

The Power of Stupidity



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Chapter 10 – The Stupidity of Power

The stupidity of every single human being is a large enough problem, with all sorts of consequences that aren't easily identified. But the picture changes when we consider the stupidity of people who have “power”—that is, control over the destiny of other people. Also in this case, I shall continue to follow the concept of defining stupidity, intelligence, etcetera by the effects of human behavior. But there is a substantial difference, an unbalance, when the relationship is not of equals. One person, or a small group of people, can influence the life and well-being of many more. This changes the size, the impact and the nature of all the cause-and-effect relations in the system.

Power, “large” or “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, whether we like it or not, 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 multiple intricacies 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 this “democracy.” Or, in organizations, we can 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. Many find it quite convenient to be “followers.” To let rulers, bosses, managers, “opinion leaders”, all sorts of “gurus” or “celebrities”, movie stars and television “personalities” set the pace and (we suppose) 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 needed to gain a lot of power, they prevail.

We must assume that the general concept 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 than other people. It 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.

Without getting into the complexities of this difference, it's worth noting that there is a widespread bizarre and stupid behavior. There are many people who go out of their way to be followers of "apparent" power – and so are actively committed to the advantage of others while damaging themselves.¹

Regardless of how and why power is held and used, and of appearances that often confuse roles, 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, and quite obvious, criterion 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.)

A clear result of this basic concept is a drastic shift in the "stupidology diagram" – as we shall see in chapter 11. The harm (or good) is much larger, depending on the number of people involved and the impact of actions and decisions. What appears as a detail in the "ivory tower" of power can be very important in the lives of "ordinary" people.

If a person in a hypothetical "equal" relationship (as we have seen in chapter 8) gains as much personal advantage as the damage it causes to someone else, the system as a whole remains balanced. But it's obviously not so when there is a difference in power.

In abstract theory, we could assume that, as the percentage of intelligent or stupid people is the same, the effect of power will be balanced.

That hypothesis may be relatively close to reality in a few "small power" situations – in narrow environments where personal interaction is direct and mutually effective. 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 consequences and the perceptions. There is a "Doppler effect", a shift, leading to an increase of the stupidity factor.

Even in open, democratic societies, where power isn't isolated and remote, information is freely available, elected representatives are supposed to act on behalf of "The People" and their actions are (or should) be open to public scrutiny, the relationship is not "of equals."

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 so 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.

1 This is one of the problems of "idolatry" – as explained in chapter 22.

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.²

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 gaining and maintaining power. An aggressive, sometimes fearsome, often anxious, always troubled, craving for power.

The people who don’t seek power per se, but are more concentrated on their responsibilities in doing good for others, have less time and energy to spend on gaining more power – or even holding on to what they have. Those 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 (responsibility or power-mongering) with many different shades and nuances. But the manipulating element is the most aggressive in the power game and therefore it 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 their delusion.

Power is sexy. This 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 many 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.

The power syndrome isn’t only a disease of powerful people, but also of their followers and of most of the people they know or meet, or who are trying to get into their environment. It’s a known fact in all human communities, and at all times in history, that the people in the service of power (or wishing to be) thrive and prosper in a stupid symbiosis with the powerful, that tends to increase and complicate the stupidity of power.

The victims of this intricate mechanism aren’t just the “ordinary people” who are subjected to the whims and abuse of the intermediaries as well as those of the powers above. They are also, quite often, the people at the top, who become prisoners of their entourage.

It is not uncommon, in history, for the “apparatus” to survive the fall of power. In many revolutions, after the “tyrant” is removed, power doesn’t go to the revolutionaries, or to the people, but is held by the same oligarchies that had it before – or by others behaving in the same way.

² There can be cases in which power is concentrated in the hands of a particularly considerate and generous person, as there can be wise oligarchies that behave like philosophers in Plato’s *Republic*. There are such examples in history – but they are rare exceptions. It is possible, sometimes, that an intelligent person “in the right place” may reverse, to some extent, the stupidity of power – but it doesn’t happen as often as would be desirable. We shall see, in the next chapter, some (hypothetical) examples of “intelligent power.” But it is generally true, as Lord Acton said, that *power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely.*»

An example is the end of the colonial system. In many countries it left control in the hands of local cliques, that aren't any better (sometimes even worse) than the foreign powers that they replaced. This didn't happen only in the twentieth century. There are many such cases in previous history – and also in some recent events.

