

Carlyle, Freud, and the Great Man Theory more fully considered

Bert Alan Spector

D'Amore-McKim School of Business, Northeastern University, USA

Leadership

2016, Vol. 12(2) 250–260

© The Author(s) 2015

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1742715015571392

lea.sagepub.com



Abstract

Contemporary surveys of leadership scholarship will occasionally mention the Great Man theory before moving on to more rigorous academic categories. Less a theory than a statement of faith, the Great Man theory does not fit into the rigorous scholarly theory and research that makes up the contemporary canon of leadership discourse. My goal in this article is to treat the Great Man theory seriously and to present a fuller notion of the theory. My intent is not to offer a defense of the theory or to “redeem” Thomas Carlyle as a leadership theorist. Rather, I will add a hitherto unacknowledged dimension: the element of Freudian psychology. In Freud’s case, the Great Man was articulated not a moral proscription for how to act, but rather an analytic description of the elemental forces that lead people to seek heroes. The article suggests that the Great Man theory is worth considering because of its contemporary relevance. To consider the theory in full, however, Freud’s work on leadership needs to be examined alongside that of Carlyle. It is Freud’s description of the impulses that drive us toward authority figures, more than Carlyle’s proselytizing for hero worship that can, and should offer valuable insights into how we—scholars, observers, and participants in the business world—react to corporate saviors.

Keywords

Great Man theory, Thomas Carlyle, Sigmund Freud, CEOs, intellectual history

In leadership discourse, the Great Man theory—an assertion that certain individuals, certain *men*, are gifts from God placed on earth to provide the lightening needed to uplift human existence—is associated mainly with Thomas Carlyle. For good reason. In the spring of 1840, Carlyle delivered a series of six public lectures on the role played by heroes in shaping the arc of history. The following year, those lectures were brought together in a single volume entitled *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, and the Great Man theory was born.

Carlyle’s voice in those lectures is off-putting to the contemporary ear. There is the obvious gender bias of his formulation, a rendering of his reading of history as unfolding through the

Corresponding author:

Bert Alan Spector, D’Amore-McKim School of Business, Northeastern University, 350 Huntington Ave., Boston, MA 02115, USA.

Email: b.spector@neu.edu

effects of dominant males combined with the prevalent Victorian conviction that leadership was “irredeemably masculine” (Grint, 2011: 8). There is the deep religiosity of his language, a reflection of the strict Calvinist upbringing provided by his parents who expected him to become a preacher (Bossche, 1991). And perhaps most distinctly, there is his admonition that “our” job, those of us not divinely designated, is to recognize the Great Man, lift him to a position of prominence, and then obey. A “sick” world would be thus healed (Carlyle, 1841/2013).¹

Contemporary surveys of leadership scholarship will occasionally mention Carlyle’s Great Man theory before moving on to more rigorous academic categories: traits, behaviors, charisma, contingencies, and so forth (see, for example, Maloş 2012). More often, Carlyle and his lectures are simply ignored (for example, Yukl, 2013), presumably because the Great Man formulation is less a theory than a statement of faith. As such, it apparently does not fit into the “rigorous scholarly theory and research” that makes up the contemporary canon of leadership discourse (Day et al., 2014: 64). A “trait approach” that emphasizes the extraordinary attributes that set effective leaders apart from less effective ones may be seen as a more recent echo of the Great Man (Northouse, 2013), although that approach too is dismissed as unsatisfying, misleading, or both (Yukl, 1989). A notable exception to the scant attention paid to the Great Man theory can be found in Keith Grint’s survey of leadership discourse, which acknowledges Carlyle as a foundational writer of modern leadership discourse (Grint, 2011).

The theme of the Great Man and its pull on the manner in which leadership is conceived and leaders are considered resonates in today’s discourse on corporate behavior. Nancy F. Koehn, for instance, suggested in a recent Op-Ed piece that the continuing upward spiral of CEO pay even in the midst of the well-publicized executive misdeeds in the first decade of the 21st century can be attributed directly to this ongoing belief in the “Great Man” (Koehn, 2014). This is a theory that warrants reexamination.

