

Which has a bigger effect on history: the plans of the powerful or their mistakes

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On the 30th of September 1938, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain landed in Britain following tense negotiations with Hitler. The future of the Sudetenland, Czechoslovakia, and all of Europe hung in the balance. After disembarking from his plane, Chamberlain declared to a breathless crowd that he had secured “peace in our time”. He was met with thunderous applause. Yet in less than a year, it was the thunder of rifles and mortars that roared across Czechoslovakia, marking the start of the bloodiest conflict in human history.

Chamberlain did nothing wrong. He had followed Britain’s traditional policy of appeasement towards tyrants while seeking to avoid an unpopular war that Britain was ill-equipped to fight. But what Chamberlain didn’t understand was that the Second World War was more than the demands of a shrieking Führer. This war was conceived in the sodden trenches of the first, birthed by the humiliating terms of the Treaty Versailles, and fed on the terror and bleakness caused by the Great Depression. Like so many other leaders in history, Chamberlain and his plans of peace had become a victim to the “vast, impersonal forces” that ultimately shape our world.

This essay will take a counterfactual approach towards history, meaning it acknowledges the agency of individuals when making decisions in history. However, rather than viewing history through the lens of the Great Man theory, this essay will emphasize the importance of greater social movements in the formation of history. Although these approaches seem contradictory, it is rare for the plans of the powerful to align, by intention or accident, with the greater social movements to have any meaningful impact on history. Far more common is the triumph of greater social movements regardless of the plans of the powerful, resulting in what we view as “mistakes”. Therefore this essay will prove that the mistakes of the powerful have a bigger effect on history than their plans.

The premise of the counterfactual approach is that rather than a predestined sequence of events, history is the product of decisions made by individuals acting in their best interest, often unaware of the greater consequences. It is important to remember that the powerful are still human beings. Although raised above the common people by military power, politics and wealth, the powerful remain victim to their emotions, trapped by their values and most importantly limited by the scope of contemporary knowledge. In 1889, Charles H. Duell, Commissioner of the United States Patent Office was quoted as having stated “everything that can be invented has been invented”. He was disproven fourteen years later by the invention of the airplane. Every generation likes to believe they have reached the summit of human knowledge; that mankind can progress no further. As a result, deliberately-made plans are rarely capable of expanding human knowledge, as they are trapped within the parameters of existing human knowledge. Mistakes such as Doctor Alexander Fleming discovering penicillin, Christopher Columbus landing in America and *Homo erectus* wandering from the

African continent show that innovation resulting in the progression of humanity is usually stumbled upon unwittingly.

The powerful are also rarely capable of fully comprehending the socioeconomic systems they are dealing with. This is a key argument made by Friedrich Hayek in *The Road to Serfdom*. He argues against state interference in markets, as the changing prices represent “the intentions of millions of market participants”. Therefore no individual has a mind complex enough to make rational decisions on behalf of the economy. This is demonstrated throughout history by the many failed attempts of government intervention to improve the economy. An example is the Weimar Republic’s plan in 1923 to pay striking workers by printing more money, resulting in a hyperinflationary crisis that engulfed the German economy and ultimately planted the seeds for the rise of Hitler.

Such disastrous examples of misunderstanding are not only relegated to the history of economics. Modern history is an unmarked graveyard of colonial failures; the result of poor plans made by powerful men out of their depth. The partition of India, described by Winston Churchill as “a shameful flight”, resulted in carnage that led to 14 million displaced, more than a million dead, and bitter wounds between India and Pakistan that have yet to heal today. This was the result of Lord Mountbatten not attempting to understand the “social, societal and religious complexities of the Indian subcontinent”; instead he employed a barrister who had never been to India to draw a line on a map to divide 390 million people. Similar was the carving up of Africa at the Berlin Conference in 1885, where the trade routes, ethnic groups and traditional boundaries of an entire continent were cut into neat shapes to represent the ambitions of 15 nations. Historian Olyami Akinwumi believes that the crises that afflict Africa today can be traced back to the divisions made at this conference. Despite their consequences, all of these examples were plans “successfully” implemented so they cannot be viewed as mistakes. Failure by the powerful to understand socioeconomic systems often results in their plans opposing the greater social movements of the time. Such attempts by the powerful to exert their will upon the world lead mostly to failure. In the rare cases of the contrary, the prior examples demonstrate the catastrophic and often unforeseen consequences of “success”.

In this essay, it is also important to examine the role of the powerful. The Great Man theory has long been discredited by historians who have come to prefer the theory of “vast, impersonal forces” shaping history to the “great men” immortalised in biographies and children’s history books. This is not to reject the role of the powerful in history. A further distinction must be made between those who are powerful and those who achieve with their power. The greatest of the latter group are extraordinary figures such as Jesus, Napoleon and Shakespeare, who have undoubtedly left their thumbprints upon the annals of history.

However most of the powerful in history are not on par with Jesus, Napoleon or Shakespeare; they were merely responsible for enabling the same greater social movements that raised themselves into power. The concept of a greater social movement is hard to define; it can be vaguely described as forces that represent the unconscious will of society, similar to how the changing prices of the markets represent the unconscious will of millions. Such is the power of these forces that often without being enabled by the powerful, they will happen regardless. As a result, the powerful seem as replaceable as the everyman in history. But this is a misrepresentation of history.

As Will Durant argued in *The Lessons of History*, “(the great man) grows out of his time and land, and is the product and symbol of events as well as their agent and voice”. The talents of great men are amplified to an extraordinary level in situations that require their need. A modern analogy of the relationship between great men and greater social movements is the relationship between politicians and the populace in democratic nations. The politician relies on the people for his power; he requires their votes therefore he chooses policies that reflect their opinions. Yet the most skilled politician, like the greatest man in history, is capable of influencing the beliefs and values of his voters through powerful rhetoric and shrewd campaigning.

The way that greater social movements amplify the role of great men is the same way that mistakes become mankind’s greatest achievements. The mistakes of the powerful greatly outnumber their successful plans. Most of these mistakes had minor effect relegated to a few generations, before being lost forever to history. Yet some mistakes have changed our world. Take the previously mentioned example of penicillin. Its accidental discovery in the early 20th Century coincided with a time when it was desperately needed: a time when cities were getting dirtier, wars were getting bloodier, and infections were getting deadlier, yet a minor infection could still be lethal. Imagine if penicillin had been discovered five hundred years earlier in Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztecs, whose population had no need for such a cure. Rather than saving 200 million lives, penicillin would have been just another patch of mold, as forgettable as the billions of other patches of mold that have existed throughout history. The surviving mistakes are the greatest mistakes.

It is impossible to ignore the role of the truly great man in history. The lessons of Jesus, the campaigns of Napoleon, and the plays of Shakespeare; the rare success are the stories we remember, recite and seek to emulate. However, without the support of greater social movements, most “great men” are reduced to the short-sighted, weak-willed creatures that humans are; barely able to plan past tomorrow, let alone affect history. Their mistakes that accidentally stumble upon innovation have shaped history far more than their “most innovative” plans. Yet it is a terrifying thought to think of history as a great abyss, churning with “vast, impersonal forces”. Therefore we seek to find sense in the madness, to find comfort in the belief that history is shaped by the plans and mistakes of “great men”. It puts us at ease with our powerlessness to affect the grand motion of history. All while failing to realise that most of these “great men” are just as powerless as us.

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