

The Power of Stupidity



by Giancarlo Livraghi

*In this pdf there are two chapters
on subjects that are obviously related
though they are not “the same”*

Chapter 23 – The Power of Obscurantism

This is a “difficult word” – and a tricky subject. Over the years, I’ve been asked several times to look into the stupidity of “obscurantism” and “superstition.”

They can be seen as two ways of looking at the same problem, but I think it’s better to deal with them separately, in this chapter and in the next.

What do we mean when we discuss “obscurantism” or “enlightenment”? Often it’s as simple as it’s meaningless. Whatever someone believes is “enlightening”, everyone else’s way of thinking is “dark” – wrong, or evil, or both. This can be the tool, or the origin, of all sorts of conflicts, ranging from maybe small, but insidious, misunderstanding to enormous, long-lasting and tragic persecution.

The contrast and the struggle, between the light of knowledge and the darkness of repression, have existed in all stages of human evolution, since the origin of our species. A complex and turbulent conflict that can be defined in many ways, but is basically the same at all times and in all cultures.

The arrogance of Prometheus or the risk of Pandora. The effort of Sisyphus or the threat of the Sphinx. All sorts of different myths and symbols, in every kind of human tradition, that may seem remote or removed, but reflect a reality that is as true today as it has ever been. With a crucial difference: the boundaries of knowledge have expanded so far, and so recently, that we are confused and bewildered.

We seek certainty and we can’t find it. This is now, as it has always been, a treacherous opportunity for whoever wants to gain power and control by saying *«don’t worry, let me do the thinking, just do as you are told and believe in what I am telling you.»*

An analysis of how these conflicts are rooted in many different cultures would be quite interesting, but obviously it goes far beyond what could be summarized in this chapter. Let’s just say that the problem has always been there – and awareness is perceivable in folklore, tradition and “common sense”, as well as in the thinking of the best philosophers of all time.

This isn't about religion (or any other "faith.") In one way or another, we all believe in something that can't be thoroughly verified by fact or experiment. Faith, by its own nature, is beyond discussion or doubt. Every person has a right to believe in whatever he or she finds suitable – even to worship Ras Tafari.¹

There is a hideous problem when and where some form of organized belief is enforced – by physical violence, including weapons, wars and murder, by persecution of "heathens" or "heretics" (as is still happening in many parts of the world) or by less blatantly brutal, but equally oppressive, means. Such as habit, custom, manner, ritual, behavior, social standards – and fear.

This isn't only the case of dogmatic religions or ideologies, that don't accept any disagreement and aggressively repress dissent or doubt. It isn't practiced only by ecclesial hierarchies, oppressive sects or restrictive affiliations. There is a thread in all human cultures and at all times, still widespread even where it is less obvious, of "obscure" thought and practice that reduces people into blind obedience and mental slavery, obliterates freedom of thought and doesn't tolerate criticism.

We could look at this in many different environments, in apparently different ways, but let's pick one, with which we are more familiar in "western" cultures. The evolution in Europe from the late Middle Age to where we are today.

Of course we can't reduce a complex and turbulent millennium to simplistically defined "dark ages." But it's a fact that for several centuries Europe was plunged into an appalling depth of poverty, violence, ignorance and repression, while thinking was imprisoned by dogma and *ipse dixit* or hidden in the secrets of esoteric fraternities.

There was a crucial change that started much earlier than 1492.² "Vernacular", non-Latin written literature started in the eleventh century and expanded in the twelfth. At the same time there was the development of universities, as well as a wider re-discovery of classic (Greek and Latin) culture.

It was the beginning of the deep change that reached full bloom in the fifteenth century – we know it as "humanism" and it's quite appropriately called The Renaissance. A unique, extraordinary development not only in art, science and philosophy, but also in social change and in the practice of organized craftsmanship. ("Arts and crafts" is a very interesting definition that is worth bringing back to its best potential in the twentyfirst century.)³

The new evolution of manufacturing industry (though not yet using thermal energy) started in the fourteenth century.⁴ Then there were new printing technologies (demanded by cultural development as much as they were made possible by technical resources) and oceanic sailing that opened new routes to remote places (for trade and war, conquest and piracy – but also for culture and knowledge.)

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1 That religion actually exists. It's called Rastafarian (or "Rasta") in Jamaica. The messiah in that cult is Ras Tafari, Haile Selassie, Negus Neghesti ("king of kings") emperor of Ethiopia from 1930 to 1974. There is also a pseudo-religion called *pastafarian*, with a spaghetti god. Of course it's a joke, though it's carefully constructed to have the appearances of what could be formally defined as a church.