This essay is part of my larger, ongoing project to assess discourse on the topic of leadership, primarily in business organizations, as it unfolded in the 20th century. Under the title *The Discourse of Leadership*, I am analyzing not the practice of leadership but rather the manner in which the topic is defined, discussed, analyzed, and considered.

I view the writing of history as an exercise in narrative construction. Historical narratives depend not on the simple compilation of a timetable containing a sequence of events, but rather on an act of imaginative intervention that constructs an “order of meaning,” with the goal of revealing themes and interactions (Durepos and Mills, 2011). I recognize that numerous narrative lines can be drawn that connect Carlyle with contemporary discourse. One such line could be suggested that connects Carlyle and German sociologist Max Weber, whose configuration of charismatic authority can be represented as a transition from Carlyle’s emphasis on the hero as a gift from God to more contemporary constructions of charisma as an attributional characteristic applied by followers (Conger and Kanungo, 1987). Another line could start with Carlyle’s gendered view of heroic leadership and reach forward to the work of Virginia Schein and others focusing on the prevalence of masculine stereotypes in contemporary literature (Schein, 1973). Both approaches, and likely others, warrant full consideration. My interest in this essay, however, is specifically, on the narrative line that connects Carlyle to Sigmund Freud and then to contemporary discourse concerning the moral—or *immoral* or even *amoral*—nature of leadership. I suggest that Freud’s description of the impulses that drive us toward authority figures, more than Carlyle’s proselytizing for hero worship can, and should offer valuable insights into how we—scholars, observers, and participants in the business world—react to corporate saviors.

A note on methodology

My methodology for this essay is intellectual history. Intellectual historians look at *ideas* as expressed by *intellectuals*. I take Maciag's inclusive definition of intellectuals as people who have "produced writing, speeches, sermons, and other textual material intended for public consumption" (Maciag, 2011: 744). In the belief that ideas are powerful agents that either change or support the status quo, I will take measure of the ideas expressed by these two seminal thinkers—Carlyle and Freud—concerning leadership, and the influence those ideas continue to exert in contemporary leadership discourse.

I make no argument that Freud read Carlyle or was otherwise directly influenced by his work. Rather, I am proposing a narrative in which Carlyle and Freud wrestle with similar questions of authority and the impact of leaders on followers, albeit from strikingly different perspectives. My contribution is to construct an historical narrative that encompasses these two sets of ideas.

The role of historical narratives is to engage in a simultaneous dual discourse, one with the past and the other with the present. It is that second exchange that offers the opportunity for critical perspective. By constructing a narrative representation of the evolution of an understanding of the Great Man theory of leadership and drawing special attention to Freud's contribution, my intent is to offer a critical perspective on current discourse.

Carlyle's Great Man

In a period of crisis and upheaval—the Napoleonic wars and the accelerating pace of industrialization—Scottish-born Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) looked for a source of strength, direction, wisdom, and uplift. That source was no longer the Church, which in Carlyle's experience had become a discredited shepherd (Bossche, 1991). Moving away from Calvinism involved a commensurate break with his father, so parental authority seemed as unreliable as Church hierarchy. Carlyle's search led him to the Great Man: an individual of this earth but unmistakably sent by God.

Already a well-known author on his way to becoming "the most widely read and most greatly admired social philosopher of his time" (Schapiro, 1945: 99), Carlyle fought his discomfort over public speaking in order to earn the significant fees associated with lecturing. Carlyle opened his series of London talks on heroes by explaining his intent. "We have undertaken to discourse here for a little on the Great Men," he explained to his audience, "their manner of appearance in our world's business, how they have shaped themselves in the world's history, what ideas men found of them, what work they did – on Heroes" (16). Carlyle intended to demonstrate how "the great man, with his free force direct out of God's own hand" provided the "lightening" that shaped the world (29).

