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THE GREAT MAN VERSUS SOCIAL FORCES

WILLIAM FIELDING OGBURN

A QUESTION of long standing in sociology is the relative influence of the individual in social change. How important is the great man in history, how important is genius in science and invention, how important the outstanding personality in religion and art and leadership in social movements? The traditional point of view has been to attribute much importance to the great individual in all those achievements and social processes. However with the rise of the idea of determinism as against the freedom of the will, of economic history in contrast to the exploits of kings and military chieftains, and of the studies of the relation of the group to the individual, the importance of other factors in history than that of the individual has been more and more appreciated. The purpose of the following paper is to add to the analysis of this ever interesting question some ideas coming from recent researches in sociology, psychology and statistics.

The analysis of this problem is often confused by the mixing of two different conceptions of greatness, the greatness that is attributable to heredity and the greatness of the developed personality which is the product of both environment and heredity. For instance, if one wishes to inquire as to, say, Abraham Lincoln's influence as a great man on the course of history, one may not be particularly interested in dissecting Lincoln into two parts, heredity and environment. But if one wishes to contrast Lincoln as a great man with the social forces of his times, one must remember that Lincoln, the adult man, represents a part of the social forces (since they helped to produce him) with which it is desired to contrast him. And the fact that Lincoln differed from other men of his times cannot wholly be attributed to heredity since the forces of the environment do not play upon all in the same degree and manner. Our need then, in order to make the analysis of the general problem sharp is to consider the greatness which is attributable to heredity. And the first task is to learn something of the frequency of the hereditary elements of greatness.

A most interesting fact about living organisms is that when a particular trait of a random number of living organisms of the same species is measured, it is found to be distributed according to the normal probability curve. Measurement in psychology also indicates that mental traits, like such physical traits as height and stature, fall into frequency distributions of the same general shape as the normal probability curve. This distribution seems to be true not only for simple mental traits but also for combinations and complexes of traits, such as logical reasoning and even general mental ability. It seems probable therefore that such traits as inventive ability or any particular combination of traits of greatness would also be similarly distributed. We therefore think that the biological bases of the different kinds of greatness occur in the normal probability curve of frequencies.

The significance of such a distribution is that we are enabled to form an idea of how frequently a particular degree, of mental ability, such as greatness, may be expected to occur. For, in a normal probability frequency area, three times the standard deviation on each side of the point of the arithmetic mean on the base line is considered as practically the limits

of the distribution. And, such being the case, if a biological trait of greatness were measured on a line from the least to the greatest, then the greatness represented by the upper tenth of the line would be possessed by about 1.5 per cent of the population, that is about 1,500 out of 100,000 on the average. And the greatness represented by the upper quarter of the line would be possessed by about 13,000 out of 100,000.

It would appear from the foregoing that high order of greatness in so far as they are biologically determined are fairly plentiful. That is, the potentialities of greatness are common. One may, however, guess that greatness is a biological mutation, in which case, without the range of normal variations and hence rare. But mutations are probably so rare, indeed, judging from the extensive observations for mutations on *drosophila*, that the great in human society could in general hardly be biological mutations.

Furthermore, the biological elements of greatness are probably not only plentiful but fairly constant over time. For race is notably stable; and in large civilized groups selection probably operates on large numbers of persons. We should therefore certainly expect constancy within the short space of a few centuries. It is important to consider the point of variation, for our understanding of cause, such as we work with practically in science, is that it is only the phenomena that vary that we term causes. Then if inherited abilities of a high order are probably fairly constant and plentiful in very large groups of civilized peoples, it seems questionable whether one is right in attributing so much weight to inherited greatness as a cause of progress and also in explaining the absence of achievement to the scarcity of inherited abilities.

Yet all of us who have studied history or observed social movements have felt the scarcity and need of great men, of great leaders. Does not this observed rarity of great men invalidate the somewhat theoretical arguments of the preceding statements? This apparent discrepancy is partly due to confusing the two conceptions of greatness, commented on previously, the inherited bases of greatness and the great man as a developed personality. The latter, great man of history, with developed personalities, are, it will be claimed later, more likely to vary and hence be scarce, than the inherited elements of greatness which, alone, have just been under consideration.

