

UNKNOWN GENIUS

HERB KOPLOWITZ, PH.D.
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History, at least interesting history, is largely the history of genius. American school children 50 years from now may need to know that Dan Quayle was once vice president, but what is alive in political history are the political geniuses - Roosevelt, Churchill, Washington, etc. In music history, long after Neil Sedaka and Neil Young are forgotten, people will study Mozart and Bach and their music. The history of science is the history of Galileo and Newton and Einstein, not of their lab assistants nor of the innumerable chemists it takes to make Post It Notes peel off just a little easier or duct tape to stick just a little firmer.

The issue is not viability. The evil political geniuses - Hitler, Stalin, etc. - will likely be remembered as long as are those whose philosophies carried the day. And though we say that history is written by the victors, Lee is studied and revered as much as Grant as he was of comparable genius. Aristotle's physics is still studied though every major tenet of it has been proven false by Newton and his crowd. Genius, not viability, is what makes for interesting history.

As almost all record is the record of genius, we come to believe that all genius is recorded, that genius guarantees immortality.

- There may have been capable military commanders whose names never reached the history books because the commanders failed - militarily or politically - before they could achieve fame. But a great commander, a genius, would have prevailed - militarily and politically or at least in biography - and would surely have survived in written record.
- There may have been capable scientists who lacked the financial or institutional resources required to get their work known, to build status in the field, to have their work perpetuated in text books and courses. But geniuses would overcome any barriers they encountered. They would not have to seek attention; attention would seek them.

I have believed that anyone who worked at the extraordinary level of intelligence we call genius would certainly be remembered to this day. I was jolted from the belief that genius grants immortality through an association I have with a genius.

Elliott Jaques has made seminal and profound contributions in several fields:

- He has developed a model for organizations that shows private sector organizations how to maximize their profits, public sector organizations how to maximize their service to the public, and all organizations how to maximize trust among employees. But this model has had little impact on the world of business and on the teaching of business. Few businesses apply the model to any great extent; they do not offer easy solutions, and they place burdens of leadership that few C.E.O.s wish to carry. Very few academic institutions teach the model, perhaps because it is so different from what is currently taught. In the world of work he stands alone as a towering giant, but his writings are lost in the plethora of mediocre ideas by mediocre thinkers.
- The model is grounded in a science he has developed of human behaviour that gives profound and useful insight into what we mean by "thinking" or "judging" or "creating" or "solving". This science is not taught in business schools nor in psychology courses; it makes so much of what is currently practiced in psychology obsolete. His contribution to psychology is profound, but his work is rarely taught.
- His science is grounded in a philosophy of science that shows how to make psychology truly scientific without losing the life in it. This philosophy makes much current academic work obsolete and it is not taught in philosophy courses nor in science courses.

Here is a man who is a genius in three fields and unknown in all. Among the few people who know and appreciate Jaques's work, a common topic of conversation is what will happen to his ideas when he dies. As Jaques enters his 80s, the fear is that his ideas will die not long after he does. There is little reason to believe that 100 years from now, any philosopher, psychologist, manager, management scientist or policy writer will be influenced by his work. The thought that this man's ideas may be lost to future generations shocked and pained me, but it raises a more fundamental thought: this must have happened before.

This must have happened before. There must have been geniuses who took their work with them when they went. We certainly know of many cases where it almost did happen.

- Churchill was in battle in Cuba and India and several times barely missed being shot dead before he had the chance to leave his mark.

- A series of unlikely events brought Hitler to power. He could easily have been an unknown, forgotten member of a forgotten laughable political party. Once he came to power, Hitler could easily have been toppled by British or French action, or by the action of the army generals or the church until the German invasion of Poland. He could have made it as a footnote into the history books solely as interim head of government who came and went with many others in post World War I Germany.
- Then there was Galois, the French mathematician who, having scheduled a duel at dawn over the virtue of a woman^s when he was 21, wrote the entire night before setting out theorems and formulae that stand as the foundation of modern algebra. He was killed in the duel.
 - a) What if he hadn't written it all down, tried to get a good night's rest instead, and died anyway? Where would mathematics be today? (And don't say automatically, "Someone would have invented modern algebra anyway." If there was someone around that smart then, why haven't we heard of him or her?)
 - b) What if he had won the duel and had gone on to do even more powerful work? Where would mathematics be now?

We know there are geniuses who we almost never found out about. Is it not possible that there have been genius who died without a trace? What's maddening, of course, is that to qualify as an unknown genius one must not be known. It's a Catch 22, "I wouldn't join any club that would have me as a member" type of double bind.

Hey, did you hear about:

- the woman who invented a mechanism that allows the wearer to experience six additional senses: radar, magnetism, and four others that have no equivalents in our vocabulary now? She could get no funding for her work and died penniless, unable to promote it. Her machine was bulldozed, along with the workshop it was in, when her children sold her house on her death.
- the child who had the kernel of an idea for an entirely new art form but became involved in organized crime and was gunned down never to create a single work of art in this new form?
- the professor who created a true and useful science of economics but who was never taken seriously? His notebooks were thrown out when he retired and left them in his office.

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We are told he was a much better judge of mathematical theorems than of the virtue of women.

- the guy who in the early 18th century, while traveling to the New World, wrote a treatise that laid out the foundation for a philosophy of life science, set out a powerful new psychology, and described the implications of the science for the design of organizations that would be effective, efficient and trust building? His work was washed overboard in a storm. But he was glad just to know that his thoughts had enough cogency that he could write them down. He became a frontiersman and never wrote about philosophy, science, or organizations again.

You haven't heard them? Then maybe the stories are true.