Given his loss of faith in the Church and his dismay over the revolutions that had spread across Europe, Carlyle wondered about authority. Who had it? Under what claims was it to be held? Who would hold it in the future? From Carlyle's vantage, wrote Chris Vanden Bossche, "it appeared not only that authority had shifted, but that the transcendental grounds for it had been undermined" (Bossche, 1991). But if old platforms for authority were passing, what would replace them? In *On Heroes*, Carlyle provided his own answer: the "Able-man," an individual who has been "sent by God" to have "a divine right over me."

Looking back at the French Revolution, Carlyle laid the responsibility for the collapse of the *Ancien Régime* squarely on the shoulders of its royal leader, Louis XVI.² Louis was a far-from-able man, and revolutions occur, insisted Carlyle, when "you have put too *Unable*

Man at the head of affairs!” (162—all emphasis will be from the original text). Societies bedeviled by the lack of an Able-man at their helm had one core responsibility: find him:

Find in any country the Ablest Man that exists there; raise *him* to the supreme place, and loyally reverence him; you have a perfect government for that country; no ballot box, Parliamentary eloquence, voting, constitution-building, or other machinery whatsoever can improve it a whit. It is the perfect state; an ideal country. The Ablest Man; he means also the truest-hearted, justest, the Noblest Man: what he *tells us to do* must be precisely the wisest, fittest, that we could anywhere or anyhow learn; – the thing which it will in all ways behoove us, with right loyal thankfulness, and nothing doubting, to do! (162).

Of course, locating an Able-man and having the multitudes agree that this *was* the Able-man was no easy matter:

“That we knew in some tolerable measure how to find him, and that all men were ready to acknowledge his divine right when found: that is precisely the healing which a sick world is everywhere, in the ages, seeking after!” (163–164)

Carlyle was offering as much an argument for how the world works as a theory of leadership. Great men were sent by God to be heroes and these heroes became leaders through the righteous process of hero worship. Perhaps no statement found in the lectures is more frequently quoted than what follows from the opening of *On Heroes*:

For, as I take it, Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones, the modelers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatever the general mass of men contrived to do or attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world’s history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these (21).

The goal of the lectures, then, was explicitly pedantic: to convince listeners to “bow down submissive before great men,” an act which would allow the worshiper to “feel himself to be more noble and blessed” (31).

Carlyle’s great men were an eclectic group; they were, in the order of his lectures, prophets, poets, priests, men of letters, and kings. Including Shakespeare along with Oliver Cromwell and Martin Luther demonstrates that Carlyle’s great men were heroic figures but not necessarily leaders in any institutional sense. To Carlyle, “all the greatness of man” came out decisively in Shakespeare.

That Shakespeare is the chief of all Poets hitherto; the greatest intellect who, in our recorded world, has left record of himself in the way of Literature. I know now such a power of vision, faculty of thought, if we take all the characters of it, in any other man (95).

“Nature” had offered Shakespeare to the world and Nature was pleased with the result.

Still, it was the final lecture, “The Hero as King,” that carried the greatest weight for Carlyle and cemented the connection between heroes and leaders, or commanders over men. It was “the last form of Heroism,” he wrote, “that which we call Kingship”:

The Commander over Men he to whose will our wills are to be subordinated, and loyally surrender themselves, and find their welfare in doing so, may be reckoned the most important

of the Great Men. He is practically the *summary* for us of *all* the various figures of Heroism; Priest, Teacher, whatsoever of earthly or of spiritual dignity we can fancy to reside in a man, embodies itself here, to *command* over us, furnish us with constraint practical teaching, tell us for the day and hour what we are to *do* (162).

It was this amalgam Great Man who should be raised to “the supreme place.” Carlyle professed indifference to the process of such elevation: “no ballot box, Parliamentary eloquence, voting, constitution-building, or other machinery whatsoever can improve it a whit.” It was the fact of elevation and the resultant worshipful voluntary subjugation that would lead to “the perfect state; an ideal country” (162).

Carlyle’s view of history as working through the deeds of great men, or conversely through the absence of such a hero, did not go uncontested at the time. Ideas, at least important ones, seldom do. Within Victorian England there was Herbert Spencer. In his 1873 *Study of Sociology*, a founding text in the evolution of sociological study, Spencer took direct aim at the Great Man theory. Reflecting a sociological world view, Spencer argued that social context played a far more significant role in shaping events than did any individual leader, great man or otherwise.

