Introduction

Since the mid-twentieth century, the "Great Man Theory of History" has fallen out of favor as the principal means of explaining the past. Instead of understanding human affairs through the deeds and speeches of preeminent figures, today's historians and social scientists look to the impersonal forces of commerce, trade, disease, food, colonialism, sex, etc.

Much of this democratizing in the social sciences and humanities is motivated by a legitimate impulse to tell a more complete story about our world. There are, however, at least three problems that attend this move—problems which require us to turn back to traditional modes as the appropriate corrective.

First, much of human history is shaped by elite players. To understand Athens and Sparta, you must study Solon and Lycurgus; Rome—Cicero, Caesar, and Augustus; France—Charlemagne and Napoleon; The United States of America—Washington, Lincoln, the Founding Fathers; and so on. And what is true in political history is often true in other domains. Each one has a pantheon of *live players* who shape and re-shape our sense of what is possible. To understand the history of science, religion, or the arts you need to study its greatest teachers, innovators, and practitioners.

Second, the democratizing tendency leads us to underestimate the significance of elite influence on the world. As Machiavelli argues, great founders establish the "modes and orders" that structure and inform civilization. This isn't to say that all social phenomena are created on purpose. There is a role for emergence, local influence, change, and drift. The point is, rather, that all of the highest orders of complex social organization are the products of intentional design. Great founders don't create their working materials, but they do shape their "clay" into forms that it otherwise wouldn't take. Too often we forget, or take for granted, the purpose of the institutions we live within. But when we try to fully understand our social world, we are compelled to tell the story of these structures from the moment of their design.

Third, the study of great foundings helps us to better appreciate the nature and limits of collective enterprise. Great foundings allow us to see the "matter" in the light of the various "forms" that it takes. Any well-articulated social entity has its own order and principles—what we can call its "regime." The regime is shaped decisively by the mind and will of its founder. It is then transmitted to his leadership corps, to be piloted and successively transmitted for as long as it continues to work effectively.

Our democratizing culture wants to do justice to the parts of history that it feels have been unduly neglected. Again, there is a legitimate motive here that we must respect. But when we steer away from understanding human life in light of the peaks of leadership, vision, and achievement, we cut ourselves off from a most useful window into human phenomena. **To understand our world—to take stock of the promise and potential of our institutions—we need to climb to the higher altitudes of the great founders.**

In this series, we will study examples of great founders from antiquity to the present. Our main concern will be to make sense of what it means to create a regime—an *order* of rules that instantiates a *mode* of life—and how regimes inform collective enterprise, including cities, nation states, companies, and firms.

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Samo Burja, *Great Founder Theory*

Introduction

A theory of history

Where are we, how did we get here, and where are we going? If we knew, could we change course? And what would it take to succeed? Many disciplines have sought to answer these proverbial big questions, with answers ranging from the philosophical to the biological and everything in between. But often overlooked is the value of history. The recorded history of human civilization over the last 10,000 years, with the stories and sagas of empires, religions, and great individuals, has left us with a tremendous corpus of raw material to read and analyze. Should we?

Perhaps history is overlooked because it feels superficially irrelevant to contemporary problems and issues. Much of it may be. Alternately, we might take the view of the ancient Biblical book of Ecclesiastes that there is "nothing new under the sun". Already, we must make an important epistemological decision. Our beliefs concerning large-scale patterns of the present world carry predictions for the future and explanations of the past. Yet, when we think about society as a greater whole and the humans in it, it seems all too natural to consider these kinds of models separately.

We change explanations of social phenomena to fit time periods, without principled reasons for doing so, for why some factors come to dominate. This divide is an artifact of our lived experience and limited knowledge, not of reality itself. Whether we like it or not, attempting to evaluate reality on the scale of society is to implicitly claim an overall theory of history.

In order to create such a theory, it is necessary to explore the functioning of institutions, the transmission of knowledge, and the landscape of power, among a number of other key dynamics. These phenomena substantially overlap and interact. I will summarize and illuminate this overlap, and try to make the common driving factor of their dynamics explicit in what I call "Great Founder Theory."