There are various ways by which social conditions make greatness rare or frequent. The original material of heredity is subjected to what the psychologists call the learning process, that is, the original impulses are conditioned into habits, so that they operate through a somewhat complex organization of habits. Personalities are thus formed and become fairly fixed by the time adult life is reached. These personalities become varied one from another, for the social conditions setting habits are greatly varied.

The specific forms and directions which these impulses organized into habits take depend upon the particular cultural conditions of the time and of the group. Men become engineers, monks, shepherds, or military men according to the different cultural conditions, which vary from time to time and from group to group. These cultural conditions vary over a very wide range indeed, as compared with the range of variation of the hereditary material of racial stocks.

What great achievements these organized personalities of adults may make depends upon two cultural situations. First are the opportunities arising from

the existence of cultural elements or materials favorable for making great achievements. At one time the materials exist for inventing the automobile, at another time not. Among one people the situation is ripe for military conquests. A new country is settled providing exceptional opportunities for social organization. Under such cultural opportunities great achievement is probable. The second cultural situation which affects the achievement of great men is the social valuations of the group. One group may greatly value artistic achievement and stimulate effort along those lines. Another group values religious leadership, while another encourages commercial enterprise. So social valuations have much to do with great achievement.

These different social conditions that affect the production of greatness include the social forces, which usually mean the dynamic element arising from the impulses of a plural number of human beings, impulses organized into particular habit mechanisms in different cultural media. Social valuations represent probably very well these social forces, for men do what the group values. These group valuations are quite integrally related to and dependent upon the accumulation of cultural elements at any one time; for instance the status of the industrial arts has much to do with determining the social valuation of commercial enterprise. The social conditions are therefore very closely related to the social forces.

But however the term social forces may be defined, it is clear that our social heritage varies greatly according to time and place, and would make great men rare or frequent, even when the distribution of the inherited elements of greatness is constant. Social forces therefore make great men, but before speaking of how great men affect the social forces, it is desirable to try to clarify this somewhat abstract argument with an illustration.

Professor Kroeber[1] has observed and discussed the very interesting fact that there are a number of inventions that have been invented by two or more inventors working independently and without knowledge of the other's work. The significance of this phenomenon, he thinks, is that it indicates the relative unimportance of the great men in cultural development. Dr. Thomas and I[2] have collected the accounts of more than one hundred such major inventions occuring in recent years that have been made by more than one inventor, at the same time and without knowledge of the other's work. Such a list is quite remarkable when it is recalled, how quickly news is disseminated in recent times. I think that every important invention in electricity has been claimed by at least two inventors.

The inference to be drawn from such data is, for instance, that the discovery of the calculus was not dependent upon Newton, for if Newton had died, it would have been discovered by Leibnitz. And we think that if neither Leibnitz nor Newton had lived, that it would still have been discovered by some other mathematician. So also the theory of evolution by variation and natural selection would have been developed even if Wallace and Darwin had never lived.

The reason we think this relatively great rôle of culture is overlooked in popular thought regarding inventions, is because the essential dependence of a particular invention on the existence of other inventions is not appreciated. Our devotion to hero-worship obscures the

[1] A. L. Kroeber, "The Superorganic;" *American Anthropologist*, May–June, 1917.

[2] W. F. Ogburn, *Social Change in Relation to Culture and Original Nature*, New York, 1923.

fact. But an airplane is just as dependent for its origin on the light engine as it is upon a great inventor. The steamboat is similarly dependent upon the steam engine, calculus on analytical geometry, and each special invention in electricity on a number of other subsidiary inventions. The existence of such necessary subsidiary inventions for the achievement of a particular invention is extremely variable, so specialized is the relationship; and much more variable than the existence of inherited mental ability of a high order.

The analysis of invention furthermore shows that the new element in the invention is relatively small, as in the telegraph or the radio, tremendously important though it may be. From this point of view an invention will be seen as a step in a process rather than the entire creation of something new; and the rôle of the great inventor is correspondingly less.

We have now spoken of two factors in invention, mental ability and the subsidiary cultural material. There is a third factor, which directs the mental ability to the cultural materials out of which the invention is made. This factor is the necessity or the desires, and we shall refer to it as social valuations. A society may encourage inventions or it may not. The steam engine was greatly desired during the eighteenth century, and much effort was employed by a series of men in making this achievement. In the United States, research in commerce is socially valued, and development is occurring more rapidly there than in other fields where there is less social valuation. Oriental peoples do not have the same social values as the Occidental peoples, nor do the primitive peoples have the same valuations as modern peoples.