The great man must always be considered and understood in terms of the times in which he lived. “Even if we were to grant the absurd supposition that the genesis of the great man does not depend on the antecedents furnished by the society he is born in,” Spencer wrote,

there would still be the quite sufficient facts that he is powerless in the absence of the material and mental accumulations which his society inherits from the past, and that he is powerless in the absence of the co-existing population, character, intelligence, and social arrangements. (Spencer, 1873/1961, 31–32).

Great men, if and when they did appear, were products of social and historical forces rather than gifts bestowed on human civilization by God.

Other contemporary thinkers—notably Leo Tolstoy (*War and Peace*, 1869) and Ralph Waldo Emerson (*Representative Men*, 1903)—joined in this argument that leaders were products of their times. In *On Heroes*, Carlyle rejected the position totally:

He [the Great Man] was the “creature of the Time,” they say; the Time called him forth, the Time did everything, he did nothing – but what we the little critic could have done too! This seems to me but melancholy work. The Times call forth? Alas, we have known Times *call* loudly enough for their great man; but not find him when they called! He was not there; Providence had not sent him; the Time, *calling* its loudest, had to go down to confusion and wreck because he would not come when called. . . . The great man, with his free force direct out of God’s own hand, is the lightning. His word is the wise healing word which we all can believe in. All blazes round him now, when he has once struck on it, into fire like his own (29).

Critics of the Great Man theory, Carlyle maintained, belittle themselves through their egregious misreading of how the world works.

It is impossible to miss the stern proselytizing, the righteous indignation, and the reproachful tone of these words. No surprise that Carlyle’s work found particular favor among the rising acolytes of 20th-century Italian fascism and German Nazism (Schapiro, 1945; Steinweis, 1995). Carlyle with his Great Man theory was called upon to add a “veneer of respectability” to “the fascists, who were delighted to find their ideas proclaimed in eloquent words by the great Victorian” (Schapiro, 1945: 114). More recently, the notion

of hero worship has been criticized as a pathway to passivity and dependence (Frieze and Wheatley, 2011; McPherson, 2008). Moderns generally and rationalists in particular typically express a deep unease with hero worship. Carlyle's preaching—that is the best word for it—is easy to resist or ignore on scientific, moral, and political grounds. However, my narrative has an additional iteration to explore before arriving at a present-day consideration of the lingering impact of the Great Man theory.

Let's bring Freud into this

By the time of the 1937 publication of *Moses and Monotheism*, a revisionist study of the great Hebrew hero and savior, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) had established a worldwide psychoanalytic movement. In search of analytic rigor to aid his and others' clinical assessment of patients, Freud delved into the unconscious working of the mind. Over time, intellectual curiosity led him to a broader perspective, seeking to illuminate a linkage between individual psychology and group dynamics, religious belief, and the structure of history. Although the study of Moses represents his most articulate view of the hero role in history, his notion of the great man (I am using small letters rather than capitals because it is meant to be descriptive in Freud's case) can be seen in earlier works, most specifically his 1921 *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*.

For Carlyle, heroes were gifts from God and the task for the rest of us was to recognize that gift and to follow. Heroism certainly resided outside of the traditional boundaries of patriarchy. For Freud, on the other hand, the need for a single, special leader was primal, arising from the drive for dependency and even love. He opened that reasoning by situating the individual within a larger collective: a tribe, clan, or family. Group membership conveys many obvious benefits to individual members, including safety and security. On the other hand, by following a single leader, group members tend to bend their thinking “in the direction of the approximation to the other individuals in the group” (Freud, 1921/1967: 20). Group members would opt for conformity while sacrificing individuality.

