

The Power of Stupidity



by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 7 – Cipolla’s Laws

One of the most interesting essays ever written about stupidity can be amusing because of its tongue-in-cheek, ironic style – but it’s better to take it quite seriously, because the subject isn’t funny. It’s called *The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity*. It was written originally in English, over thirty years ago, by Carlo M. Cipolla, Professor Emeritus of Economic History at Berkeley. But it was practically unknown to the general public until it was included, in Italian, in a book that was published in 1988. Unfortunately the English text is not publicly available.¹

Some of Carlo Cipolla’s observations (bright as they are) confirm existing knowledge and general commonsense. Such as the fact that the size of the problem – or “the number of stupid people”, in all human categories and societies – is generally and broadly underestimated.² This is something that we can all notice everywhere and every day. Aware as we may be of the overwhelming power of stupidity, we are quite often surprised by its surfacing when and where we least expect it.

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¹ Carlo M. Cipolla, *Allegro ma non troppo*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1988, Italian translation by Anna Parish. *The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity* are in the last 37 pages. In 2001 that book was published in Spanish and Portuguese – but not in English. Cipolla’s essay on stupidity was written in the early Seventies and circulated privately by photocopy. In 1976 it was printed in a thin booklet as a Christmas gift to a few colleagues and friends. In 1987 it was published by the *Whole Earth Review* – apparently without the author’s agreement. In 2002 the original English text was online, in *Ecotopia* and other websites. But suddenly, in 2006, the copyright owners decided to prohibit its publication everywhere – including the internet. And so it became, again, unavailable. That’s a pity. But, alas, that’s the law. Sometimes it reappears in different places online, but I can’t say where, because it’s “illegal” – and, by the time this book is printed, it may have vanished again.

² Cipolla’s First Law: «*Always and inevitably everyone underestimates the number of stupid individuals in circulation*» – page 45 in the Italian edition

Two consequences are pretty obvious in any analysis of the problem. One is that we often underestimate the awful effects of stupidity.³ The other is that, because it is so unpredictable, stupid behavior is more dangerous than intentional mischief⁴ (as was clearly summarized by Robert Heinlein in *Hanlon's Razor* – see chapter 1.)

What is missing in this perspective (as in the case of Walter Pitkin and almost every author dealing with this subject) is a consideration of our stupidity – or, in any case, of the stupidity factor that exists even in the most intelligent people. See chapter 9 for more comments on this subject.

One of the key notions in Carlo Cipolla's theory (as well as in the studies by James Welles) is that a person's stupidity is "independent of any other characteristic of that person." In other words, stupidity is equally shared by all humanity.⁵

This is a basic point, that may contradict some widespread opinions, but it's confirmed by any careful analysis of the problem. This isn't just some bland, superficial way of being "politically correct." It is substantially true that no human category is more intelligent – or more stupid – than another. There is no difference in the level and frequency of stupidity by gender, age, race, color, ethnic background, culture, education, etcetera (ignorance may be influenced by stupidity, or vice versa, but they are not the same thing – see chapter 13.)

There is a concept, in Cipolla's theory, that I have adopted as a method in some of my analyses. It's defined in his "Third (and Golden) Law" – *«A stupid person is a person who causes losses to another person or to a group of persons while himself deriving no gain and even possibly incurring losses.»*⁶

An important advantage of this approach is that it avoids the thorny problem of trying to find, in theory, a definition of stupidity (or intelligence) while it evaluates its relevance in relation to practical effects.

It's pretty clear that, with this criterion, different categories of behavior can be defined. At one extreme we find people who do good for themselves as well as for others (therefore we call them "intelligent.") At the other end of the spectrum there are people who do harm to themselves as well as to others (and those are "stupid.")

Obviously there are at least two "in between" categories. One that harms others while gaining self advantage (Cipolla calls them "bandits.") And one where we place people who harm themselves while doing good for others.

³ Cipolla's Fourth Law: *«Non-stupid people always underestimate the damaging power of stupid individuals. In particular non-stupid people constantly forget that at all times and places and under any circumstances to deal and/or associate with stupid people always turns out to be a costly mistake»* – It. ed. page 72.

⁴ Cipolla's Fifth Law: *«A stupid person is the most dangerous type of person»* with the corollary *«A stupid person is more dangerous than a bandit»* – It. ed. page 73.

⁵ Cipolla's Second Law: *«The probability that a certain person be stupid is independent of any other characteristic of that person»* – It. ed. page 48.

⁶ This is the central focus of Cipolla's theory – It. ed. page 58.

The definition of this last category isn't as simple as it may seem. It isn't always appropriate to call them "hapless" or "hopeless." That approach may seem correct if gain or loss are measured according to simplistic criteria of "classic" economy. But it can be wrong when applied to people who deliberately sacrifice some of their own benefits for the good of others – as explained in the next few pages (chapter 8.)

The most useful concept in Carlo Cipolla's approach is the definition of stupidity (and intelligence) based on the results of human behavior, not on difficult and questionable theories. We shall see in the next two chapters some practical results of this method – as well as the reasons why some of the criteria that I am following in the development of this subject are different from those indicated by his "laws."

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I am deliberately avoiding any attempt to offer a formal definition of stupidity. We can be quite precise on the subject by discussing how stupidity relates with other behaviors. As well as what it does, how it works, the nature of its causes and effects, the ways in which it can be understood and its hideous influence can be prevented or reduced.

However, for those who are interested, there is a definition – by James Welles – that fits the purpose better than any other I have ever read. It's online, with my comments: gandalf.it/stupid/defining.pdf

Essentially, it points to a key fact: the problem of stupidity is basically connected with information, communication and knowledge. The basic tools to control it are listening, curiosity and doubt. As we shall see in the next chapters – especially at the end, in *Antidotes and Prevention*.

A description of the book
is online – stupidity.it