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There are “syndromes” that can coincide with power, but they can also infect people who don't have it. A reader of the Italian edition of this book commented that arrogance isn't just another form of stupidity, it can be its root. She is right. The delusion of “feeling superior” is an aggressive cause of stupidity. And so is violence – stupid not only for its consequences, but also for the cowardice and mental weakness that are often its origin.

Even when there is no physical abuse, arrogant people do all they can to force others into obedience. And, unfortunately, they are often allowed to succeed.

The stupidity of war

War is a serious, tragic and complex subject. It would be difficult to cover it thoroughly even in a whole book.³ But it may be appropriate to summarize here a few comments on its obvious connection with stupidity.

Sixty years ago, after a second awful world war, there was a probably naive, but not unreasonable, perception that wars had come to an end. Unfortunately this is not so. There have been, and there are, wars and other hideous conflicts in many parts of the world – and no end of these horrors is in sight.

The perception that wars can, and should, be avoided is, per se, an intelligent evolution – though it still has inadequate development. So is the growing (but not effective enough) opposition to the death penalty. And the fact that for over half a century (with the painful exceptions of the Balkans and the Caucasus) there hasn't been another war in Europe.⁴

The development of information systems, that in the second half of the twentieth century made it widely possible to know more directly the horrors of war, helped to change our perceptions. But, sadly, facts prove that this new state of awareness isn't as strong and coherent as it appeared.

We are no longer convinced that armed conflicts are “always” necessary, as we had been led to believe for millennia – but we seem to be going back, though uncomfortably, to the notion that wars are, sometimes, “unavoidable” in the turbulent evolution of human affairs.⁵

3 There are historians who have written essays on wars and conflicts, in ancient history and recent events, where stupid decisions have caused all sorts of catastrophes. Examples of books on this subject are *The March of Folly – from Troy to Vietnam* by Barbara Tuchman (1984), *Der Hinge-Faktor* by Eric Durschmied (1998) and *History's Worst Decisions – Encyclopedia Idiotica* by Stephen Weir (2005.)

4 After 1945 there have been no “major wars” between European countries, but there have been violent conflicts in Europe, such as “internal terrorism” in Ireland and Spain – and, in a different way, in Italy in the Seventies. They are perverse and essentially stupid, but they are not the same as wars.

5 Wars continue, in several parts of the world. Recent developments, such as international terrorism, all sorts of violence, fanaticism, arms trading, mercenaries, organized crime, aren't as new as they may seem. They existed, in different ways, many times in history. Obviously they are as stupid as wars – with some additional perversion. Not only because of the suffering they inflict and the terror they spread, but also as a result of what is done with the intention (or pretext) of fighting them, with many abuses and distortions falsely justified as prevention or repression.

War can be placed, in the stupidology diagram, somewhere between stupid banditism and aggressive stupidity. Many wars are serious damage for all, including the winners. But even when someone gains some advantage the stupidity of power is devastatingly effective: the gain of a few is a horrible tragedy for too many.

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All situations are always complex. For instance, in the case of war – as in other conflicts or disasters – there are countless opportunities for the multiplication of violence, cruelty, abuse, exploitation, trickery and stupidity. But there are also many little openings for the ability to manage difficult circumstances. With some of the best qualities in human nature. Mutual help, solidarity, generosity, understanding, love and friendship.

In extreme conditions we find that stupidity remains dominant, but intelligence is never totally missing in human behavior. It would be interesting to find a way of being more intelligent, and human, also in times of peace.

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The problem is that (while it can – and should – be limited, controlled, scrutinized and conditioned) power can not be 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 this doesn't mean that we must accept, tolerate or support its arrogance. Or be deceived too easily by gestures, words, promises and declared intentions.

Power should not be admired, trusted or even respected unless it shows practical intelligence in what it does to us and to the world. (It should be for us and for the world – and when it's effectively so it's welcome – but the machinery of power, combined with the obstinate stupidity of bureaucracy, often frustrates even the best intentions.)

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.

A description of the book
is online – stupidity.it