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THE POWER OF STUPIDITY By Giancarlo Livraghi

Originally written as a "special report" for Entropy Gradient Reversals

I have always been fascinated with Stupidity.

My own, of course; and that's a big enough cause of anxiety.

But things get much worse when one has a chance to find out how Big People take Big Decisions.

We generally tend to blame awful decisions on intentional perversity, astute mischievousness, megalomania, etc. They are there, all right; but any careful study of history, or current events, leads to the invariable conclusion that the single biggest source of terrible mistakes is sheer stupidity. When it combines with other factors (as happens quite often) the results can be devastating.

One of the many examples of stupidity is that intrigue and powermongering are called "machiavellian". Obviously nobody has read his books, as that is not what old Niccolò meant.

Another thing that surprises me (or does it?) is the very little amount of study dedicated to such an important subject. There are University departments for the mathematical complexities in the movements of Amazonian ants, or the medieval history of Perim island; but I have never heard of any Foundation or Board of Trustees supporting any studies of Stupidology.

I have found very few good books on the subject. One I read when I was a teenager, but never forgot. It is called A Short Introduction to the History of Human Stupidity by Walter B. Pitkin of Columbia University, and was published in 1934. I found it by chance many years ago while browsing around my mother's bookshelves; and much to my delight, when I went to her home yesterday and looked for it, it was still there. Old as it is, it's still a very good book. Some of Professor Pitkin's observations appear extraordinarily correct sixty years later.

Now... why did he call a 300-page book a "short introduction"?

At the end of the book, it says: Epilogue: now we are ready to start studying the History of Stupidity. Nothing follows.

Professor Pitkin was a very wise man. He knew that a lifetime was far too short to cover even a fragment of such a vast subject. So he published the Introduction, and that was it.

Pitkin was well aware of the lack of previous work in the field. He had a team of researchers hunt through the files of the Central Library in New York. They found nothing. According to Pitkin, there were only two books on the subject: Aus der Geschichte der menschlichen Dummheit by Max Kemmerich, and Über die Dummheit by Lewenfeld. Unfortunately I don't understand German, though "Dummheit" sounds clear enough; and I guess Kemmerich and Lewenfeld must have had a special abundance of material for their studies, considering what happened in Germany in 1933 and following years.

In Pitkin's opinion, four people out of five are stupid enough to be called "stupid." That was one and a half billion people when he wrote the book; it is over four billion now. This, in itself, is quite stupid.

He observed that one of the problems of Stupidity is that nobody has a really good definition of what it is. In fact geniuses are often considered stupid by a stupid majority (though nobody has a good definition of genius, either). But stupidity is definitely there, and there is much more of it than our wildest nightmares might suggest. In fact, it runs the world – which is very clearly proven by the way the world is run.

But somebody, fifty-four years later, came up with a rather interesting definition. His name is Carlo M. Cipolla and he is Professor Emeritus of Economic History at Berkeley. All of his books are in English, except two. The first was published by "Il Mulino" in Bologna in 1988.

In that book there is a little essay called The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity, which may be the best ever written on the subject.

Here are the Five Laws of Stupidity according to Carlo Cipolla:

First Law
Always and inevitably everyone underestimates the number of stupid individuals in circulation.

This is not as obvious as it sounds, says Cipolla, because:

people whom one had once judged rational and intelligent turn out to be unashamedly stupid and day after day, with unceasing monotony, one is harassed in one's activities by stupid individuals who appear suddenly and unexpectedly in the most inconvenient places and at the most improbable moments.
He also observes that it is impossible to set a percentage, because any number we choose will be too small.

Second Law
The probability that a certain person be stupid is independent of any other characteristic of that person.

If you study the frequency of stupidity in the people who come to clean up classrooms after hours, you find that it is much higher than you expected. You assume that this is related to their lower level of education, or to the fact that non-stupid people have better chances of obtaining good jobs. But when you analyze students or University professors (or, I would add, computer programmers) the distribution is exactly the same.

Militant feminists may be incensed, says Cipolla, but the stupidity factor is the same in both genders (or as many genders, or sexes, as you may choose to consider). No difference in the sigma factor, as Cipolla calls it, can be found by race, color, ethnic heritage, education, etcetera.

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.

(We shall come back to this, because it is the pivotal concept of the Cipolla Theory.)

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.

That (I would say) suggests that non-stupid people are a bit stupid – but I shall get back to this point at the end.

Fifth Law
A stupid person is the most dangerous type of person.

This is probably the most widely understood of the Laws, if only because it is common knowledge that intelligent people, hostile as they might be, are predictable, while stupid people are not. Moreover, its basic corollary:

A stupid person is more dangerous than a bandit

leads us to the heart of the Cipolla Theory. There are four types of people, he says, depending on their behavior in a transaction:

Hapless (or "hopeless")
Someone whose actions tend to generate self-damage, but also to create advantage for someone else.

Intelligent
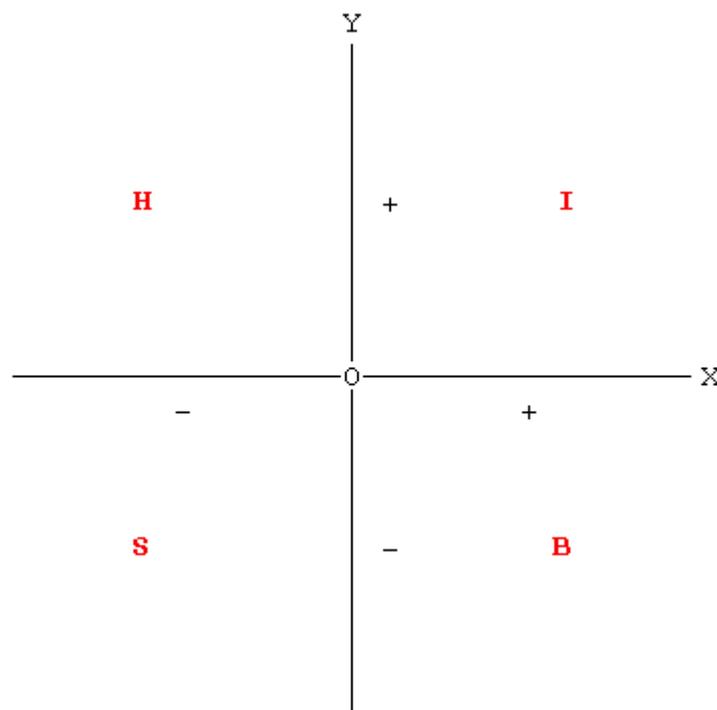**Someone whose actions tend to generate self-advantage, as well as advantage for others.**

Bandit
Someone whose actions tend to generate self-advantage while causing damage to others.