On institutions

What is an institution? This term conjures associations with organizations such as governments, courts, corporations, and universities. For our purposes, an institution is a zone of close coordination maintained by automated systems.

There is a spectrum of automation, however, and the more automated something becomes, the more useful it is to call it an institution. The most automated of institutions can be understood as bureaucracies.

We can understand the world as a landscape of functional and non-functional institutions. Functional institutions are the exception. Creating functional institutions requires a founder who knows how to coordinate people to achieve the institution's

purpose, and who uses this knowledge to build new institutions or dismantle and rebuild existing ones.

Non-functional institutions are not simply institutions where, say, the buildings are on fire or mass layoffs have started. We might call those failed institutions, at the extreme end of non-functionality. Rather, the vast majority of non-functional institutions merely inadequately imitate functional institutions. In the institutional landscape, those are the norm, rather than the exception. They attempt to copy the relevant social technology from one or several functional institutions. Such non-functional institutions can still easily generate narratives of being goal-oriented and functional, both for internal consumption by functionaries and external consumption by observers and competitors.

The internal narrative helps non-functional institutions achieve modest effects locally, but these are side effects of socializing. Its members might individually pursue actions towards the organization's goal, perhaps even believing they are pursuing them effectively; however, the social interface rewards appearance rather than reality, hence close cooperation towards the organization's goals cannot materialize. The narrative is not only maintained internally, but broadcast to external society as well in order to invite participation in the appearance of functionality. Everybody has to keep their story straight.

One sign and symptom of this simple optimization for appearance is that everyone in the organization is trying to perform the same kind of task—the one that is most socially rewarded—rather than them being specialized according to their function.

The body of the institution becomes a social club gathered under pretense. We shouldn't disparage the value of socializing itself. Anomie, the rift between individual and community, has only grown since the sociologist Emile Durkheim introduced the concept in his diagnosis of 19th century society. Given our predicament, it is perhaps wise to try and build community by any means available, so our society should tolerate some false pretense for socializing. Perhaps that is the very reason we have even more non-functional institutions today than the historical average.

However, whatever the talent or intentions of individuals within such a non-functional institution, the main body of the institution, the communal fabric of socializing and even material incentive, stands in the way of fully realizing the institution's nominal function.

Ultimately, vital functions must be realized. To name only a few, imagine militaries that cannot win wars, churches that cannot maintain communities, governments that cannot guarantee security, universities that cannot maintain intellectual life, courts that don't uphold the rule of law, industries that don't produce goods, and R&D labs that fail to advance technology.

To fail at all of these functions would amount to a failed society.

Limits to knowledge and effects of limitation

A society can make do with having some functional institutions and some dysfunctional institutions. You could argue that the Roman Empire, for century after century, succeeded in building armies that could win wars, but failed to maintain the intellectual life inherited from the Hellenic era, for example.

Even then, such a society pays a high and often invisible opportunity cost. They might believe their institutions are functional, because they have simply never seen the functions carried out well. There are no outliers that can be used to disprove the thesis that the status quo is the best that can be done.

The invisibility of dysfunction may follow from a lack of viable comparisons. Comparisons between often competing societies are difficult because of clashing politics and social narratives. How well would a French audience have received a treatment of the strategic merits of pan-Germanism in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War? Comparisons across time are difficult, because of confounding factors we cannot control for. Commentators and historians today draw all kinds of parallels between contemporary America and historical empires, yet there is no single comparison that seems notably more explanatory than the others. Comparisons against theoretical ideals are limited by the quality of theory. We might only be able to clearly compare functional and non-functional institutions when functional institutions still exist in the same domain of society. This illustrates what a crucial difference even one functional institution can make.