2 Some of the best historians believe that the "modern age" didn't start with Columbus crossing the Atlantic Ocean, but with the bankruptcy of the Peruzzi and Bardi bank in Florence in 1343, caused by default and refusal of debt by the King of England – that marked the end of medieval economy and the strengthening of national states. Other (and earlier) dates can be reasonably chosen, pointing to the fact that change was developing in the thirteenth and fourteenth century and had started in the eleventh and twelfth.

3 It's no coincidence that now we are feeling the need for a "Leonardo attitude", or the "Da Vinci Man." It wasn't just the genius of one person. There is a strongly felt, though scarcely fulfilled, need for a re-discovery of a deep blend of art and science, beauty and functionality, technique and philosophy, harmony and knowledge – that wasn't only the special talent of one "encyclopedic" mind, but the shared culture of the environment in which he lived.

4 There were advanced technical and engineering developments, used mostly for scientific and military purposes, in the classic Greek-Latin environment, especially in the "hellenistic" period, including the use of heat engines – though scarcely applied to "industrial" process. They were "forgotten" for a thousand years – and some discovered recently. (See The Archimedes Computer in note 1 – page 113.)

And then there was “Illuminism”, “The Enlightenment”, that appeared to be the final victory of Reason, *liberté égalité fraternité*, humanity at last and forever freed from prejudice, ignorance and oppression.⁵

So – where are we now?

After the social conflicts of the nineteenth century (mixed with high hopes of “progress” defeating “obscurantism”) and after the scientific success and political catastrophes of the twentieth – are we getting close to the age of enlightenment? Obviously not – and in several ways it’s getting worse.

We are drowning, again, in superstition. Believing in tricky numbers or lucky charms or unreliable forecasting would be relatively harmless entertainment if we didn’t see so many people hopelessly ruined by gambling. (And this, of course, includes the stock exchange.) Equally absurd criteria are applied in all sorts of other circumstances.⁶

Believing in astrology could be just another silly game, but it’s taken far too seriously by too many people – and, in several supposedly “civilized” countries, it’s grotesquely supported by major media, including mainstream television and several newspapers and magazines that are supposed to be reliable. We shall get back to this in chapter 24, also looking into the appalling proliferation of soothsayers, wizards, sorcerers, necromancers, prophets, sects, pseudo-scientists, etcetera – and abominable “healers” promising to cure all sorts of diseases.

John Kenneth Gailbraith used to say: «*The only function of economic forecasting is to make astrology look respectable.*» But some things are predictable, if we know how to look at them in the right perspective. I have no way of knowing in what shape the world economy will be when this book will be read in coming months (or years.) But it’s pretty clear that the expanding and contagious disease of speculative maneuvering could have been easily diagnosed twenty or thirty years ago, nothing was done to bring it under control, and eventually the manipulators were caught in their own trap. So great is the power of stupidity.

Obscurantism isn’t only in the most obvious superstitions. There are all sorts of “beliefs” that have no base in reality. Or maybe they were meaningful when they started, but they no longer make any sense, while we continue with habits though we have forgotten their origin. And to those of tradition new prejudices are being added. Some may be relatively harmless (though they are, in any case, confusing) but several are quite dangerous.

We are horrified by reading of murders and suicides caused by satanic cults or other perverse rituals, but we don’t always realize how many beliefs and delusions can lead to all sorts of persecution, suffering, violence and repression.

The progress of science is bewildering. It’s been less than a century since we discovered that not only the copernican concept is correct beyond any reasonable doubt, but the size of the universe is enormously larger than we had ever been able to imagine. Our attitude, in spite of all evidence, remains ptolemaic. Our point of view, though we know that it isn’t so, sets the Earth as the center – and even when we try to understand what is happening on our planet our perceptions are often subjective and unbalanced (see chapter 21 on problems of perspective.)

There is endless probing into the nature of matter and energy, the structure and origin of life, leading to discoveries and hypotheses that are fascinating, but also unfamiliar and puzzling. Science can not, and must not, try to offer any final and absolute certainty. It must be open to new explorations that can change and revise all theories.

⁵ Though this is known as the “French Revolution”, “illuministic” ideas were brewing also in other European countries. And they were formalized, earlier than in any other place, in the rebellious colonies that became the United States of America.

⁶ See chapter 10 on the stupidity of power, 18 on the vicious circle of stupidity and 22 on idols and icons.

This is the beauty and the strength of our quest for knowledge. But it constantly challenges our habits and our assumptions. It's comfortable to believe, to rest on cozy commonplace. It's intriguing, but distressing, to learn, to look beyond the edge of our restricted horizon.

John Updike said: «*Astronomy is what we have now instead of theology. The terrors are less, but the comforts are nil.*» It is so in all developments of science. The ever-expanding explorations are fascinating, but also discomforting. The more we learn, the less we are sure.