Stupid
We already have this definition in the Third Law.
Professor Cipolla uses a matrix that looks like this:

The "X" axis measures the advantage gained from one's actions.

The "Y" axis measures the advantage gained by another person (or group).

Clearly, people in the "I" area are intelligent, people in the "B" area are bandits, people in the "H" area are hapless, and people in the "S" area are stupid.

It is also quite clear that, depending on where they fall in this matrix, people have a greater or lesser degree of stupidity, intelligence, banditism, etc. One can develop quite a variety of combinations, such as smart bandits or stupid bandits, depending on the benefit-damage ratio. (In this, Cipolla observes, the amount of damage is to be measured from the perspective of the victim, not the bandit, which makes most thieves and criminals quite stupid.)

I guess that from here on each of us can use this matrix to study stupidity and elaborate the application of the Cipolla Theory in all its many possible variations.

But that is not quite the end of the story.
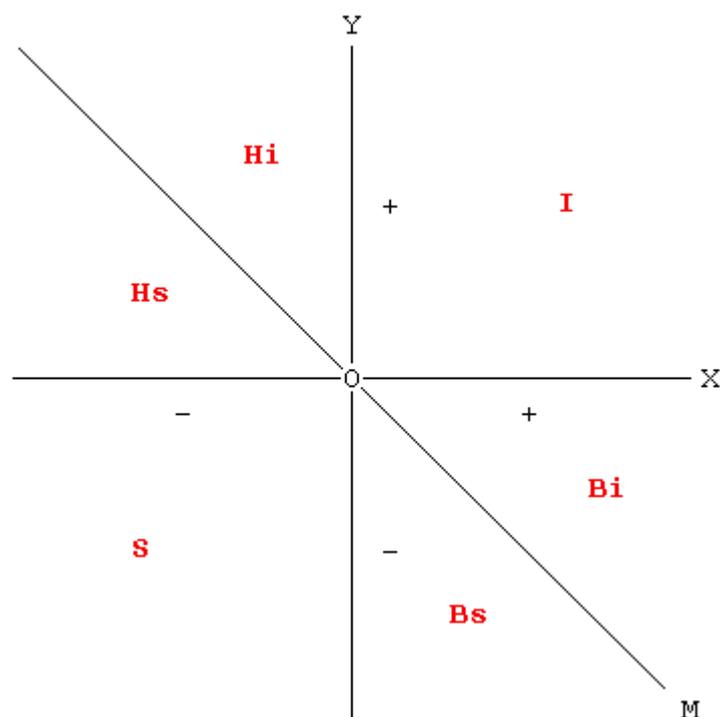
If we draw a diagonal line across the matrix, we find that everything on the upper right side of this line generates an improvement to the overall balance of the system, while events (and people) on the other side cause a deterioration.

A variety of interesting analyses can be conducted by studying variables in each of the four sectors, such a Sh and Sb, Ib and Ih, Hs and Hi, or as many sub-sectors as one may wish to define.

For instance, the "M" chord in the lower right side of the grid delineates the position of the "perfect bandit": someone who causes exactly as much damage as he or she accrues gain. Obviously, on the two sides of the diagonal you have "imperfect" bandits – Bi are "intelligent bandits" and Bs are "stupid bandits."

In a world populated exclusively by "perfect bandits," the system as a whole would be balanced; damage and advantage would cancel each other out. The same effect would occur in a world populated by "perfectly hapless" people.

Of course intelligent people make the biggest contribution to society as a whole. But, nasty as it may sound, intelligent bandits also contribute to an improvement in the balance of society by causing more advantage than harm overall. "Hapless-intelligent" people, though they lose individually, can also have socially positive effects.

However, when stupidity gets into the act, the damage is enormously greater than the benefit to anyone.

This proves the original point: the single most dangerous factor in any human society is stupidity.

As a historian, Cipolla points out that, while the sigma factor (stupidity) is a constant in time as well as space, a strong upcoming

society has a higher percentage of intelligent people, while a declining society has an alarming percentage of bandits with a strong stupidity factor (sub-area Bs in the grid) among the people in power, and an equally alarming percentage of hapless (H area) among those who are not in power.

Where are we now? That's a good question...

Cipolla also observes that intelligent people generally know they are, bandits are well aware of their attitude, and even hapless people have a sneaking suspicion that all is not right.

But stupid people don't know they are stupid, and that is one more reason why they are extremely dangerous.

Which of course leads me back to my original, agonizing question: am I stupid?

I have passed several IQ tests with good marks. Unfortunately, I know how these tests work and that they don't prove anything.

Several people have told me I am intelligent. But that doesn't prove anything, either. They may simply be too kind to tell me the truth. Conversely, they could be attempting to use my stupidity for their own advantage. Or they could be just as stupid as I am.

I am left with one little glimpse of hope: quite often, I am intensely aware of how stupid I am (or have been). And this indicates that I am not completely stupid.

At times, I have tried to locate myself in the Cipolla matrix, using as far as possible measurable results of action, rather than opinion, as a yardstick. Depending on the situation, I seem to wander around the upper side of the grid, between the Hs and Ib areas; but in some cases I am desperately lost in Sh. I just hope I am on the right side of the diagonal as often as I think.

On a broader scale, one would expect the strongest success factors to lie in the Ib and Bi subsectors. However, the staggering number of Sb and even Sh people who have wonderful careers can be only explained by a strong desire on the part of many leaders to be surrounded by as many stupid people as possible.