If an organization is clearly better, it is possible to imitate it. In a famous Caltech commencement address, Feynman explained the folly of simple-minded imitation, likening such imitation to the notion of the "cargo cult": just as a lucky hunter-gatherer tribe in the path of cargo airdrops during World War II built imitation airstrips and wooden control towers after the war under the expectation that such forms were the causes of cargo airdrops, so too do we copy the appearances of old functional institutions without understanding or replicating their true nature.[1] As long as the functional example is still around, however, you can keep returning to it, each time narrowing in on what steps actually make it work. You are only stuck building wooden airplanes or wearing turtlenecks if the original is no longer around.[2] Success through reverse engineering is much easier than blind trial and error, even after controlling for false starts and dead ends.

This kind of imitation can bring you to an increasingly better approximation of a given set of social technology. However, since the social technology behind functional institutions wasn't discovered through blind tinkering, it is ultimately grounded in an existing tradition of knowledge.

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[1] Richard Feynman, "Cargo Cult Science" (commencement address, CalTech, Pasadena, CA, 1974), http://calteches.library.caltech.edu/51/2/CargoCult.htm.
[2] Kate Storey, "Why the Black Turtleneck Was So Important to Elizabeth Holmes's Image," Esquire, March 18, 2019, https://www.esquire.com/style/mens-fashion/a26836670/elizabeth-holmes-steve-jobs-black-turtleneck/.

Once that tradition is lost, you are making photocopies of photocopies. Each subsequent copy loses information. A crucial difference between organisms and organizations is that organizations do not undergo natural selection.[3] Since the fidelity of transmitting intricate social technologies is so low, complex adaptations cannot arise.

There is no corporate equivalent to DNA. The positive copying errors do not propagate and overwhelm the negative copying errors as they would in millions of years of evolution in wasps or elephants. This means that institutions only arise through the process of imitation and invention carried out by human minds.

A single new functional institution that visibly and strongly outperforms others in its reference class offers an educational example that can be followed by many. Imitation of practice is much easier and faster than transfer of knowledge, especially when the tradition of knowledge is still alive to be imitated.

Some functional institutions shoulder the burden of their civilizational function entirely on their own. There was only one organization that sent human beings to the Moon: NASA under Wernher von Braun.

Whether because of the scale of the task they handled and consequently their solitary nature, or because other institutions learn from their crucial example, functional institutions are often irreplaceable. When a functional institution dies, the living tradition of knowledge disappears, followed only by ever fainter echoes.

Such institutions, when they arise, provide far more value to society than they can possibly capture for themselves or their founders.

A civilization is an ecosystem of institutions

In "Institutional Failure as Surprise," we explore how institutions rely on each other for handling many necessities. Examples include infrastructure, enforcement of contracts, security, intellectual culture, design—too many to exhaustively name.

No single institution is self-sufficient. Rather it is a part of an ecosystem, receiving and giving support in complex arrangements. Due to interdependency and the extreme differences in functionality among institutions, functional institutions subsidize all others. Consider, for example, how companies like Apple or Facebook, which provide hardware or software platforms of unprecedented scale, make it possible for ecosystems of apps and games—and the companies that develop them—to thrive. Facebook could survive without Zynga, but not vice versa.

Functional institutions solve and handle hard tasks not just for themselves but for many other organizations and communities. Thus, even mere social groups, being able to outsource to (not to mention imitate) functional institutions, can become quite productive. Functional institutions provide multipliers that make the non-functional institutions' modest linear efforts worthwhile.

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3 Eliezer Yudkowsky, "No Evolutions for Corporations or Nanodevices," LessWrong (blog), November 16, 2007, https://www.lesswrong.com/posts/XC7Kry5q6CD9TyG4K/no-evolutions-for-corporations-or-nanodevices.

In a civilization with several functional institutions, everything seems to work very well. The ubiquitous perception of functionality is then reflected in the culture and produces a very palpable mood of optimism. Nothing seems beyond the civilization's grasp.

People impact the world through the institutions they build

The term institution is similar, but not synonymous, with the concept of an empire, though they can overlap in some cases. An empire is a region of coordination around a central power, where the central power is the cause of the region of coordination. An institution can be the entirety of a given person's empire, but empires can also include multiple institutions. Naturally, functional institutions can extend the reach of personal empires.

