

‘Should History Focus On The Movers And Shakers?’ Discuss.

How should history be told? Cambridge Dictionary claims that history is “the study of, or a record of, past events considered together”¹ — a definition which, unfortunately, provides little guidance for *how* exactly one should write about such historical events. Fifth-century BC Greek contemporaries Herodotus and Thucydides, the Founders of History,² held opposing ideas about history’s purpose. One regurgitated others’ accounts without evaluating their legitimacy, believing readers had to draw their own conclusions, whereas the other focused on war, using dates and other *facts* to establish an objective outlook on history. Since then, historians have relentlessly and unsuccessfully searched for the ‘correct’ method, with the various schools of history founded over the centuries serving as proof of this continual change in opinion. The particular belief in history as one of *movers and shakers* — that is “people with a lot of power and influence”³ though the 1873 poem, ‘Ode,’ from which the phrase originated, suggested no such definition — has been an ideological foundation of many movements as well as distinctly absent from others.

In 1840, thirty-three years before ‘Ode’ was published, a Scottish philosopher and essayist called Thomas Carlyle published a series of lectures, under the title of ‘*On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History*,’ which gave birth to the Great Man Theory. Dominating nineteenth-century historical thought, the seminal work can be summarised best by Carlyle himself: “the History of the world is but the Biography of great men.”⁴

Across six lectures, Carlyle suggested that special men exist throughout history, each the “indispensable saviour of his epoch”⁵ for how he changes the world around himself —

¹ Cambridge Dictionary

² Theophrastus, Greek philosopher

³ Cambridge Dictionary

⁴ T. Carlyle, ‘On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History,’ Lecture I

⁵ *ibid.*, I

specifically, it is his ability to move and shake history from its normal path, have power over the natural progression of events, that distinguishes him from ordinary folk. Although the modern definition of movers and shakers requires only that people possess power or influence and nothing more, Carlyle elaborated upon his idea of great men by claiming each hero's large historical impact should be partly attributed to divine intervention — that is to say, regardless of their religion, each is “a wise, gifted, noble-hearted man”⁶ who acts out God's will. Carlyle's theory enjoyed immense popularity not only during his lifetime but also for decades afterwards: best exemplified in the predominance of lengthy biographies about notable individuals in the ‘*Encyclopædia Britannica*’ until as late as the Eleventh Edition, published in 1911.⁷ Carlyle's view that individuals wielded decisive influence over history was supported by many historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries — in 1913, Frederick Adams Woods published an investigation into the relationship between rulers and economic success in fourteen European nations from the twelfth-century to the eighteenth-century — he “frequently [found] that under strong [leaders] the country flourished in almost every way.”⁸

However, Carlyle's model of history has come under criticism as great as the historian's heroes themselves.

Herbert Spencer, an English philosopher, sociologist, anthropologist, and classical liberal political theorist, criticised Carlyle's theory as “vagueness,”⁹ borne more out of humankind's “universal love of personalities”¹⁰ than of true scholarly thinking. An active writer of the late nineteenth-century, Spencer was one of the key members of this period's intense discourse between new scientific schools — which rose in popularity during the 1870s following Western societies' acceptance of evolution — and established individualist schools: Great Man Theorists and Whig historians. After reading Darwin's ‘*On the Origin of Species*,’ Spencer coined the term ‘survival of the fittest’¹¹ to make history seem more

⁶ T. Carlyle, ‘On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History,’ Lecture I

⁷ ‘*Encyclopædia Britannica* Eleventh Edition’

⁸ F. A. Woods, ‘The influence of monarchs; steps in a new science of history,’ pp. 10

⁹ H. Spencer, ‘The Study of Sociology,’ pp. 28

¹⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 28

¹¹ H. Spencer, ‘Principles of Biology,’ vol. 1, p. 444

scientific. A traditional historian might disregard Spencer's tentative historical determinist theory as simply a manifestation of his long-held desire to establish a universality of natural law¹² but *bias* appears too frequently within all historians, as shall soon be illustrated, for Spencer's work to justifiably be discredited by this. Regardless, Spencer summarised the root of his dismissal of the possibility that history should be focused on movers and shakers when he claimed that, "before [a great man] can remake his society, his society must make him."¹³ Spencer, as well as some historical determinists, proposed that, in order to accurately record history as a logical progression of past facts, one must trace every event's train of causation through the people making decisions to the environmental influences which forged the behaviour of those involved individuals themselves.