When I read the book, I liked it so much that I wrote a letter to Carlo Cipolla. (I have done this sort of thing only twice in my life).

Much to my surprise, he answered, briefly but kindly.

I had two questions:

"Can I have the original unpublished English text, for my English speaking friends?"

The answer was no. (He didn't say why, but I have a hunch.)

"What do you think of my 'corollary' to your theory?"

In this case, the answer was "Well... why not, maybe..." – which I took as Enthusiastic Approval and Endorsement of...

Livraghi's Corollary to Cipolla's First Law
In each of us there is a factor of stupidity, which is always larger than we suppose.

This creates a three-dimensional grid and I don't think I have to take you through the steps, because no stupid (or timid) person would have had the courage to read this far.

Of course, one can introduce other variables, such as our own H and B factors, and other people's S, H and B. It may be wise to forget I, as there never is enough of that; however, do consider B, because even the most generous person can sometimes behave like a bandit, if only by mistake. These additional factors generate multi-dimensional models that can get fairly difficult to manage. But even if we consider only our individual sigma values, the complexity can become quite staggering.

Try it for yourself... and get really scared.   **[Indice Pagina](#)**   **[Indice Forum](#)**

THE POWER OF STUPIDITY **Part Two by Giancarlo Livraghi**

After fifteen months, my little essay on stupidity seems to be quite alive on the net. I am still receiving mail from different corners of the world; and it's being mirrored, linked or quoted in a number of places. The resulting dialogue made me discover some very interesting people and some remarkable websites I didn't know.

Questions and comments from several people led me to think a little more about this intriguing (and terrifying) subject. Here is the "humble result" of those meditations.

Is the Cipolla definition "true"?
In my early stages of learning, I was lucky enough to have teachers who set a few principles that, many years later, remain firm in my mind.

One of those philosophical principles is that there is no such thing as "absolute" truth. A "true" theory is simply the most convenient under the circumstances: the one that best explains and interprets what we are studying.

I don't know which is the best "absolute" definition of stupidity – or even if there is one that makes any sense. I am not aware of any really effective definition of intelligence, either.

The beauty (I think) of Carlo Cipolla's definition of stupidity (and intelligence) is that it is not based on an abstract concept but on results: a person or a behavior is stupid or intelligent depending on what happens. This has two advantages.

The first is that it defines a person (and that person's behavior) as stupid (or intelligent, or hapless, or a bandit) on the basis of facts;

or, at least, on our understanding and definition of facts. The second, and even more important, is that it leads us to concentrate on the vital factor: not stupidity per se, but the damage it causes.

There can be countless types of behavior that are, or appear, "stupid" but are harmless. They come up close to neutral in the Cipolla matrix – and that is, indeed, where they belong.

For instance, sharing silly fun with friends and having a good laugh may be seen as "stupid" by outsiders, but according to the Cipolla Theory such behavior is likely to be classified as "intelligent": which indeed it is, as long as the fun shared by the people being amused is more than the annoyance or boredom caused to bystanders. Generally the intelligence (practical advantage) of such behavior is limited to a moment of good humor; but quite often it can lead to more relevant effects, by sparking up cooperation and ideas in ways that would not be possible in a boring environment.

"Silly" can be remarkably intelligent, while "serious" can be awfully stupid... quite apart from the fact that innovative thinking is often seen as "silly" by people who don't understand it.

This leads to an important subject: the relevance of non-linear thinking (as well as emotion and humor) in all mental processes and especially in innovation. To discuss that in a meaningful way I would need much more space than I have here. Let me just say that the distinction of "right" and "left" mind may be interesting in clinical experiments but, in my view, should be avoided in the general observation of human behavior because the structure of thinking is not as simple as that – and, in any case, the various processes of perception and thought always work together and are better understood as a whole than as the sum of separate functions.

Three corollaries
Shortly after reading about the Cipolla Laws, I developed what came to my mind as the "First Livraghi Corollary". Then I realized that I couldn't call it "first", because I had only one. But my original feeling was right... I have since discovered that there are at least three.

Here they are:

First Corollary:
In each of us there is a factor of stupidity, which is always larger than we suppose

[I explained that in my original "stupidity" paper.]

Second Corollary:
When the stupidity of one person combines with the stupidity of others, the impact grows geometrically – i.e. by multiplication, not addition, of the individual stupidity factors

It seems to be a generally accepted concept that "the sum of a network increases as the square of the number of members" and it seems quite obvious that the same criterion applies to the combination of stupidity factors in individual people. This can help

to explain the well-known fact that crowds as a whole are much more stupid than any individual person in the crowd.

Third corollary:
The combination of intelligence in different people has less impact than the combination of stupidity, because (Cipolla's Fourth Law) "non-stupid people always underestimate the damaging power of stupid people"

Stupidity is brainless – it doesn't need to think, get organized or plan ahead to generate a combined effect. The transfer and combination of intelligence is a much more complex process.

Stupid people can combine instantly into a super-stupid group or mass, while intelligent people are effective as a group only when they know each other well and are experienced in working together. The creation of well-tuned groups of people sharing intelligence can generate fairly powerful anti-stupidity forces, but (unlike stupidity bundling) they need organized planning and upkeep; and can lose a large part of their effectiveness by the infiltration of stupid people or unexpected bursts of stupidity in otherwise intelligent people.

In some situations these dangers can be partly offset (if not totally controlled) by being aware of the potential problem before anything goes wrong and having "backup intelligence" in the group (and in whatever equipment is being used) to fill the gaps and correct the mistakes before the damage becomes too serious. Any good skipper of a sailboat knows what I mean; so does any other person that has experience of an environment where the cause-effect process is bluntly direct and tangible.

Communities with a high intelligence factor are likely to have greater potential for long-term survival, but for that to be effective we must avoid the potentially devastating short-term impact of shared stupidity, which (unfortunately) can cause major damage to large numbers of non-stupid people before it self-destructs.

