

Should History focus on the movers and shakers?

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, historians typically focused on 'movers and shakers'. Contemporary subjects included Napoleon Bonaparte and Winston Churchill, but as shown by the extensive collection of writings on figures such as King Henry VIII or Queen Boudica, interest in influential people spanned millennia. In an attempt to explain history, Thomas Carlyle's 'Great man theory' reasons that 'the history of the world is but the biography of great men'¹, with their decisions, works or ideas having turned its path. Carlyle highlights six types of 'hero': the hero in divinity, as a prophet, a poet, a priest, a writer or a king and it is under these headings that one could define a 'mover and shaker'. Yet, this theory doesn't evoke greater understanding of the forces that shaped these men; the movements and undercurrents which brought them to prominence and enabled them to act. Studying their actions alone illuminates just the surface of events, perhaps creating a superficial interpretation. A modern wave of historical revisionism has begun to change opinions on the most revealing way to study historical events. Due to access to new evidence; leaps in science; nationalism and even changes in 'fashionable' opinions, historians are able to re-evaluate the roles of people, groups and wider factors on the historical record. By drawing on examples including Martin Luther, the French Revolution, Lenin and the Russian Revolution, this essay will explain and justify the importance of a holistic view on historical events, without sole focus on the 'movers and shakers'.

By focusing on the 'mover and shaker' alone, an historian is able to remark upon their significance over a period of time and perhaps draw comparisons to the 'movers and shakers' of today. Yet with this view, an historian would lose the overall picture which could change their whole perception on this period. A significant individual under Carlyle's classification is the priest, Martin Luther, the figurehead of the 16th century reformation. The Lutheran denomination of Protestantism is still widely followed today, almost five centuries after his death, with over 65 million members worldwide and his most emphatic teaching *sola fide* (faith is the only path to salvation) at its centre. On the 31st October 1517, Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg Castle church, making waves in the early modern Holy Roman Empire. By 1520, with the aid of the printing press, there were 300,000 Lutheran items in circulation and by 1521, having grasped the attention of the most prominent man in Christendom, the Pope, Luther's contemporary prominence seems to be undeniable.

However, the extent of Luther's reach is debatable as historians need to look beyond the man at the top, before making assumptions. This can only be done by trying to uncover the realities of 'belief' at grass roots level. Despite a quarter of secular princes adopting Lutheranism in their states within ten years, there is weighty evidence showing the lack of Lutheran practice among commoners, who made up the majority of their populations. Although John the Steadfast of Saxony was one of Luther's most unwavering supporters, the 1529 Visitation to the district of Schweinitz in Saxony admits that 'the peasants here neither pray, nor believe, nor know the Ten Commandments properly' and the pastor in the village *Holzendorf* 'complains that the effort he makes in preaching is despised by the people'². While on the surface, Luther seems to hold great significance, the complete lack of understanding among ordinary people evidently suggests that Luther had 'moved and shaken' rather less than it seemed. Furthermore, by looking at the context in which Luther was working, there is clear evidence for the impact of a wide range of people. Humanism preceded Luther; writers such as Desiderius Erasmus from this intellectual movement founded on classical texts and language, inspired Luther's teachings on *ad fontes* (back to the sources) and *sola scriptura* (the reliance of scripture alone). Moreover, the Holy Roman Empire's anticlerical climate was particularly prominent in the early 1500s and greatest among ordinary townspeople who were dissatisfied by the absenteeism, pluralism and nepotism of unsuitable parish clergy. This attitude towards the Catholic Church created an eager environment in which Luther's bright hopes for reform were able to thrive. Without this intellectual inspiration and popular dissatisfaction of those around, before or below him, it is unlikely that Luther's reformation would have taken hold as it did. So, by widening their perspective on this period and stepping back from a sole focus on movers and shakers, historians are instead able to capture a more detailed

¹ Thomas Carlyle, (1840) "The Hero as Divinity", *Heroes and Hero-Worship*.

