In his book, *The Study of Sociology*, he argues that the leaders are the product of society and social interaction. He believes:

You must admit that the genesis of a great man depends on the long series of complex influences which has produced the race in which he appears, and the social state into which that race has slowly grown. ... Before he can remake his society, his society must make him. (Spencer, 1896)

The researchers believe that there are multiple contemporary theories that exist these days and that the great man theory of Carlyle is not the only source to rely upon, while such theories as named are Transformational leadership, Charismatic personality, Transactional leadership, Ethical leadership, and Empathetic Leadership (Iftikhar et al., 2021).

It is worthy to mention that James (1880) strongly defends the great man theory by discussing that a typical psychological nature of an individual plays a vital role to make a great leader. He opposes the idea of social environment in shaping the overall personality of a great man. He expresses his idea that ‘genetic anomalies’ in great men’s brain are the decisive factor for making them a great leader to be followed by many common individuals. He argues that the great minds are independent of social variations and social settings which in fact play a pivot role for common people. His support mainly lies on psychological and biological tendencies of the great men to justify that they are never the product of society and social conditions. In fact he goes a step farther by arguing that the genius are independent of societal changes afflicting them.

Tolstoy (2010) brings a very unique idea about leadership. He argues that the importance of great leaders is imaginary and further calls them ‘the history’s slaves’.

Implications on modern day society

The Great Man theory chiefly lies upon the notion that for creating a better world, instead of adopting systems- democratic, autocratic, monarchic, aristocratic, or cleric- it is highly

favourable and feasible to select a hero among all six categories and follow their footsteps as how they faced and resolved the challenges coming in their way in their particular pursuits as they are the people who have left undeniable marks on history and have paved way for the creating a better harmonic world by their deeds, decisions, war strategies, agreements, philosophies and writing. History is made because of such men's actions.

But as far as the theory's social implications are concerned, it seems quite unscientific method to answer the existing ills of the society by following the footprints of the sages of ages. Each society has its own limitations; each time has its own requirements; each culture has its own diversities; each society has its typical behaviour; each region has its own peculiar mode of thinking, and each individual works under social and political pressures. In such diversifying nature of people, their societies, geographies, cultures, races, religions, and ethnicities, the concepts of great man theory cannot be applied. A man's ideas can not be implemented on the diverse society's codes, approaches and modes.

Hence it is noticed that leaders are not born but they are the by-product of society. It is the society which moulds someone to be a warrior if such need arises. It is the social contribution when an individual grows to be a statesman because such society is in the mode of negotiation and the constant talks adds much to transform an individual of a particular society to be a statesman or a diplomat. In the similar way, a writer is not by birth a writer, but it is the social and political requirement of the age which contributes such transformation as needed for becoming a writer. The role of society behind the making of heroes can never be overlooked as the social setting provides an opportunity for a common individual to grow and groom to be a hero. There is such a huge thought process and social role to be played. Merely following blindly an individual without knowing the context of his class, society, group etc would further mislead and may cause anarchy in society.

For this reason, it is highly detrimental and instrumental as well to study the living phenomenon of any society along with its modes, perspectives, dimensions, approaches to be analysed and inquired to solve the prevailing problems and enriching the usefulness of individuals for their positive contribution towards the general well-being of the society.

Conclusion:

Great Man Theory has remained the cornerstone in human beings social, political and socio-psychological processes in 19th century and has influenced the large circle of social and political thinkers and philosophers as the prevalent situations of then England favoured the concept. Later vocal criticism was also witnessed on this theory. As far as its social application is concerned, it fails to contribute for the general good of common masses as it cannot be applied in the modern perspective where democracy and human rights ideals have taken the firm roots, and the glaring mistakes of the selected heroes can be surfaced in the age of electronic media.

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