Another dangerous element in the equation (as pointed out by Carlo Cipolla) is that the machinery of power tends to place "intelligent bandits" (sometimes even "stupid bandits") at the top of the pyramid; and they, in turn, tend to favor and protect stupidity and keep true intelligence out of their way as much s they can. That is, I think, an important subject per se. Maybe one day I shall try to comment on it... [Years later, I did: in The Stupidity of Power.]

Stupidity and biology

In a basic biological environment, the "stupidity problem" doesn't exist. The process is based on the production of an extremely large number of "dumb" mutants. Only very few (the "fittest") survive, and that's it. From that point of view, what we see as catastrophe is just another variation in the "natural" course of events. Destructive fires are understood by botanists as a necessary, indeed desirable, step in the evolution of a forest. Millions of living creatures that die in the process may disagree, but their opinion is irrelevant.

In that perspective, solutions are simple and very effective. If there

are too many people, all we need is another plague (or any mass slaughter device that will not interfere too much with the overall environment) that can kill 90 percent of the population. The surviving 10 percent, as soon as they get over the shock, are likely to find the resulting environment quite agreeable. They are also likely to be genetically similar: share specific traits of appearance and attitude. If they all had green hair, pink eyes and liked rainy weather, they would soon come to consider the (extinct) people with any other hair or eye color, as well as people that like sunny weather, as rather quaint and "inferior"; their moisture-resistant history books would treat most of us as we treat the Neanderthals.

The destruction or sterilization of our planet, by man-made nuclear (or chemical) power or by collision with some wandering rock, would be an irrelevant detail in a cosmic perspective; and it if happened before the development of space travel and colonization the disappearance of our species (along with the rest of the terrestrial biosphere) wouldn't cause much of a stir even in our galaxy.

But in the particular biological environment that is set by certain species (such as ours) the system is based on the assumption that the environment can, and should, be controlled; and that each individual in our species (and in other species that we "protect") should be able to live longer, and more pleasantly, than he or she would in an uncontrolled environment. This needs a particular breed of organized "intelligence". Therefore stupidity, in this stage and type of biological development, is extremely dangerous.

As we are human, that's what we need to worry about.

Stupidity and the "millennium"

There are very few things in this world that can be predicted as precisely as the end of the 20th Century. It will happen at exactly 0 hours, 0 minutes, 0 seconds of January 1, 2001; and we have enough shared conventional definitions to set our clocks and watches in each of the time zones as precisely as we need to pop a cork or use a sophisticated timer.

But there is a surprisingly large number of people who think the millennium will end at midnight on December 31, 1999. When, of course, we shall enter "year two thousand": but we shall still be in the 20th Century for another year. I know lots of bright and well educated people who take a while to adjust to that notion. They scratch their heads and eventually, only half-convinced, mumble something like Uhm, maybe you are right, I guess there never was a Year Zero.

Is that stupid?

By the Cipolla definition, it is not; because it's unlikely to cause any major harm, could encourage us to refresh our 'rithmetic, and may lead us to celebrate twice. If that doesn't cause too many accidents, it could mean people having twice the fun, merchants making money twice... at the end of the story it could turn out to be quite harmless, or even "intelligent".

But... there is a problem that may hit us quite severely at the end of 1999, and that is how clocks are set in computerized systems.

I've heard many rather dumb comments on this subject. Such as «Haha, my Mac will adjust to year 2000 and your PC won't» - or «What's all the fuss about? the clock in my computer will handle the 2000 figure.»

It seems nearly impossible to make people stop and think about broader implications than their own personal computer. I don't want to get into technicalities – that's not my field and I leave it to the experts. Here is a link to a detailed analysis of "myths and realities" and several different opinions on this matter. It could be debated forever; but time is running out.

In any case, there seems to be enough old software around, in huge systems or in small vital devices, to be a serious problem for lots of people who have nothing to do with computers. A friend of mine, who is a very competent and bright EDP expert, says: «Your coffee machine, your alarm clock and your video recorder are unlikely to have date tantrums; your PC may well work through the turn of the century as it is, or with a few minor adjustments; but, in spite of the OTIS disclaimer, in some parts of the world you should be careful before you take an elevator on January 1, 2000.»

I don't think we are heading for doomsday. I guess in the next couple of years solutions will be found. But suppose just one little bit of something, in one single system or piece of equipment, is not fixed and tested properly ahead of time; and suppose it's in air traffic control, or a hospital, or the aiming device of a weapon... can we really trust all of the people concerned, in every corner of the planet, do their homework properly?

Big or small as the problem may be... the stupidity lies in its predictability. The Gregorian calendar was set 415 year ago; long before any of the modern devices (electronic or other) were conceived. How could anyone, no matter how long ago, make a computer, a piece of software, or anything containing a time program without considering that there would certainly be a problem if it couldn't handle year digits beyond 99? Two years from the deadline, they are still fussing about how to untangle the mess.

A few more comments, after the fact, are in an article published in February, 2001: The millennium and the bubble.

We could forget electronics and talk about many other things. Take pensions. In my country, pension schemes are government controlled and compulsory. Several decades ago it was abundantly clear that the population would get older and there would be a serious problem. Nobody did anything about it. Quite to the contrary, they did a number of things to make it worse: early pensions, special favors to people that neither deserved them or needed them, etcetera – on a monstrously wide scale. And now they are still quarreling about how to try to fix the problem.

And the environment, the population explosion, the use of fossil

energy... the dumb, hierarchic rigidity of private and public organizations (including schools) in a world of increasing turbulence and complexity... the "information society", the networked world, being potentially a powerful tool for the underprivileged, but driven by fatware in the opposite direction...

The blind are leading the blind, stupidity is running the world. For anyone looking at us from outer space, this could be extremely funny. But somehow it doesn't make me laugh.   **Indice Pagina Indice Forum**

THE STUPIDITY OF POWER Part Three of "The Power of Stupidity" by Giancarlo Livraghi

I wrote the first draft of this paper in October, 1997. It remained unfinished for over four years. I was running into the same sort of problem that Walter Pitkin faced in 1934 when he published his "Introduction to the History of Human Stupidity" (see The power of Stupidity – part 1.)
Every time I went to work on it there were several examples of the Stupidity of Power. In the events of the day – or in some part of recent or remote history.
Concentrating on any of those examples meant getting into the awesome complications of serious and tragic events – or of circumstances that are very likely to lead to disaster and are not being effectively managed ahead of time. Too complex to be discussed effectively in what must be a short document. Too difficult to be explained without deep studies that would take years. So – I decided to forget the examples and the facts, and to stay with the general theory. Which, I hope, is basically simple and clear – though unfortunately it doesn't offer any specific solution.