² Dr Alison Gundy, Hilary Brash, Adam Kidson, (2015) *Religion and State in Early Modern Europe*, p232, Source 16

picture of the Reformation and obtain deeper understanding to how it came about and was received in the 16th century.

Marxist 'historical materialism'³ focuses on movements and trends in a wider sense. Marx himself wrote that it is the 'social existence' of men which 'determines the general character of the social, political and intellectual processes of life.'⁴ Effectively, he chooses to understand history by studying the actions and feelings of the masses through class conflict. British Marxist, E. P. Thompson, discusses the social history of England, criticising how the legacy of the working class seems to appear only through the prism of the educated rich. In his own words, this 'enormous condescension of posterity'⁵ was present due to the oversight of historians who had solely relied on the voices of the upper class. The authority of both intellectuals substantiates the on-going argument against the focus on the movers and shakers in history. Marxist historians also supported the methodology of 'history from below'⁶ which encapsulates the points of view of otherwise forgotten outsiders or groups such as women, workers or those who have been colonised. This 'bottom-up' focus is the idea that history is driven by the daily lives of ordinary people, be it the information passed through word of mouth or their power as a collective to initiate change or maintain continuity. By raising the issue of a 'people's history' the Marxist methodology at the very least brings attention to people who rarely become 'movers and shakers' but retain their right to be heard and gain a sense of identity and heritage through the broader context of their periods in history.

To study the French Revolution through a focus on 'movers and shakers' alone is simply impossible. Instead, Marxist interpretations of the same event emphasise the importance of 'history from below', a phrase which is interestingly accredited to the French historian Lucien Febvre⁷. Social causes include class conflict in the peasants' struggle to abolish the feudal system and the attack on the *ancien régime* in France⁸. Marxists argue that it was the *Grande Peur* (great fear), a period of peasantry panic and riot which sparked the rising against the king's 'aristocratic conspiracy'⁹. This is reinforced by Georges Lefebvre who stated that 'The revolution is only the crown of a long economic and social evolution which has made the bourgeoisie the mistress of the world'.¹⁰ The Age of Enlightenment in 18th century France also provides evidence of 'history from below'; the army of underground writers and publishers sent a wave of propaganda into the climate of desire for egalitarianism. Contrastingly, the French Revolution was also influenced by the privileged classes. In the *ancien régime*, the First Estate (the Church) was even richer than nobility whilst also holding 'almost half the real estate of France'¹¹. The nobility (the Second Estate) were exempt from many taxes or paid so little that it didn't hurt them anyway. Therefore, their provocation of the poor proves the Marxist opinion of dispute among the classes and 'histoire des masses'. The overall creation of a secular and democratic republic – *politics from below*, if you will – disregards one singular influencer and by looking to focus on such a person, an historian could in turn, disregard this momentous period in French history. The French revolution also held a key role in almost every revolutionary movement that it preceded and in particular, the 1917 Russian Revolution in which the rebels used French phrases including '*liberté, fraternité, égalité ou la mort*' meaning 'freedom, brotherhood, equality or death'. Additionally, current French politics still feel the effects of the Revolution with focus on the abolition of the privileges of noble birth and the establishment of the ideal of equality. Therefore, it is clear that this revolution, driven ultimately by low-class "powerless" forces, holds centuries-worth of importance – all of which would be forgotten should history focus on the 'movers and shakers'.

³ Encyclopaedia Britannica

⁴ Karl Marx (1859) *Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy)

⁵ E. P. Thompson (1963) *The Making of the Working Class*

⁶ Friedrich Engels (1870) *Der deutsche Bauernkrieg* (The German Peasant's War)

⁷ In 1932 in his praise of Albert Mathiez for telling the "histoire des masses et non de vedettes" (history of the masses and not of starlets)