It's a temptation to seek shelter in conventional, reassuring notions – and so fall prey to intentional deceits or absurd fantasies.⁷

We can have doubts about some parts of Darwin's theory, as it was originally defined, because knowledge has evolved since his first studies one hundred and fifty years ago. But there is obstinate spreading of quaint retrograde beliefs that, in spite of overwhelming evidence, deny the basic concept of evolution. With very worrying cultural, social and political consequences.

We are educated (in those parts of the world where there is a “decent” level of education) to believe that we have overcome racism. But there is a continuing proliferation, with all sorts of disguises, of ways of thinking and behaving that are based on the notion that some sorts of people are “superior” – and other “inferior.”

There are, as awful today as they have ever been, situations of genocide, with the extermination of whoever is perceived as “different.” When and where it isn't organized murder, it's slavery, persecution, exploitation, famine, disease and inhuman conditions – not only in (apparently) remote places, but also in some parts of so-called “advanced” economies and cultures. That isn't only cruel and horrible. It's also very stupid.

Witch hunts aren't extinct. Though we no longer see people burning at the stake, with applauding audiences, in the cities of Europe, and torture is (apparently) prohibited, as a tool for “saving souls” or extorting information, we still see persecution and “demonization” of attitudes or behaviors that are disliked by established power, by a domineering oligarchy or by some aggressive faction that wants to impose its absurd, and often delirious, worldview.

It's a widespread habit to believe what fits our mental grooves, our prejudice and bias, the conventional attitudes of our environment – or the bizarre manias of the information system in which we are entangled.

And we also tend to not perceive, or to refuse as false or irrelevant, whatever appears to be disturbing because it doesn't fit the pattern of preconceived banalities or narrow-minded cultural myopia.

Real progress – of a single person, an organization or mankind as a whole – is based on always doubting apparent certainties, always having an inexhaustible desire to learn, to evolve, to improve. We can learn something new, or understand something better, every day. But are we seeing, and listening, as well as we should? How often can we tell which tiny piece is the key to the solution of a big puzzle?

Scientific progress is extraordinary, but unfortunately it doesn't help us as much as we may wish, because it's fragmented into many restricted sectors, unable to find those broader syntheses that could nourish not only an evolution of our knowledge and understanding, but also an enrichment of our daily humanity.

But science, when it's free, has an advantage. It can never be satisfied with any of its achievements, it can't rest on its laurels, it must always explore new horizons and new perspectives – ceaselessly reconsidering every hypothesis, theory, method, system or cognitive process.

⁷ Fear is often a source of ignorance and stupidity. Because we run away from uncomfortable facts or knowledge. Or because we are manipulated by power, that often uses fear to scare people into obedience. See chapter 14.

There is a problem. It's difficult and complex. There is no sharply defined separation between knowledge and prejudice, light and darkness. There are obscurantisms in the most free and open cultures, as there can be surprising bits of wisdom and depth where we expect to find only ignorance and superstition. There are scientific and philosophical establishments that are supposed to be dedicated to the search of knowledge, while they are entrenched in the arrogant, myopic protection of cultural privilege. Or they are conditioned by power interests – economic, political or academic.

Enlightenment and obscurantism aren't neatly divided worlds. We don't have two opposed and disciplined armies, with uniforms and flags to make it clear who stands for what. They constantly mix in a tortuous, devious, contaminated, turbulent and ever-changing environment, where it's hard to tell the paths to clarity from the labyrinths of obscurity, the real quest for knowledge from the disguises of prejudice.

There is also a creeping notion that knowledge is not to be shared. It is true, of course, that specialized competence or dangerous tools need to be handled only by people who have the appropriate expertise and responsibility. But that notion is still today, as it was in "primitive" human societies, extended by all sorts of power-mongering, with self-appointed elites putting the rest of us to sleep with manipulated and confusing lullabies (or scaring us into obedience.)

Are we sinking in the quicksands of renewed and growing obscurantism? There are many symptoms of that disease. Some are extremely dramatic. Others may seem relatively harmless, but combine into an insidious cocktail of obnubilation that is the feeding ground for dangerous cultural infection.

We could be nostalgic about the times in our history when enlightenment was riding high, promising freedom and knowledge for all, affirming the "inalienable right" of all human beings to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." And rightly so. That the path to those ideals isn't easy or smooth is no good reason to stop trying. But it isn't as simple as it sounds.

At all times there has been, as there is now, a mixture of light and darkness. There never was such a luminous state of conscience as it may appear in hindsight (when we focus on the brightest ways of thinking, because those can inspire us now, as they did then, to look for a way ahead.)

The lessons of history are always useful, but it isn't easy to understand the complex and turbulent situation in which we are now. Many things have changed. In some there is real progress – with important results. But, if we fall into the delusion of assuming that we are "advanced" and aware, we lose the perception of our limitations. Complacency hinders the desire to learn, to discover, to improve.