Freud selected two institutions to offer illustrative examples of this attraction: the Church, particularly the Catholic Church, and the military. Christ for the church and the commander-in-chief for the military were both father figures who were loved by group members and were thought to love all followers within the group equally. Those assumptions were based on the basic process of identification. This was, for Freud, the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person: particularly the son identifying with the father. “A little boy will exhibit a special interest in his father; he would like to grow up like him and be like him, and take his place everywhere” (Freud, 1921/1967: 37). Identification with a father figure was a natural, even inevitable form of emotional attachment.

For Freud, the leader is always male; a *father* figure. Strozier and Offer explain that “Freud always examines the unfolding of the Oedipus complex”—this being the primary source of conflict within the family—“from the boy's point of view, adding only parenthetically that the analogue of the boy's conflicts occurs in girls” (Strozier and Offer, 2011: 28). For Carlyle and Freud both, the great man is, well, a *man*. Carlyle's gendered view derives from his reading of world history as unfolding through the actions of men; for Freud, it derived from the assumed role of the father as head of the family.

In Freud's treatment of Moses, we can see his most complete statement of the role of the male hero leader in human society. Throughout history, Freud noted, “the great majority of people have a strong need for authority which they can admire” (Freud, 1937/1967: 111).

Freud replaced Carlyle's belief in divine intervention with individual psychology, family dynamics, and psychosexual drives. He nonetheless located what he felt was a recurring human desire for a single, always male, individual. This father figure satisfied a primal need for protection and love.

Freud's story of Moses departs in dramatic ways from that found in *Exodus*. Rather than being a Jewish son sent floating down the Nile, he is in Freud's retelling an Egyptian born into royalty. His later struggle with the Pharaoh is, in this telling, a struggle—perhaps symbolic but maybe not—with his “real” father. Moses emerged as a hero by rebelling against this father, killing him “in some guise or another” (Freud, 1937/1967: 111). Monotheism, which Moses institutionalized among the Hebrews, represented for Freud the triumph of the father figure, the single male deity who could serve as the organizing totem for his followers. Moses was, for Freud, the great man, with monotheism representing the institutionalization of the single male authority figure.

A reconsideration (with Freud in the mix)

The Great Man theory, despite its lack of scientific rigor, remains fully relevant. In the world of business, the search for a hero to “save” failing companies still exerts considerable appeal. Driven by a “quasi-religious belief” in the power and influence of an individual hero, board members and investors regularly search for “saviors” (Khurana, 2002). Occasionally, that savior is a woman. Boards hire, and then frequently dismiss CEOs, both male and female, always on the lookout for the latest savior.

A number of scholars have noted the utility and appeal of condensing a multitude of forces, complex interactions, and uncertain causation into an individual (see, for example, Meindl et al., 1985; Pfeffer, 1977). Leadership as a concept upholds human agency. Furthermore, it offers a pathway to corrective action: when things go bad, fire the current leader and hire a new one. That is, of course, a simple, certainly simplistic pathway, but a pathway nonetheless.

External observers of corporate life contribute to the exaltation of individual leader/heroes. James Meindl and Stanford Ehrlich (1987) asked research subjects to evaluate the performance of a fictitious firm based entirely on data provided them by the researcher. The performance data were held constant. What changed in the two accounts provided the subjects were an emphasis on the individual role of the leader in achieving that performance. The result: Subjects evaluated performance of a fictitious firm more positively when the information they received pointed to leadership as the main cause for performance. There is little reason, apparently, to think that the notion of an individual hero/leader has lost its power to influence our thought process.

Corporate executives explicitly reinforce the Great Man theory when they don the cloak of heroic leadership. Eric Guthey and his colleagues noted a trend, dating back to the later 19th century, for business executives to construct a narrative in which “they can remain floating in mid-air by virtue of their own innate skills and exemplary characteristics” (Guthey et al., 2010: 12). Other recent studies have shown that CEOs take pains to claim authorship of great successes for their companies, while blaming failures on outside forces: unfair foreign competition, crippling state regulation, world economic trends, and even bad weather (Bligh et al., 2011; Gray and Densten, 2007; Salancik and Meindl, 1984; Staw et al., 1983). By romanticizing their own role in the company's success, CEOs seek to enhance their self-esteem. With adulation comes prestige, power, and control (Goode, 1978). CEOs seek to assure others—shareholders (both current and potential future investors), board members,

Table 1. Comparing the contributions of Carlyle and Freud.