I argue in "Competition for Power" that people's impact on the world follows a Pareto-like distribution, with the most impactful people having a far greater impact than the rest. The creation of functional institutions is the means by which people are hugely impactful. People who build institutions are far more impactful than people who don't, and among those, people who build functional institutions are by far the most impactful.

The height of personal power amassed by creators of functional institutions can certainly dwarf the power held by those merely inheriting them. But power is a means, not an end. The big picture impact of such impressive personal empires doesn't lie in the power to right particular wrongs or achieve particular aims, but rather in how such empires lay the foundation for building further institutions.

A functional institution can outright solve a problem for a civilization. It might, for example, complete the construction of infrastructure so important it changes the course of economic development for centuries to come, such as ancient China's grand canal or a hypothetical space elevator.[4]

A functional institution can subsidize the working of many other ventures through providing services that other institutions and communities can rely on. One might consider Hammurabi or Muhammad's systems of law as examples, with many other revered lawgivers in history besides.

Those who build these functional institutions mold society, outperforming all others by orders of magnitude. This dynamic holds true even among the founders of functional institutions themselves: within this set, those who build the very most

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[4] The canal system which would eventually become the Grand Canal was first constructed in the Warring States period, directed by officials known as hydraulic engineers (水工), powerful actors and often statesmen in their own right. Centuries later, the network of canals was connected and unified into the Grand Canal by the chief engineer of the Sui Dynasty, creating an aquatic highway stretching from Beijing to Hangzhou, the equivalent of the distance from New York to Florida—the chief artery of Chinese civilization. For more, see Joseph Needham, Lu Gwei-Djen, and Ling Wang, Science and Civilisation in China, Vol. 4: Physics and Physical Technology, Part 3: Civil Engineering and Nautics, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 285, 307. On a space elevator, see "What Is a Space Elevator?" International Space Elevator Consortium, 2014, https://www.isec.org/faq.

functional institutions are much more impactful than the rest of those founders who build functional institutions.

As a further consequence, the founders of these institutions are responsible for the vast majority of social technology that we see in society. Most social technologies, especially advanced ones, cannot be explained by evolutionary analogy, whether Darwinian or Lamarckian, although mutation and evolution may be helpful in explaining the ways in which social technology decays.

Rather, social technologies appear in clear, discontinuous jumps, with several interlocking, interdependent institutional complexes put into place in a short time span. They did not evolve, but were designed and then implemented. The Founding Fathers of the United States, who created Congress, the Presidency, the Supreme Court, and much more, all at once, serve as a clear example.

I will call those who found the most functional institutions that contribute to the bedrock of their civilizations great founders. Through the creation of institutions, great founders become the primary force that shapes society.

To examine a society, then, we should first look for functioning institutions. A simple way to do this is to identify businesses, religions, governments, and so forth that are radically outperforming their competitors. We then seek out the founders of these institutions.

By looking at the distribution of founders across various domains, we can make predictions about the future of specific fields and industries. Even further, by investigating the plans and intentions of great founders, and evaluating how likely they are to succeed, we can make specific predictions about what the future holds.

The actions and capabilities of great founders determine the future social and material landscape of civilization, and thus the future of the world. Societies with many great founders will innovate and flourish, while societies with few will stagnate and deteriorate.

Samo Burja, "Live vs. Dead Players"

Whether you are examining past societies or living and acting within one today, it's important to distinguish between *live* and *dead* players. A live player is a person or well-coordinated group of people that is able to do things they have not done before. A dead player is a person or group of people that is working off a script, incapable of doing new things.

This distinction matters both for pragmatic and strategic reasons: it tells you how to act both offensively and defensively. Offensively, if you figure out whether a player is alive or dead, you can predict how they will respond to things and what that means you can do. If you find out that a player is dead, then you know that you can confront them in ways that are not known to them, and they will not be able to fight back. On the other hand, if you fail to figure out that a player has died, you might not realize that you can get away with replacing them. Defensively, paying attention to live players allows you to anticipate and prevent the grabbing of power, for instance.