⁸ Gwynne Lewis (1999) *The French Revolution – Rethinking the Debate*, p74

⁹ Encyclopaedia Britannica

¹⁰ Georges Lefebvre (1957) *The Coming of the French Revolution*

¹¹ Claude Manceron (1987) *Blood of Bastille*, p309

In explaining the Russian Revolution, Soviet historians tended to emphasise the Cult of Lenin in writings now categorised as 'hagiography' – the promotion of the subject as a hero to be worshipped or to the status of a god-like figure. Lenin clearly qualifies as one of Carlyle's 'Great men' in a kingly or divine manner and hence a significant example of a mover and shaker. However, Marxist writers would argue that Lenin didn't initiate the revolution on his own and instead seized the movement created by class conflict as predicted by Marxist theory. In fact, to gain the most complete image of the revolution and develop an informed opinion on it, an historian shouldn't rely on just contemporary sources depicting a great 'mover and shaker' or on biased writings emphasising 'history from below'. Instead, the broader the investigation, the better. The Russian Revolution has been perceived by modern historians under three schools of thought: The Liberal School, the Libertarian School and the Revisionist School with separate points of view on the extent of the roles of the mover and shaker (Lenin) or the 'revolution from below' (industrial workers and peasants). The Liberal School agrees with the Soviet-pushed interpretation; in his *History of Russia*, P. Miliukov¹² focuses on Lenin's personal political influence as opposed to wider social and economic developments. Trotsky also famously called Lenin 'the greatest engine-driver of the Revolution' due to his ability to put proletariat desires into practice after his decision to seize power for the Bolsheviks in October 1917. The Libertarian School concurs to a point: M. Brinton argued that the Bolshevik party was based on a class of 'intellectual workers', emphasising the relationship between Lenin the individual and his work with social groups. Together, they arguably epitomise the significance of historical focus on movers and shakers; without a powerful person to initiate events, the revolution might not have happened. However, the Revisionist School highlights 'revolution from below'. As with Luther, by looking at the context in which he operated, Lenin's role becomes increasingly small. B. Williams¹³, S. Fitzpatrick¹⁴ and R. Service¹⁵ are the forerunners of this way of thinking and their books encapsulate the impacts of societal trends and developments on Lenin's leadership. With the First World War looking increasingly bleaker for Tsarist Russia, popular support for Nicholas II and his wife dwindled among the middle and upper classes. Additionally, the inflation of food and fuel prices due to the harsh winter of 1916, meant the impoverished and malnourished lower classes were keen for a new regime. Even though he evidently dreamed-up revolutionary ideas and held significant power, it was a nationwide climate of dissatisfaction created the united force for rebellion. Furthermore, the biased idea that Lenin masterminded the revolution with theories of a huge lower-class subscription is relatively ridiculous as the biggest distributor of Lenin's ideas was the Bolshevik *Pravda* newspaper which only circulated to about 100,000 people, less than 0.1% of the country's population. Consequently, a sole focus on Lenin, the 'mover and shaker' of early 20th century Russia, would clearly result in an inherently biased picture with incorrect understanding of scale and context.

In conclusion, the importance of a holistic approach to the study of historical events is paramount. History is more complex than just 'top down' or 'bottom up'. In the case of Desiderius Erasmus, it could be argued that common feelings provoked his writing, yet his writing also provoked them further be it directly or through another 'mover and shaker' such as Martin Luther. There is unmistakable interplay between 'movers and shakers' and 'the people' so neither should be regarded in isolation. Although sole focus on these powerful individuals can be interesting, it is an old fashioned and superficial way to evaluate entire historical periods especially considering the lack of a single case where it can be definitively concluded that a 'mover and shaker' alone, made significant change. The modern approach to history has been democratised, recognising that everyone has a history, not just the 'great men'¹⁶. The study of history is all the better for abandoning sole focus on 'movers and shakers'.

¹² P. Miliukov (1932) *History of Russia*

¹³ B. Williams (1982) *The Russian Revolution 1917-1921*

¹⁴ S. Fitzpatrick (1982) *The Russian Revolution*

¹⁵ R. Service, *The Russian Revolution 1900-1917* (1986). *Lenin: A Political Life* (3 volumes 1990s)

¹⁶ Thomas Carlyle, (1840) "The Hero as Divinity", *Heroes and Hero-Worship*.

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