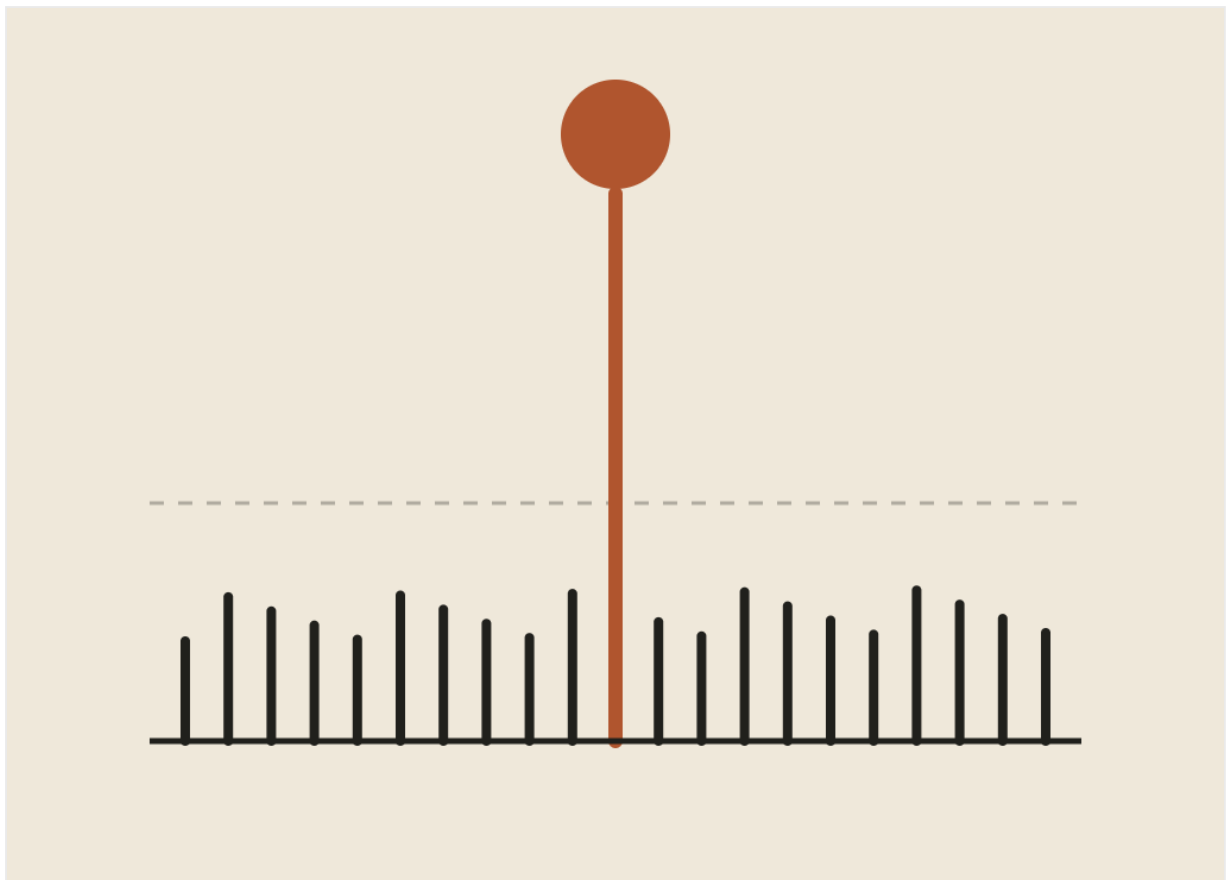


History

The Great Man Theory of Technology

Historians spent a century insisting no single person moves the world. Then you read the record of invention, and the heresy starts to look like data.

By Emmanuel Awosika ■ October 18, 2025 ■



Serious history spent much of the twentieth century dismantling the great man theory, the old idea that history is the biography of a few outsized individuals. The replacement was a more sophisticated picture

in which deep forces, economic, social, and material, do the real work, and the famous names are just the faces that happened to be standing where the wave broke. For most of history this correction was healthy and largely correct. But applied without care to the history of invention, it runs into an awkward body of evidence.

The strongest case for the impersonal view is the phenomenon of simultaneous invention. William Ogburn catalogued dozens of cases in which the same discovery was made independently by different people at nearly the same moment. Calculus arrived with Newton and Leibniz at once. The telephone reached the patent office in the hands of Bell and Gray on the same day. Natural selection occurred to Darwin and Wallace in parallel. If the idea was ripe enough to fall to two or three people at the same time, the argument goes, then no individual was truly necessary. The forces were driving toward the result, and someone was always going to arrive.

This is powerful, but it proves less than it seems. Simultaneous invention shows that certain ideas become reachable once the prior conditions are in place. It does not show that every consequential advance was overdetermined in this way, and the record contains plenty that were not. Some breakthroughs sat available for decades, all the pieces present, until a particular mind assembled them in a way no one else had. The counterfactual where that person is absent is not a world where the thing arrives a year later. It is sometimes a world where it arrives a generation later, or in a form so different that the downstream history bends.

The honest position lives between the two stories, which is unsatisfying but true. The deep forces set the range of the possible. They determine which inventions are on the table at all in a given time and place, and they explain why no amount of genius produced a jet engine in the

Bronze Age. Within that range, individuals still matter, sometimes enormously, in choosing which possibility gets realized, how fast, and in what shape. The forces load the dice. Particular people still throw them.

What makes the great man theory worth rescuing, in this narrow domain, is that the fashionable correction overshot. In its eagerness to deny that any one person is indispensable, it slid toward the claim that no one is, that the named inventors are interchangeable placeholders for an inevitability. The invention record does not support that. It supports something more interesting and less tidy, in which structure and agency are both real, the wave and the surfer both necessary, and the biography of the individual is neither the whole story nor a story you can safely delete.