These social valuations are essentially of the nature of social forces, for they are the dynamic desires of the group. They are the forces that impinge upon the native impulses and especially are they the forces that play upon the developed personality, the great man. And in so far as man is a medium, a responding mechanism, these are the forces to which he responds in making great achievements.

These three factors, mental ability, cultural material, and social valuations, which have been deduced from a study of invention, are also factors in various kinds of great achievement as well as in mechanical invention. Sometimes some one of these factors plays a more important rôle than the others.

For instance, the formation of empire at a particular period will depend on such cultural elements as priority and differential in economic processes as well as upon great men; and to the degree that they are present, to that degree will empire be developed.

In the field of medicine, another illustration, great achievement is dependent also on the variation of the cultural material, that is, the existence of scientific accomplishment at the time, and not so much to variation in social valuation, for the need of saving human life was greater in earlier times when there was less medical development than now. The primitive peoples certainly put forth effort and their great men tried as is shown by the practices of the shaman. Necessity has been called the mother of invention but necessity did not produce scientific medicine among the primitive peoples. Nor does the need of great men in any endeavor necessarily bring them forth. The required cultural materials must be present.

Another interesting illustration is decorative art among primitive peoples. The patterns of a tribe, though varied and numerous, show little change, that is, invention. In this case, the absence of

change would hardly seem due to the absence of the necessary cultural material, for the various possibilities of design would seem to be relatively independent of subsidiary materials. It seems rather more probable that the existing designs are sufficient for the needs, or they are conventionalized to existing requirements.

In the case of great leadership in social movements or social organization very little estimation is usually given to the importance of existing cultural elements in the social situation. The lack or presence of great ability is customarily judged the important factor. It is probably, however, truer not to attribute the failure of a League of Nations or the failures to escape the evils of reconstruction after great wars to the absence of great men but to attribute these failures to absence of the needed cultural elements in the social conditions. For will power alone is no more competent to produce a certain form of social organization, than it is to produce a flying machine. A flying machine depends upon contributory mechanical elements. So social organization depends upon contributory social elements. When a people is looking for a Moses to lead them out of the wilderness. the failure of such a saviour to appear may always easily be laid to a shortage of exceptional ability, but it may be more realistic to attribute the absence of a great leader to the condition of social economic life.

But even granting that the times make the man one may wish to ask, Does not the man greatly influence the times? Men influence the times because all cultural change must occur through the medium of human beings. The eminent individual influences the times for one man is more influential than another and there is such a thing as leadership, even though the leader be the medium through which the social forces play.

In discussing further how the individual influences his time, I shall make another reference to the field of inventions. We may say that the men who invented the steamboat influenced not only their times but the whole future course of industrial evolution. Shall we say it was the men who thus influenced their time, or was it their invention? Men influence their times through their work. So it was with the men who framed the Constitution of the United States, a document which shaped the conduct of the people for a long time to come. So with all great men.

It should be noted here however that the extent of the influence of great men depends not only on their talent but also on the favorableness of the social conditions. There is a special time that is favorable for the invention of a steamboat and for its adoption. So there is a particular time in the course of governmental development that is favorable for the creation of a republican constitution and its adoption. Great men thus appear as media in a social process.

The phenomenon of the great man, it is necessary to observe, varies a good deal among the different cultural activities, such as, mechanical industry, art, religion, military affairs. For instance in mechanical development, the psychological elements of personality hardly come into play as much as they do in religion. In those activities where there are opportunities for the influence of personal traits of leadership the great man has an additional kind of influence, especially among his contemporaries. Also in painting, music and literature there is opportunity for the influence of personal traits. So that in trying to appraise the rôle of the great man there is an error in generalizing for all fields of culture.

However in some of the fields where the great man is very prominent, such as in

art and in religion, much is credited to the great man, that is due to other factors. For instance the christian who attributes to Jesus the invention of the golden rule does not know that that the golden rule is a sort of proverb in a dozen or more different ethical systems. Also, the various schools in painting and in literature are hardly wholly explainable in terms of the great personality. Social valuations and existing cultural elements are also factors in greatness in religion and in art. The nature of military campaigns is such that the great leader has opportunities in such a crisis for spectacular achievement and lasting renown. But there are many other factors in wars than leadership. Economic factors and social organization are mighty influences. The social valuation of leadership in war is also great. So also in state craft there are powers behind the throne. The Treaty of Versailles was determined by underlying group or public opinion in the respective countries rather than by great men as such.