Most notable schools of thought are similar to either Carlyle or Spencer — and sometimes both as seen with their predecessor Hegel and his providentialist belief in intangible *Geists* (*Weltgeists*, or World-Spirits; *Volksgeists*, or National-Spirits; and *Zeitgeists*, or Spirits-Of-The-Age) controlling history. In '*Lectures on the Philosophy of History*,' Hegel acknowledged the impact of individuals before Carlyle but, instead of crediting divine blessing and natural talent, he presented a theory reminiscent of historical determinism — Hegel believed that intangible World-Spirits guided people to make their decisions and thus made the path of humanity inevitable.¹⁴

Europe was not the only region with a diversity of historical styles. The first true history of China, the '*Spring and Autumn Annals*,' catalogued every main event that had occurred over a 241 year period exclusively within the vassal state of Lu. Each entry averaged around ten characters because the historian provided little narrative voice¹⁵; a stark comparison would be Guo Moruo — a historian, writer, and Maoist propagandist — whose operas featured elaborate speeches and songs as well as Chinese historical figures reframed using Marxist ideologies¹⁶. In 1980, Chi-ming Hou and Tzong-shian Yu compiled

¹² D. Duncan, 'Life and Letters of Herbert Spencer,' pp. 537

¹³ H. Spencer, 'The Study of Sociology,' pp. 29

¹⁴ "Universal History belongs to the realm of (*Geist*) Spirit" — G. Hegel, 'Lectures on the Philosophy of History,' (1857 Translation) vol, 1, pp. 17

¹⁵ E. Wilkinson, 'Chinese History: A New Manual,' (2012 Edition) pp. 612

¹⁶ "In the area of historical drama, Guo Morou has done excellent work" — M. Zedong, 'Letter to Yang Shaoxuan and Qi Yanming' (January 9, 1944)

presentations from a 1977 Taiwanese conference in the *'Modern Chinese Economic History'* — each essay had the intention of “further[ing] the development of Chinese economy history”¹⁷ by examining Chinese history in quantitative manners.

At this point, one might begin to observe something peculiar about the historiography discussed thus far: it is best introduced in the words of Carl L. Becker, a New American historian; “We must have a past that is the product of all the present.”¹⁸

Becker expressed a doubt that historical truth, as in the recounting of *history* by scholars, could ever truly overlap with factual truth, that is, the actual progression of past events. In a review¹⁹ of historian G.P. Gooch’s work, he stated that to “suppos[e] that the past can be known in some ultimately true and final manner” was “naïve.” Becker first explored the concept of historical relativism in his 1910 essay, *'Detachments'* and then later, in depth, in his much-acclaimed 1931 address to the American Historical Associations (AHA), *'Everyman His Own Historian.'*

At the AHA, Becker described history as “an imaginative creation, a personal possession which each one of us, Mr. Everyman, fashions out of his individual experience, adapts to his practical or emotional needs, and adorns as well as may be to suit his aesthetic tastes.”²⁰ Becker proposed that history’s purpose — and therefore the way in which it should be, or more accurately *is*, told — is forever changing because everyone has a different use for the subject. As time passes, old ideas die out with their inventors and new concepts emerge with the births of more people; each school of history posits its historical truth as correct despite factual truth being unattainable because they judge their theories in relation to present values. Due to his great admiration for Enlightenment thinkers as well as liberal democracy itself, Becker was unable “to commit fully and loudly to [the] nihilistic relativism”²¹ to which he was led after realising historians could never be objectively correct. Later, Becker found his relativist work “especially loathsome [...] in the

¹⁷ *'Modern Chinese Economic History: Proceedings of the Conference on Modern Chinese Economic History'* pp. 640

¹⁸ C. Becker, *'Detachment and the Writing of History,'* pp. 13

¹⁹ C. Becker, *Review of 'History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century,'* pp. 209

²⁰ C. Becker, *'Everyman His Own Historian,'* Section II

²¹ M. Griffes, *'The Origin and Development of Carl Becker's Historiography,'* pp. 101

face of the revisionist, nationalist mythologies being employed by”²² twentieth-century European dictators to oppress millions of people.

However, as fearful as one may be of the repercussions of relativism, the earlier examination of the great change in historiographical schools’ values makes the truth of Becker’s words undeniable and thus invaluable for reaching a conclusion on how history should be told. The changes described thus far have come about because each new historian, intentionally or not, imprints their beliefs about history’s purpose onto their work as soon as they begin to write and human societies continue to develop ideologically.