Great Man Theory		
Carlyle		Freud
Great men were sent by God to be heroes and these heroes became leaders through the righteous process of hero worship	<i>Core of theory</i>	Humans have a primal need for a father figure to whom they offer dependence and love in return for protection and reciprocated love
God	<i>Source of authority</i>	Position in family
Male—by virtue of history	<i>Gender</i>	Male—by virtue of patriarchal family structure
Respect	<i>Exchange with followers</i>	Love
Loyal reverence	<i>Role of followers</i>	Submission
Not recognizing great man	<i>Inherent danger</i>	Mistreatment by great man
Uplift	<i>Outcome of obedience</i>	Reduced autonomy of group members

fellow executives, and employees at all levels—that their leadership in worthy of followership; that they are indeed great men.

The narrative I have constructed explicitly offers Freud as a significant coauthor of the Great Man theory. Freud addressed many of the same matters taken up in Carlyle's lectures, most particularly the source and role of authority in human existence (see Table 1).

For Carlyle, dependence on the Great Man offered nothing but uplift. For Freud, on the other hand, dependency inevitably led to a marked reduction in intellectual engagement on the part of group members. Part of this dynamic, what would later come to be known as "groupthink" (Janis, 1972; Whyte, 1952), involved placing a higher value on group membership than on individual autonomy. But Freud added that the presence of a strong, attractive individual leader exacerbated the tendency to submerge the individual into the group. Group members provided the leader with love and expected that love to be reciprocated equally to the members.³ This was Freud, so, yes, that attraction was in part sexual; a libidinous attraction to the father-figure/leader.

In Freud's view, the great man is "the father that lives in each of us from his childhood days for the same father whom the hero of legend boasts of having overcome." The "picture of the father," then, includes the "decisiveness of thought, the strength of will, the self-reliance and independence of the great man [and] his divine conviction of doing the right thing which may pass into ruthlessness." The great man will be admired, trusted, and followed. However, "one cannot help but being afraid of him" (Freud, 1937/1967: 140).

That final note—"one cannot help but being afraid of him"—offers a markedly different tone from the jubilation so prevalent in Carlyle. And Freud did not stop with that warning. By admiring a leader unconditionally, followers were submitting to authority. In so doing, followers rendered themselves vulnerable. Submission enabled an authority

figure who “dominates and sometimes even ill-treats them” (Freud, 1937/1967: 111). Writing on the cusp of a World War II (Freud had fled Vienna for London just the year prior to the publication of *Moses and Monotheism*), Freud’s warning was tangible and immediate.

It is tempting to dismiss Carlyle’s unquestioned celebration of hero/leaders as passé and naive. Before doing so, however, we should recognize a striking parallel in contemporary leadership theories, especially transformational leadership. Political Scientist James MacGregor Burns, for instance, defined leadership as a “good thing.” It is by his definition virtuous and ethical, helping people and institutions achieve such “lofty principles as order, liberty, equality (including brotherhood and sisterhood), justice, and the pursuit of happiness” (Burns, 2003: 27).

Powerful individuals may provide ill treatment. In that case, however, they are not leaders. The “transforming leader” in Burns’ view is both deeply moral and profoundly uplifting. “The result of transforming leadership is a relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents” (Burns, 1978: 4). It is the concept of “moral leadership,” Burns insisted, “that concerns me the most.”

Burns focused on what he called transforming leadership and that became the dominant paradigm in leadership scholarship thereafter (Antonakis, 2012; Northouse, 2013). The leading advocates of applying such transforming leadership to business followed his lead in asserting the inherent goodness of leadership. The well-known syllogism, introduced by Bennis and Nanus in 1985 that “*Managers are people who do things right and leaders are people who do the right thing*” explicitly marries leadership with righteousness (Bennis and Nanus, 1985: 21). Bernard Bass explicitly departed from the “moral uplift” component that Burns had inserted (Bass, 1985a, 1985b). Nonetheless, he remained committed to the proposition leadership sat at the core of effective organizational performance (Bass, 1993).

