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## Reputations are made by great PR

Published: January 26 2011 01:12 | Last updated: January 26 2011 01:12

From Mr Philip Whiteley.

Sir, Gideon Rachman ("**Where have all the thinkers gone?**", January 25) covers most of the reasons that current leading thinkers do not appear to be of the same calibre as previous generations, but he overlooks one important element: the power of reputation. In short, were some of those "great" figures from the past really so great? Does Karl Marx belong in the category, when pretty much all his assumptions and predictions turned out to be, well, wrong? His ideas caused much death and destruction – and for nothing. From the right wing, step forward Milton Friedman, who gave us the credit crisis.

A decade ago Bent Flyvbjerg, now chair of major programme management at the Said Business School, Oxford, pinpointed the error most "great" economists and other social scientists have made since the Enlightenment. Their shared belief has been that the models of the physical sciences could be applied to society. A fairly basic observation – that society consists of sentient beings called humans – has been missing from most contemporary "taken-for-granted" assumptions.

His book *Making Social Science Matter*, in which he warned that the economy was not predictable and could not be modelled, should have been required reading for the investment banks and finance editors, but I don't see it in the best-seller lists. Mary Midgley, the moral philosopher who surely towers above many famous dead white men, has made similar points.

I suggest the workings of the PR industry, and sheer randomness, have much influence on how the epithet "great" sticks to some names and not others, irrespective of their achievements – or birth date.

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