The distinction between live and dead players also matters if you are trying to predict the future of society. You can predict what will happen in a society if you understand its landscape of live players. Societies with few live players will stagnate; societies with many live players will develop and adapt.

Whether a player is alive or dead is always relative to themselves. Thus, a live player is not necessarily exceptional in skill, although this is usually the case. If a player has already done X, doing X again does not make them a live player, even if other players can't do X yet or X is an impressive move. The player would have to make a move that is new for them in order to be a live player.

For example, Vladimir Putin is a live player, and by virtue of his piloting the institutional machinery of the Russian state, Russia is also a live player. The Russian state is doing things it hasn't done in a long time, things that were unthinkable a few years ago. Russia annexed Crimea, for example, and such a thing hasn't been done in Europe for decades. It also completed a successful military operation in Syria, notable in part because Syria is beyond Russia's geopolitical stronghold of peripheral former Soviet states in its "near abroad," and Putin managed to achieve his foreign policy objective of stabilizing Assad at considerably less cost than comparable American interventions in the Middle East.

Russia didn't have much time to develop plans for Syria—perhaps three years—which means it had to pull things together quickly. This is a very strong indicator that Russia can figure out new things, and quickly too. However, one country having this kind of influence over another country is nothing new—it's merely new for post-Soviet Russia, which is why we would deem Russia a live player. This same action taken by France in Mali would not indicate that France is a live player, for example, because France has routinely intervened in West Africa. A bureaucratized action, even if it is an impressive action, is not a sign that the player is alive.

It is possible then to describe the characteristics of live versus dead players in greater detail, which will help in distinguishing between them.

Live Players

It's worth restating the definition of a live player: a live player is a person or tightly coordinated group of people that is able to do things they have not done before. There are two attributes that are necessary for a player to be considered live: tight coordination and a living tradition of knowledge.

If not merely one individual, a live player that is a group of people must be tightly coordinated in order to be flexible and responsive enough to do things they have not done before. This allows them to make moves outside of the formal structure of the group, go off script, modify themselves, continue acting even if the outer form dies, and so forth. Imagine, for example, an engineering team that keeps working together successfully after the company they work for formally blows up, perhaps transitioning together to a new company or just coordinating as hobbyists on the side.

The generation of new tactics, strategies, coordination mechanisms, and so on entails the production of new, useful knowledge. Thus, a live player must have a living tradition of knowledge. For the tradition of knowledge to be living, it must have at least one theorist, among other things. An individual live player may fulfill multiple roles in themselves, including being one's own theorist.

Signs of Live Players

What are signs that a player is alive? One strong sign is a player doing things outside of their expected domain—in a new, unexpected domain—which indicates that they can figure out new things for themselves.

Take Steve Jobs. Not too long ago, we saw Apple fighting against compliance with government requests for backdoor access to its data. This means that Jobs had previously found a way around compliance, which also means that Jobs was able to figure out ways to deal with the intelligence world. This was outside of his expected domain of building technology companies. This is a strong sign that Apple, at least while piloted by Steve Jobs, was a live player.

Another sign of a live player is exceptional individuals gravitating towards them. Such individuals tend to be good at assessing others, and will tend to seek out others who are also exceptional. If they cluster around a person or group, there is something exceptional about that person or group. Successfully reverse-engineering an attack is another, albeit weak, sign of a live player. Those who can make novel moves will also tend to be able to reverse-engineer moves, but those who can reverse-engineer moves often lack the ability to create novel ones.

Spotting live players is made difficult by the live players themselves. Live players frequently conceal themselves to avoid opposition from other live players or to reduce the

likelihood of attacks. By concealing themselves, they delay other people's responses to them. For example, Amazon branded itself as a book-selling company long after it stopped being merely a book-selling company. This helped it avoid having Walmart think of it as a competitor. Nowadays, Amazon might prefer people think of it as a competitor to Walmart, to avoid people thinking of it as a competitor to SpaceX, Microsoft, or even the U.S. government.