Freud, as we have seen, was far less celebratory. Leaders are individuals who exercise authority and exert power. They get other people to go along, to follow. Inspiration is part of the appeal to others, but, as Freud insisted, so are fear, coercion, and conformity. To pretend leaders are not power wielders—a pretense which Barbara Kellerman argued that was embraced by a “tacit alliance” among theoreticians, practitioners, researchers and educators, consultants and trainers—was to “whistle in the dark” (Kellerman, 2000: 68). Freud, not Carlyle, speaks to our contemporary awareness of what Tourish (2013) calls the “dark side” of leadership.

The Great Man theory, more fully understood, helps our appreciation of what Meindl, Ehrlich, and Dukerich referred to as the lofty elevation of a concept of leadership by imbuing it with “mystery and near mysticism” (Meindl et al., 1985: 78). Academics do not escape the allure of the romantic hero/leader. I have written about the appeal of Chrysler executive Lee Iacocca to the foundational authors of transformational leadership (Spector, 2014).

All the rigorous scholarly research and theorizing we may undertake cannot diminish the human striving to locate heroic leaders. People seek a narrative structure that brings legitimacy to abstractions, offers coherence in response to apparent chaos, and asserts human agency in the face of seemingly unmanageable complexity. I am not suggesting that all of this is rational. It may, in fact, be the opposite. Nor am I denying that the search may well be delusional and self-defeating. Certainly, the terms of the search as suggested by Carlyle (for the Great Man of history) and Freud (for the father figure) should be and have been contested. What I am suggesting is that self-awareness can open the door for self-examination. Alternative paths to group, organizational, and social health can then be considered.

Rather than ignoring the Great Man theory, we should appreciate that, in Freud's telling especially, it is a description of our deepest impulses rather than a proscription for uplift. Unlike Carlyle, Freud insisted that the impulses can lead to a loss of individuality and mistreatment by the same figure to whom we offer our followership.

When leadership scholars marginalize the Great Man theory and fail to consider it in full, we risk diluting what can and should be a robust discourse on just how and why individual hero/leaders continue to capture our imagination and the best options for addressing that impulse.

Notes

1. All subsequent quotes from Carlyle will be from this volume.
2. Carlyle had written a massive three-volume history of the French Revolution that is said to have served as a primary source for Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, published 22 years later.
3. Is it too much to suggest that Freud's notion of reciprocal and equal love provides a psychosexual underpinning to contemporary notions of organizational justice?

References

- Antonakis J (2012) Transformational and charismatic leadership. In: Day D and Antoinakis J (eds) *The Nature of Leadership*, 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 256–288.
- Bass BM (1985a) *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations*. New York: Free Press.
- Bass BM (1985b) Leadership: Good, better, best. *Organizational Dynamics* 13: 26–40.
- Bass BM (1993) A seminal shift: The impact of James Burns'. *Leadership. Leadership Quarterly* 4: 375–377.
- Bennis WG and Nanus B (1985) *Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge*. New York: Harper Business.
- Bligh MC, Kohles JC and Pilai R (2011) Romancing leadership: Past, present, and future. *Leadership Quarterly* 22: 1058–1077.
- Bossche CRV (1991) *Carlyle and the Search for Authority*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Burns JM (1978) *Leadership*. New York: Harper.
- Burns JM (2003) *Transforming Leadership: A New Pursuit of Happiness*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press.
- Carlyle T (1841/2013) In: Sorrensen David R. and Kinser BE (eds), *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Conger JA and Kanungo RN (1987) Toward a behavioral theory of charismatic leadership in organizational settings. *Academy of Management Review* 12: 637–647.
- Day DV, Fleenor JW, Atwater LE, et al. (2014) Advances in leader and leadership development: A review of 25 years of research and theory. *Leadership Quarterly* 25: 63–82.
- Durepos G and Mills AJ (2011) Actor-network theory, ANTi-history and critical organizational historiography. *Organization* 19: 1–19.
- Freud S (1921/1967) *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. New York: Liveright Publishing.
- Freud S (1937/1967) *Moses and Monotheism*. New York: Vantage.
- Frieze D and Wheatley M (2011) It's time for the heroes to go home. *Leader to Leader* 2011: 27–32.
- Goode WJ (1978) *The Celebration of Heroes: Prestige as a Social Control System*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gray JH and Densten IL (2007) How leaders woo followers in the romance of leadership. *Applied Psychology: An International Review* 56: 558–581.
- Grint K (2011) A history of leadership. In: Bryman A, Collinson D, Grint K, et al. (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Leadership*. Los Angeles: Sage, pp. 3–14.
- Guthey E, Clark T and Jackson B (2010) *Demystifying Business Celebrity*. London: Routledge.