The essence of stupidology is an attempt to explain why things don't work – and how much of that is due to human stupidity, which is the cause of most of our problems. And even when the cause is not stupidity we make the consequences much worse by being stupid in how we react or try to fix the problem.

Essentially, this analysis is diagnostic, not therapeutic. The idea is that, if we understand how stupidity works, we may be able to control its effects a little better. It's impossible to defeat it altogether, because it's part of human nature. But its effects can be significantly reduced by knowing it's there, and understanding how it works – and thus not being caught by total surprise.

I've discussed this, to a limited extent, in The Power of Stupidity. (As all stupidologists know, the subject is so vast that such short comments can only scratch the surface; but if I've been able to prompt readers to think about it, that is the biggest achievement I could possibly imagine.)

The stupidity of every single human being is a large enough problem. But the picture changes when we consider the stupidity of people who have "power" – that is, control over the destiny of other people.

As in the first two parts, I shall continue to follow the Cipolla

definition of stupidity, intelligence etc. But there are substantial differences when the relationship is not of equals. One person, or a small group of people, can influence the life and wellbeing of many more. That changes the cause-and-effect relations in the system.

Power, large and small

Power is everywhere. We are all subject to someone else's power and (except perhaps in the case of extreme slavery) we all exert power on others. Personally, I loathe the concept, but it's part of life. Parents have (or are supposed to have) power over their children, but children have a great deal of power over their parents, which they often use quite ruthlessly. We may be "owners" of cats and dogs, horses or hamsters, elephants or camels, sailboats or cars, phones or computers, but quite often we are subject to their power.

It would be far too complicated, for the sake of this subject, to get into the intricacy of human relations. Therefore I shall concentrate on the most obvious cases of "power": those situations where someone has a defined role of authority over a large (or small) number of people.

In theory, we all tend to agree that there should be as little power as possible, and that people in power should be subject to control by the rest of the people. We call that "democracy." Or, in organizations, we call it leadership, motivation, distributed responsibility, sharing and personal empowerment – as opposed to authority, bureaucracy, centralization or formal discipline.

But there are relatively few people who want real freedom. Responsibility is a burden. It's quite convenient to be "followers." To let rulers, bosses, "opinion leaders", gurus of all sorts, movie stars and television "personalities" set the pace and do the thinking – and put the blame on them if we're unhappy.

On the other hand, there is a somewhat special breed of people who enjoy power. Because they are so dedicated to the substantial effort and sacrifice needed to gain large power, they prevail.

We must assume that the Cipolla theory applies: there are just as many stupid people in power as there are in the rest of humanity, and there are always more than we think. But two things are different: the relationship and the attitude.

The power of power

People in power are more powerful that other people. That isn't as obvious as it sounds. One might argue that this is not always so. There are apparently powerful people with less real influence than some who are much less visible. But for the sake of this discussion we must stay away from that problem. Regardless of how and why actual power is held and used, this is about real power. The uneven relationship caused by the fact that some people have a stronger influence on circumstances than others – and in many situations a few people can do good or harm to many.

A basic definition in the Cipolla theory is that the effect of behavior

must be measured not by the yardstick of whoever does something, but from the other end – the point of view of whoever is subject to the effects of that person's acts (or lack of action.) The clear result of this basic concept is a drastic shift in the Cipolla grid. The harm (or good) is much larger, depending on the number of people involved and the impact of actions and decisions.

If a person in an "equal" relationship gains as much personal advantage as the damage it causes to someone else, that person is a "perfect bandit" in the Cipolla definition, someone else is "perfectly hapless", and the system as a whole is balanced. This is obviously not so when there is a difference in power.

In theory, we could assume that as the percentage of intelligent or stupid people is the same the effect of power will be balanced. But when power deals with large numbers of people the one-to-one relationship is lost. It is much more difficult to listen, to understand, to measure the effect and the perceptions. There is a "Doppler effect", a shift, leading to an increase of the stupidity factor. All serious studies of power systems (while they are not necessarily based on the notion that power is stupid) point to the need for power separation, and for power conflicts to be formalized to that they don't lead to violence, in order to avoid "absolute power" (i.e. extreme stupidity.) That's a big enough problem to keep us all on constant alert against any exaggerated concentration of power – and to explain why so many things aren't working as well as they should. But there is more.

The power syndrome

How do people gain power? Sometimes by not even trying. They are entrusted by other people, because other people trust them. They have natural leadership and a sense of responsibility. This process, more often than not, produces "intelligent" power. A situation in which the chosen leaders do good for themselves – and a lot more for others. Sometimes it can lead to deliberate sacrifice, when people do harm to themselves for the benefit of others (if that is done intentionally it doesn't fall into the "hapless" category because of the moral good, including self perception and the approval of others, gained by the person who deliberately places common good over private interest.) But there are much fewer examples of such "intelligent power" than we would all like to see. Why?

The reason is that there is competition for power. People who don't seek power per se, but are more concentrated on doing good for others, have less time and energy to spend on gaining more power – or even holding on to what they have. People who have a greed for power, regardless of its impact on society, concentrate on the struggle for power. Most individuals are placed somewhere between the two extremes of that spectrum, with many different shades and nuances. But the powermongering element is the most aggressive in the power game and therefore gains more power.

Even people with the most generous initial motivation can be forced, over time, to dedicate more energy to maintaining or increasing power – to the point of losing sight of their original objectives.

Another element, that makes things worse, is megalomania. Power is an addictive drug. People in power are often led to believe that because they have power they are better, smarter, wiser, than ordinary people. They are also surrounded by sycophants, followers and exploiters enhancing that delusion.