The relative influence of the different factors in the foregoing illustrations are difficult to determine precisely by measurement. They are speculative and subject to claims and counterclaims. I should like to add one further illustration where the material has been subjected to measurement.

Professor Kroeber[3] in working on this problem considered the phenomenon of style and fashion in women's dress. The popular impression is that styles in women's wear are set arbitrarily by a few leading dressmakers. It would seem that here was a situation for a relatively free will. The leader does as he wishes and the people follow like so many sheep; an extreme instance of the power of the great man. Professor Kroeber, in studying this matter, found a journal that had printed regulary pictures of styles in women's evening dreses for about one hundred years. He measured for each year a number of attributes of these dresses, such as width of skirt, and depth of decolletage, and plotted the results on graph paper. If the styles were arbitrarily set we should expect no regular order to the plottings; the remarkable result however showed curves as smooth and regular, say, as the curves of business cycles, admittedly a product of social forces. Just what these social forces governing styles and fashion are, may not be known, but the leader certainly does not appear free to do just as he wishes.

The rôle of the exceptional individual in the social process and the relative dependence of social change and achievement on social forces or the great man will no doubt be a subject of debate for some time to come. But these results of recent researches do seem to clarify the analysis. Our conclusions are that greatness must be conceived in terms of inherited qualities and environmental traits. The distribution of inherited qualities appears to be such that the inherited abilities of greatness should be plentiful and constant, facts which minimize the importance of the great man, biologically conceived. On the social forces side, there are two important factors that affect great achievement, the existing cultural materials and the social valuations. These two factors vary greatly over time and by places, and hence may be called causes of great achievement. They are of the nature of social forces. Great men are thus the product of their times. They in turn influence their times, that is, their achievement influences the times. The great man is thus a medium in social change. The phenomenon of the great man varies

[3] A. L. Kroeber, "On the Principle of Order in Civilization as Exemplified by Changes of Fashion," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 21, pp. 235–263, 1919.

in the different kinds of social activities, and each situation should be separately analyzed as to the relative strength of the different factors. In some cases psychological traits of personality are more important than others. These factors at the present time are only with great difficulty susceptible of precise measurement. But certain extended observations indicate that the production of great men and their influence are strongly conditioned and determined by the particular existing stage of the historical development. The great man and his work appear therefore as only a step in a process, largely dependent upon other factors.

NEIGHBORHOODS AND NEIGHBORLINESS

DAVID SNEDDEN

I

WHEN social workers and other ameliorators direct their efforts *against* rather than *in the general direction* of fairly visible evolutional trends in societies they should not only proceed with much caution, but they should take important stands only after assuring themselves to the fullest possible extent that they are right. Men going with a procession will at least not seriously impede the progress of their fellows; whereas the man marching resolutely counter to the popular march will probably not only be sadly buffeted himself, but he will probably harass and interfere to no purpose with all those against whom he collides.

The present writer is convinced that many social workers in both urban and rural areas have become so impressed by certain unfortunate by-product effects of enlarging community administration that they have set themselves to resist, with all the ardor of Don Quixotes, certain current tendencies which are in fact, for the present at least, irresistible.

Let it be understood that in this paper "a community" is any social organization occupying a defined geographic area and embracing all the inhabitants of that area. In that sense, obviously any village, any county, any city or any nation is a community. Because large communities must have so much machinery to discharge collective functions it is natural that they should coincide with, or rather become, *political* organizations.

Let it also be understood that the word "neighborhood" is here used to denote those people who lived within easy "hallooing" distance, or at least easy walking distance, of each other. Where, as in many parts of rural America, families live, not in village aggregates but isolatedly on farms of one hundred or more acres it is permissible to stretch the radii of neighborhoods to a few miles.

It is obvious, of course, that under all primitive conditions the neighborhood, as camp or settlement, readily becomes a full-functioning community so far as necessarily collective functions are concerned. Of these defence against external enemies was long the most obvious and pressing, and maintenance of certain kinds of internal order the next in importance. When there are few or no roads or safe waterways, no telegraph lines, almost no commerce and only rare communication with the outside world the village as a compact neighborhood, whether of ancient Italy, yesterday's Minnesota frontier