- Janis IL (1972) *Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign Policy Decisions and Fiascos*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Kellerman B (2000) Hitler's ghost: A manifesto. In: Kellerman B and Matusak LR (eds) *Cutting Edge Leadership 2000*. College Park, MD: Center for the Advanced Study of Leadership, pp. 65–68.
- Khurana R (2004) *Searching for a Corporate Savior: The Irrational Quest for Charismatic CEOs*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Koehn NF (2014) Great men, great pay? Why CEO compensation is sky high. Available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/great-men-great-pay-why-ceo-compensation-is-sky-high/2014/06/12> (accessed 23 July 2014).
- Maciag D (2011) When ideas had consequences – Or, whatever happened to intellectual history? *Reviews in American History* 39: 741–751.
- McPherson B (2008) No more heroes. *Human Resource Management International Digest* 16: 6–9.
- Maloş R (2012) The most important leadership theories. *Annals of Economic Studies* 413–420. January.
- Meindl JR and Ehrlich SB (1987) The romance of leadership and the evaluation of organizational performance. *Academy of Management Journal* 30: 91–109.
- Meindl JR, Ehrlich SB and Dukerich JM (1985) The romance of leadership. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 30: 78–102.
- Northouse PG (2013) *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, 5th ed. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Pfeffer J (1977) The ambiguity of leadership. *Academy of Management Review* 2: 104–112.
- Salancik GR and Meindl JR (1984) Corporate attributions as strategic illusions of management control. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 29: 238–254.
- Schapiro JS (1945) Thomas Carlyle, prophet of fascism. *Journal of Modern History* 17: 97–115.
- Schein VE (1973) The relationship between sex role stereotypes and requisite management characteristics. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 57: 95–100.
- Spector BA (2014) Flawed from the 'get-go': Lee Iacocca and the origins of transformational leadership. *Leadership* 10: 362–379.
- Spencer H (1873/1961) *The Study of Sociology*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Staw BM, McKelchne PL and Puffer SM (1983) The justification of organizational performance. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 28: 582–600.
- Steinweis A (1995) Hitler and Carlyle's 'historical greatness.' *History Today* 45: 33–39.
- Strozier CB and Offer D (2011) Freud and his followers. In: Strizier CB, Offer D and Abodyli O (eds) *The Leader: Psychological Essays*, 2nd ed. New York: Springer, pp. 13–30.
- Tourish D (2013) *The Dark Side of Transformational Leadership: A Critical Perspective*. London: Routledge.
- Yukl G (1989) Managerial leadership: A review of theory and research. *Journal of Management* 15: 251–289.
- Yukl G (2013) *Leadership in Organizations*, 8th ed. Boston: Pearson.
- Whyte WJ Jr (1952) Groupthink. *Fortune* March: 114–117, 142–146.

Author biography

Bert Alan Spector is an Associate Professor of International Business and Strategy as the D'Amore-McKim School of Business, Northeastern University, in Boston. His research interests include management and organizational history, leadership, organizational change, and business model innovation. He is currently working on an intellectual history of business leadership discourse, *Leadership: Discourse and Meaning*, to be published in Cambridge University Press in 2015.