Power is sexy. That isn't just a manner of speech. There is an instinct in the nature of our species that makes powerful people (or people who appear to be powerful) sexually attractive. Though most people playing the power game are too busy with it to be able to have any decent sex – or to care about emotion, affection and love.

People who have or seek power are as just as stupid or intelligent as any average person. They are often quite clever, astute and mischievous. But if we follow the Cipolla theory, that measures intelligence and stupidity by the effect of behavior, not motive or technique, the result is a definite shift, as shown in this graph, where the red arrow is the "P" (power) factor. It increases the "sigma factor" in the system and causes a shift from "I" (intelligence) to "S" (stupidity.)
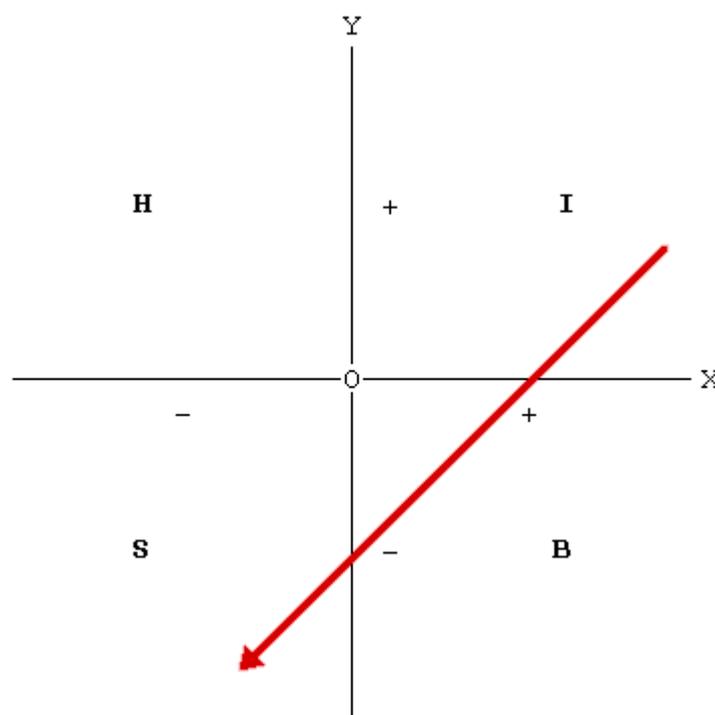
A careful reader may notice that the arrow is on a side. This is to allow for the fact that a few people (those in power and their entourage) gain some advantages – and therefore the shift in the system is not from the center of the "I" area to "S" but tends to go from the "Ib" (intelligent bandit) to the "Sb" (stupid bandit) sector.

A few more graphs, showing other possible developments, are included in a footnote   as a separate file.

The pursuit of power increases the stupidity factor. The impact can

be relatively large or small depending on the amount of power (the importance of matters influenced by power and the number of people subject to its effects) and on the intensity of the power struggle.

This is the most relevant, if not the only, exception to Cipolla's Second Law. It remains true that «the probability of a person being stupid is independent of any other characteristic of that person.» But power, as a system, is much more stupid than any single "ordinary" person can be.

The problem it that power can be limited, controlled, scrutinized and conditioned – but not eliminated altogether. Humanity needs leaders. Organizations need people who take responsibilities, and those people must have some power to perform their role.

So we've got to live with power – and its stupidity. But that doesn't mean that we must accept it, tolerate it or support it. Power should not be admired, trusted or even respected unless it shows practical intelligence in what it does to us and to the world. As far as I can see, there is no "universal" or standard solution to this problem. But we are half way there if we are aware of it – and if we never allow ourselves to be blinded or seduced by the treacherous glitter of power.
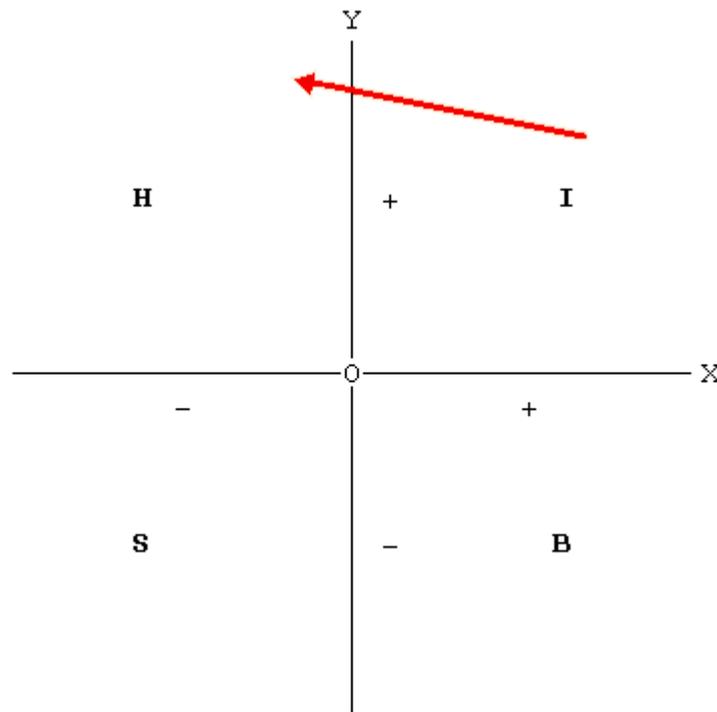
An effective antidote to the stupidity of power is the ability of some people to make things work without placing themselves in a "power role". As explained in a wonderful little story written seventy years ago and called **Brown's Job.**   **Indice Pagina**   **Indice Forum**

STUPIDITY GRAPHS by Giancarlo Livraghi

A footnote to "The Stupidity of Power"

In addition to the graph in The stupidity of power there are a few other possible hypotheses – that can be analysed using the Cipolla grid.

Let's assume, for instance, a situation in which "intelligent power" prevails. We would probably see a trend like this.

```
                    Y
               ↖
            _____|_____
           H        |  +         I

        _____O_____X
                    |
              −     |     +

           S        |  −         B
                    |
```

Power, in this case, deliberately chooses to offer greater advantages to the community than to itself, to the point – sometimes – of accepting some disadvantages if they help to improve general wellbeing (as already noted, in this case people in power can not be defined as "hapless" or "helpless".)