Dead Players

We defined a dead player as a person or a group of people that is working off a script, incapable of doing new things.

What can cause a player to die? A player will die if their tradition of knowledge dies and they are unable to replace their thinkers or theorists. Perhaps an individual live player simply runs out of ideas. Even if tight coordination remains, the player is dead. They will compete in old areas, but have a hard time expanding into new areas.

A player will also die if their tight coordination is replaced by formal structures, which can happen as members of an organization change. If you're constrained by formal structures, it becomes harder to go off script, and this won't be adaptive enough. Remember, however, that tight coordination can be achieved by just one exceptional person.

Revival

How can you revive a dead player? It only takes one great person to revive a dead player. That said, reviving a dead player is challenging—more challenging than reviving a dead tradition of knowledge. In order to revive a dead player, you have to displace an existing power structure. It is frequently easier to do this by conquering the existing power structure with outside, owned power, than by trying to transform the player from dead to alive from the inside. This is because a dead player, if it is an organization, may contain mechanisms that preclude insiders from gaining enough power to restructure it into a live player.

Apple is an example of a dead player. It became much less interesting and powerful after Steve Jobs' death. Under him, it was a cultural and commercial force that was able to interface effectively with the U.S. government.[5] Now, it is a bureaucracy imitating his taste. It is incapable of adapting, building beautiful new things, and acquiring power.[6]

It's much easier to detect live players than it is to detect dead players. This is because seemingly dead players might actually be alive (and playing dead).

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[5] Alexia Tsotsis, "Why Was Apple Late To The PRISM Party?," TechCrunch, June 17, 2013, https://techcrunch.com/2013/06/17/apple-nsa/.

[6] Apple's main function now is to maintain a hold on previously amassed power. Apple has not developed a revolutionary product in years, and is instead focused on streamlining and integrating UI across its products. Apple's target market is not new users; it is only existing ones. See Dieter Bohn, "Apple and the End of the Genius," The Verge, June 28, 2019, https://www.theverge.com/2019/6/28/18870887/apple-jony-ive-design-genius-committee.

Machiavelli, *The Prince*

VI – Of New Principalities That Are Acquired through One's Own Arms and Virtue

No one should marvel if, in speaking as I will do of principalities that are altogether new both in prince and in state, I bring up the greatest examples. For since men almost always walk on paths beaten by others and proceed in their actions by imitation, unable either to stay on the paths of others altogether or to attain the virtue of those whom you imitate, a prudent man should always enter upon the paths beaten by great men, and imitate those who have been most excellent, so that if his own virtue does not reach that far, it is at least in the odor of it. He should do as prudent archers do when the place they plan to hit appears too distant, and knowing how far the strength[7] of their bow carries, they set their aim much higher than the place intended, not to reach such height with their arrow, but to be able with the aid of so high an aim to achieve their plan.

I say, then, that in altogether new principalities, where there is a new prince, one encounters more or less difficulty in maintaining them according to whether the one who acquires them is more or less virtuous. And because the result of becoming prince from private individual presupposes either virtue or fortune, it appears that one or the other of these two things relieves in part many difficulties; nonetheless, he who has relied less on fortune has maintained himself more. To have the prince compelled to come to live there in person, because he has no other states, makes it still easier. But, to come to those who have become princes by their own virtue and not by fortune, I say that the most excellent are Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, Theseus, and the like. And although one should not reason about Moses, as he was a mere executor of things that had been ordered for him by God, nonetheless he should be admired if only for that grace which made him deserving of speaking with God. But let us consider Cyrus and the others who have acquired or founded kingdoms: you[8] will find them all admirable; and if their particular actions and orders are considered, they will appear no different from those of Moses, who had so great a teacher. And as one examines their actions and lives, one does not see that they had anything else from fortune than the opportunity, which gave them the matter enabling them to introduce any form they pleased. Without that opportunity their virtue of spirit would have been eliminated, and without that virtue the opportunity would have come in vain.