Herodotus claimed history’s *raison d’être* was “to prevent the traces of human events from being erased by time, and to preserve the fame of the important and remarkable achievements produced by both Greeks and non-Greeks.”²³ One may reasonably assume that this view of history as a tool for preserving a record of general achievements came about because of Ancient Greek society’s reverence²⁴ for the Olympics which were a tool for immortalising mankind’s physical accomplishments. Many centuries later, in the eighteenth-century, “Voltaire recast historiography in both factual and analytical terms.”²⁵ But, as Thomas Carlyle points out, “Voltaire read history [...] through a pair of mere anti-catholic spectacles;”²⁶ Voltaire spent his whole life advocating for the weakening of the church and his histories were not excepted. Voltaire’s bias could be considered both a product of personal experiences and his society’s rising anti-clerical sentiments. When searching for even greater evidence of history’s purpose being nothing more than relative to the present, one would need look no further than the recent rise of Environmental history in the United States following the environment movements of the ‘60s and ‘70s. As a methodology, it has retained popularity thanks to what Alan MacEachern called, “the field’s tendency to relate to present-day environmental concerns.”²⁷

²² M. Griffes, ‘The Origin and Development of Carl Becker’s Historiography,’ pp 101

²³ Herodotus, ‘The Histories,’ (2008 Translation)

²⁴ “[the] games were esteemed sacred, and ranked above all others” — Strabo, ‘Geography,’ (1903 Translation) Book VIII, Chapter III, Section 30

²⁵ G. de Syon, ‘Voltaire,’ pp. 1270

²⁶ T. Carlyle through J. Lord, ‘Beacon Lights of History,’ pp. 207

²⁷ A. MacEachern, ‘Method & Meaning in Canadian Environmental History,’ pp. xii

Despite new schools being established every few decades as the values responsible for affecting the view of history's relative purpose continue to evolve, Carlyle's original theory has not been eradicated with Sydney Hook being an outspoken modern supporter²⁸. Lacking a singular model of history which is invulnerable against criticism, historians will not be able to settle their debate over movers and shakers. And so, I am going to argue for the adoption of a new model which shall incorporate previous schools.

Much as domains are set above kingdoms in biological taxonomy, there may exist a theory that will sit above most, if not all, schools of history — thus reconciling the various factions and providing a new way forward for historians. All schools have presented their own thesis and there always appear to be exceptions to each one's proposals which prevent their pre-eminence. For instance, *nouvelle histoire* reaches its limits when applied to the ancient world because so much material from this period has been destroyed and followers of this school can only arrive at objective conclusions about people's motivations and events' causations by using a significant amount of documentation.

Given that established schools are unable to prove their singular righteousness due to relative purpose and seemingly unavoidable application flaws, I would like to suggest my own unifying and over-arching hypothesis — depending what one is writing their history on, one should follow different schools.

Although it has been introduced using biology classification, this theory was primarily inspired by Quantum and Newtonian physics — particularly, the idea that each possesses distinct laws that prevent their reconciliation yet both are accepted as a part of the greater subject of physics.

This theory's first tenet is that power controls history. Now, this power can belong to anything as well as nothing, existing instead intangibly like a market mechanism or natural phenomena — regardless, power alone can impact the world, forcing something on Earth to change enough for history to take note.

The second tenet is that power has been allocated in different ways across time and space. Autocracies, such as the Russian empire, are designed to vest all the power the nation possesses legally with one person. By contrast, democracies such as ancient Athens provided all citizens with some power of governance. Monopolistic markets allow single

²⁸ S. Hook, 'The Hero in History. A Study in Limitation and Possibility,' pp. 116

firms to wield both great power and influence. The existence of these systems (on a domestic or international scale and in a political, social, or other sense) throughout history and their different methods of dividing their total available power seems undeniable.

And so, it is my proposition, having accepted these two principles, that histories should be written differently depending upon the division of power in that place and time. For instance, in an autocracy, everyone is powerless save the one who holds total power — it is their relative dominance that provide autocrats with the greatest opportunity of influencing history. In such cases, an individualist school of history might be most appropriate. No one person in a liberal democracy will ever achieve absolute power, and therefore, a consideration of social, economic, and political forces would be more suitable. There are also cases where natural phenomena harbouring ungovernable power can override even the most disproportionately powerful individual within a system — i.e. the Black Death in the fourteenth-century, and potentially the coronavirus today.

In conclusion, I believe historians should incorporate the movers and shakers model into their works where relevant — that is, more often when evaluating areas and periods of history in which power is heavily concentrated. This should not exclude consideration of other factors. However, when power appears diluted within a system, historians should focus less on individuals and more on social, economic, political, and environmental forces.

2,457 Words

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