

Parnassus House
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Great Founders: What is a great founder?

In *Great Founder Theory*, Samo Burja grounds the importance of founders on the role of institutions in supporting civilization. Institutions are “zone[s] of close coordination maintained by automated systems.” The power of great founders is in their ability to create and shape functional institutions – those that “solve a problem for a civilization.” Great founders are necessarily *live players*. A live player is “a person or tightly coordinated group of people that is able to do things they have not done before.”

1. Bureaucracies – the *most automated* institutions – give us a clear sense of the tradeoffs inherent to institutions. On the one hand, bureaucracies instantiate *orders* in the form of specialization and delegation. On the other hand, bureaucracies tend to become sclerotic. Bureaucratization for institutions is analogous to *habit formation* for individuals.
2. *Functional* institutions rely on orders that are designed and instantiated during their founding to address the *causes* of the problems the institution aims to solve. Thus, effective orders correspond to an underlying *tradition of knowledge* of those causes.
3. As long as an institution is functional, its orders can be *imitated*, both within the institution over time, and by other institutions. Imitation is a powerful mode of transmitting orders and traditions of knowledge because it’s often difficult or impossible to encode that “tacit” or “dark” knowledge in writing.
4. Institutions tend to become *non-functional* over time, in large part due to the loss of their traditions of knowledge. When there is no live player at the helm of an institution, successive imitation can turn into “making photocopies of photocopies” of prior orders. Each copy incrementally loses information. Eventually, an institution can become a “cargo cult,” carrying out rituals that are decoupled from their functional purpose.

In Chapter VI of *The Prince*, Machiavelli advises rising elites to imitate “the greatest examples” of founders from history – “Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, Theseus, and the like.” These examples shed light on the *virtue* required for founding “altogether new” regimes, which consists in introducing “new orders and modes” that shape the *matter* of the regime into a new *form*.

1. Machiavelli helps us see that great foundings have a *spiritual* element that requires both *will* and *mind*. Founders must have the will to deal, often forcefully, with the orders of the antecedent regime. And they must have the mind to shape the material (i.e. people) into a new and effective form (i.e. institutions).
2. According to Machiavelli, the only way to fulfill your potential is to *aim high*. Although the advice goes somewhat against our current moral paradigm, he would advise rising elites to err on the side of arrogance, allowing reality serve as a check on their ambition.