The shift to the upper part of the "Y" axis is unlikely to be fast, but it tends to be steady and consistent. Such situations are not impossible. There are nearly always a few in some parts of the system. But they depend on unusually well tuned, well motivated teamwork – harmonies that aren't easily generated or reproduced, and can fall apart because of changes in the environment or disruptions in their structure.

Rare as they are, such teams are extraordinarily effective. The observation of history and facts confirms that real innovations and improvements in society are much more likely when there are synergetic teams, active symbiosis, instinctive cohesion and strong humanity.

Carlo Cipolla wrote that «Whether one considers classical, or medieval, or modern or contemporary times one is impressed by the fact that any country moving uphill has its unavoidable "sigma" fraction of stupid people. However the country moving uphill also has an unusually high fraction of intelligent people who manage to keep the "sigma" fraction at bay and at the same time produce enough gains for themselves and the other members of the community to make progress a certainty.» The result is a situation like the one shown in the next graph (where the red area marks the position of people in power, the green is the rest of the community.)
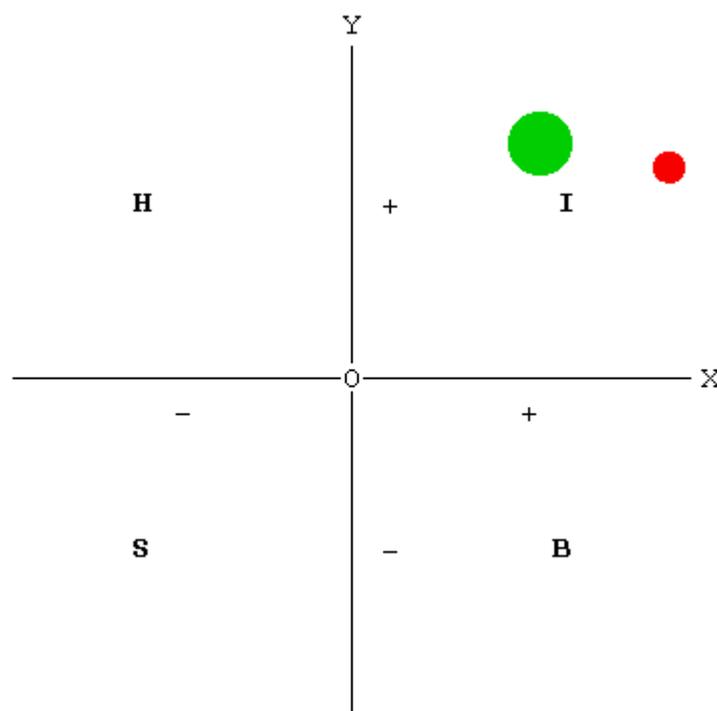
There are no "arrows" in this graph because, in the most favorable circumstances, such a system can remain stable (or make slow progress, as indicated in the first graph.) In a stabilized situation people in power are likely to have greater advantages than the rest, but as this works for everyone's benefit it isn't a problem – as long as two (opposed but synergetic) stupidity factors don't get into the picture: servility and envy.

I don't want to complicate the picture, but I think there is one relevant comment. In some particularly efficient organizations the two areas overlap, because there is no hierarchy and responsibilities are shared. It'a a well known fact that this is the most "intelligent" form of human cooperation and it can produce extraordinary results.

Such systems era basically strong, but they are exposed to damage. They can be warped by internal problems, such as stupidity factors or power syndromes. Or they can suffer from changes in the environment – or be disrupted by intervention from the outside which (deliberately or by mistake) upsets their delicate balance.

After this short digression on intelligence we must go back to the unfortunately overwhelming subject – stupidity. At the end of his essay Carlo Cipolla pointed out that «In a country which is moving downhill, the fraction of stupid people is still equal to "sigma"; however in the remaining population one notices among those in power an alarming proliferation of the bandits with overtones of stupidity and among those not in power an equally alarming growth in the number of helpless individuals. Such change in the composition of the non-stupid population inevitably strengthens the destructive power of the "sigma" fraction and makes decline a certainty. And the country goes to hell.» Of course this applies not only to "countries" as nation-states but also to any sort of human

community – large or small.

In this case the postion of people in power, and of the rest of the people, is placed as we see in the next graph.
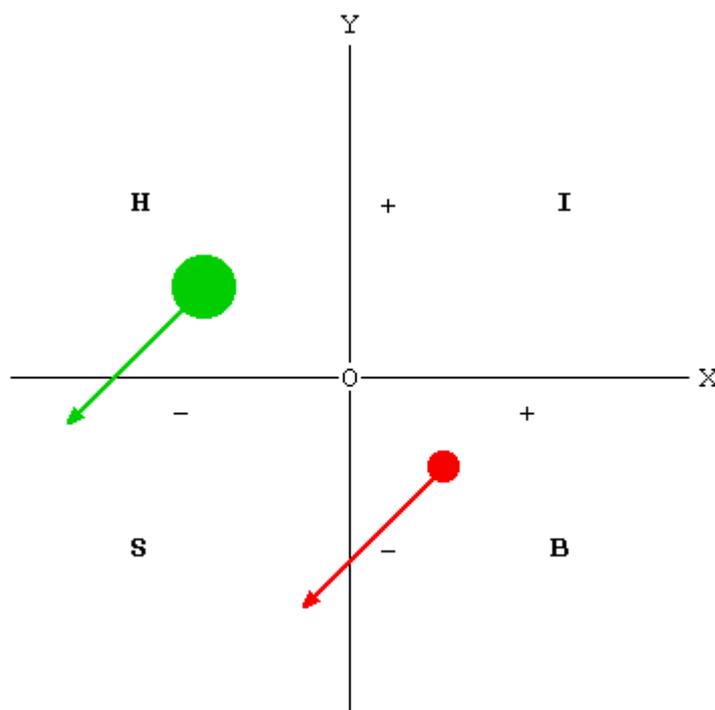
It's hard to understand, in this type of situation, if the stupidity of power generates widespread stupidity – or vice versa. In most cases both contribute to a "vicious circle" and so the entire system deteriorates, as shown by the arrows in the graph.