It was necessary then for Moses to find the people of Israel in Egypt, enslaved and oppressed by the Egyptians, so that they would be disposed to follow him so as to get out of their servitude. It was fitting that Romulus not be received in Alba, that he should have been exposed at birth, if he was to become king of Rome and founder of that fatherland. Cyrus needed to find the Persians malcontent with the empire of the Medes, and the Medes soft and effeminate because of a long peace. Theseus could not have demonstrated his virtue if he had not found the Athenians dispersed. Such

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[7] lit.: virtue

[8] The formal or plural you.

opportunities, therefore, made these men happy, and their excellent virtue enabled the opportunity to be recognized; hence their fatherlands were ennobled by it and became very happy.

Those like these men, who become princes by the paths of virtue, acquire their principality with difficulty but hold it with ease; and the difficulties they have in acquiring their principality arise in part from the new orders and modes that they are forced to introduce so as to found their state and their security. And it should be considered that nothing is more difficult to handle, more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to manage, than to put oneself at the head of introducing new orders. For the introducer has all those who benefit from the old orders as enemies, and he has lukewarm defenders in all those who might benefit from the new orders. This lukewarmness arises partly from fear of adversaries who have the laws on their side and partly from the incredulity of men, who do not truly believe in new things unless they come to have a firm experience of them. Consequently, whenever those who are enemies have opportunity to attack, they do so with partisan zeal, and the others defend lukewarmly so that one is in peril along with them. It is however necessary, if one wants to discuss this aspect well, to examine whether these innovators stand by themselves or depend on others; that is, whether to carry out their deed they must beg[9] or indeed can use force. In the first case they always come to ill and never accomplish anything; but when they depend on their own and are able to use force, then it is that they are rarely in peril. From this it arises that all the armed prophets conquered and the unarmed ones were ruined. For, besides the things that have been said, the nature of peoples is variable; and it is easy to persuade them of something, but difficult to keep them in that persuasion. And thus things must be ordered in such a mode that when they no longer believe, one can make them believe by force. Moses, Cyrus, Theseus, and Romulus would not have been able to make their peoples observe their constitutions for long if they had been unarmed, as happened in our times to Brother Girolamo Savonarola. He was ruined in his new orders as soon as the multitude began not to believe in them, and he had no mode for holding firm those who had believed nor for making unbelievers believe.[10] Men such as these, therefore, find great difficulty in conducting their affairs; all their dangers are along the path, and they must overcome them with virtue. But once they have overcome them and they begin to be held in veneration, having eliminated those who had envied them for their quality, they remain powerful, secure, honored, and happy.

To such high examples I want to add a lesser example, but it will have some proportion with the others and I want it to suffice for all other similar cases: this is Hiero of Syracuse. From private individual he became prince of Syracuse, nor did he receive

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[9] Or pray.

[10] Savonarola (1452-98) was a Dominican friar who came to Florence to preach in 1481, and succeeded in convincing the Florentines, who thought themselves "neither rude nor ignorant," that "he spoke with God." Cf. *Discourses on Livy* I 11, where NM praises this accomplishment and does not refer, as he does here, to Savonarola's terrible end by burning at the stake.

anything more from fortune than the opportunity. For when the Syracusans were oppressed, they chose him as their captain, and from there he proved worthy of being made their prince. And he was of such virtue, even in private fortune, that he who wrote of him said "that he lacked nothing of being a king except a kingdom."[11] Hiero eliminated the old military and organized a new one; he left his old friendships and made new ones; and when he had friendships and soldiers that were his own, he could build any building on top of such a foundation; so he went through a great deal of trouble to acquire, and little to maintain.

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[11] Possible sources: Polybius, I 8, 16; VII 8; Livy XXIV 4; Justin, XXIII 4; I Samuel 18:8. Cf. the Dedicatory Letter to the *Discourses on Livy*.