Sometimes this trend can be reversed, but that requires a very special combination: the convergence of intelligent people that can gain power and a strong collective thrust for substantial change.

In the absence of such an "intelligent mutation", or of an outside influence that changes the basic criteria, over time the system tends to explode – that is, to disintegrate.
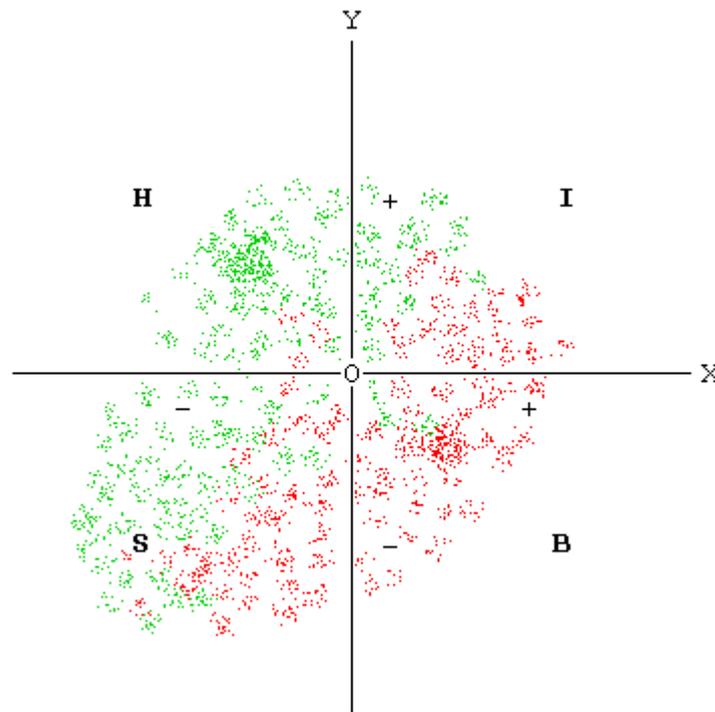
If a "chaotic" situation occurs before there is irreparable damage to the entire ecosystem... almost anything can happen. A turbulent vortex generates countless openings for stupidity, but "intelligent" developments are not totally impossible.

As I said at the beginning – I am deliberately staying away from any specific application of these concepts. But we can all experiment as we wish on all sorts of practical situations (from the general state of the planet to large or small communities.) As Carlo Cipolla suggested at the end of his book, we can print out (or draw on a piece of paper) as many blank grids as we wish – and fill them in by placing individuals or groups of people in the appropriate places.
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BROWN'S JOB Unknown author – about 1930

Brown is gone, and many men in the trade are wondering who will get Brown's job.

There has been considerable speculation about this. Brown's job was reputed to be a good job. Brown's former employers, wise, grey-eyed men, have had to sit still and repress amazement, as they listened to bright, ambitious young men and dignified older ones seriously apply for Brown's job.

Brown had a big chair and a wide, flat-topped desk covered with a sheet of glass. Under the glass was a map of the United States. Brown had a salary of thirty thousand dollars a year. And twice a year, Brown made a "trip to the coast" and called on every one of the firm's distributors.

He never tried to sell anything. Brown wasn't exactly in the sales

department. He visited with the distributors, called on a few dealers, and once in a while made a little talk to salesmen. Back at the office, he answered most of the important complaints, although Brown's job wasn't to handle complaints. Brown wasn't in the credit department either, but vital questions of credit got to Brown, somehow or other, and Brown would smoke, talk, and tell a joke, untwist the telephone cord and tell the credit manager what to do.

Whenever Mr. Wythe, the impulsive little president, working like a beaver, would pick up a bunch of papers and peer into a particularly troublesome or messy subject, he had a way of saying, «What does Brown say? What does Brown say? What the hell does Brown say? – Well, why don't you do it, then?» And that was disposed.

Or when there was a difficulty that required quick action and lots of it, together with tact, and lots of that, Mr. Wythe would say, «Brown, you handle that.»

And then one day the directors met unofficially and decided to fire the superintendent of No. 2 mill. Brown didn't hear of this until the day after the letter had gone. «What do you think of it, Brown?» asked Mr. Wythe. Brown said, «That's all right. The letter won't be delivered until tomorrow morning, and I'll get him on the wire and have him start East tonight. Then I'll have his stenographer send the letter back here, and I'll destroy it before he sees it.» The others agreed, «That's the thing to do.»

Brown knew the business he was in. He knew the men he worked with. He had a whole lot of sense, which he apparently used without consciously summoning his judgment to his assistance. He seemed to think good sense.

Brown is gone, and men are applying for Brown's job. Others are asking who is going to get Brown's job – bright, ambitious young men, dignified older men.

Men who are not the son of Brown's mother, nor the husband of Brown's wife, nor the product of Brown's childhood – men who never suffered Brown's sorrows nor felt his joys, men who never loved things that Brown loved nor feared the things he feared – are asking for Brown's job.

Don't they know that Brown's chair and his desk, with the map under the glass top, and his pay envelope, are not Brown's job? Don't they know they might as well apply to the Methodist Church for John Wesley's job? *

Brown's former employers know it. Brown's job is where Brown is.

YESBUT - WHYNOT   Unknown author – about 1990

Yesbutters don't just kill ideas. They kill companies, even entire industries.

The yesbutters have all the answers.

Yesbut we're different. Yesbut we can't afford it.

Yesbut our business doesn't need it.

Yesbut we couldn't sell it to our workforce.

Yesbut we can't explain it to our shareholders.

Yesbut let's wait and see.

All the answers. All the wrong answers.

Whynotters move Companies

The next time you're in a meeting, look around and identify the yesbutters, the notnowers and the whynotters. God bless the whynotters. They dare to dream. And to act. By acting, they achieve what others see as unachievable.

Why not, indeed? Before the yesbutters yesbut you right out of business.

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