If we realize how many things in today's world are obscure, and we try every day to understand something a bit better, we don't only push back the edge of the expanding power of obscurantism. We also enrich our humanity. It isn't easy to find a little spot of light in the darkness, like a far off beacon in the night. But, when it happens, it's a very pleasant experience.

Chapter 24 – Stupidity and Superstition

We generally agree that superstition is stupid. And, like stupidity, sometimes it's just silly, while in many ways it can be dangerous. But it isn't easy to understand what it is, because it's a vague, uncertain definition.

It can be very subjective. What one person (or culture) sees as a foolish superstition can be something that others want to believe. And all people, of course, must be free to believe in whatever they choose.

It has happened in all cultures, at all times, that something was labeled as superstition, myth or witchcraft, and only later understood as progress in science and knowledge. And vice versa. We may believe that now we are more "enlightened", but things of that sort are still happening. And we may have tomorrow unexpected scientific validation of something that we are perceiving as a quaint theory.

To get to the core of the subject we must stay away (as we did in chapter 23) from consideration of faith – religious, political, ideological or of any other sort. Though the separating line is often uncomfortably thin.

One can, for instance, be a true Christian without believing in the miraculous power of a relic, a token or an image, the countless apparitions of angels, saints or devils – and the proliferation of weeping or bleeding statues and simulacra. Just as many people can "believe" in such things without having any deep religious faith.

In another perspective, it can be exaggerated to label as "superstition" some small fetish, that sometimes is a harmless habit also for non "credulous" people (such as "touching wood" – or whatever is considered lucky – without believing that it really matters.)

For instance in sailing there are omens and auspices that nobody really believes, though it's quite often avoided, if only jokingly, to unnecessarily invoke "bad luck." One of these is that green is an unlucky color (when it isn't a semaphore, a position light or part of a flag.)

One of many episodes that could be quoted was in the preliminary races of the 2000 America's Cup. One of the strongest teams decided to defy the legend by hoisting green spinnakers. The tearing of many of those sails was one of the reasons why it didn't win. Was that because of the untested chemistry of some rarely used dye? Or a mistake by a sailmaker that was uneasy with the color? Or poor coordination in a crew made nervous by the ill-omened green? It's hard to tell. But I must admit that I wouldn't feel very comfortable at sea on a boat with green sails.⁸

We can all, occasionally and jokingly, treat as omen prevention what is simply common sense, being prepared for unexpected problems. As in the case of Murphy's Law (see chapter 4.)

We can draw the line, where we feel it's most appropriate, between gullibility and belief – or between perverse credulities and harmless habits, such as wearing or carrying a small "lucky charm."⁹ In between, though it isn't easy to define its boundaries, lies the insidious power of superstition.

⁸ Years later, in the 2007 America's Cup selections in Valencia, the superstition was effectively dispelled by the good performance of the Spanish team with a green hull. But an obstinate believer in the bad spell could argue that, in spite of some lucky episodes, they didn't get to the finals. And after that event the whole America's Cup organization was plagued by bickering, polemic and intrigue, to the point of making its survival uncertain.

⁹ This, sometimes, can actually work, but it doesn't need to be magic. Wearing or touching something that reminds us of somebody, or in any way gives us a pleasant feeling, can improve our state of mind, reduce tension, make us more relaxed, comfortable and aware.

It's quite surprising to discover that people, who are not foolish or ignorant, can "believe" bizarre absurdities without even trying to understand which may have been the origin of habits, fears or prejudices.

With a bit of research we can find that walking under a ladder may have had esoteric meanings, but it was (and still may be) dangerous if someone working on top of the ladder drops a tool. The fear of black cats may have been originated by associating them with witchcraft – but something dark moving unexpectedly in the night could scare a horse.

In the seventeenth or eighteenth century, when the idea was born that we should never put a hat on a bed, it wasn't healthy to place, where people slept, a container of dirt, ointments and lice that proliferated in wigs and headwear.

Mirrors were rare and traditionally associated with magic. The problem was also that replacing a broken mirror was quite expensive and could take a long time (though not seven years.)

A list of examples could be very long. Some superstitions relate somehow to potential real problems, most are based only on old beliefs and fears that now are forgotten, but the habits are still followed without knowing why.

They are not as harmless as some may seem. If we fall into the habit, even in small things, of believing the unbelievable, we can slide into dangerous delusions. We can hurt ourselves, or the people we care for, by using, for illness or other problems, the wrong remedy or protection. We can become prisoners of behaviors that go beyond the limits of "harmless little whims" and become haunting obsessions.

It's made even worse by exploitation. Superstitions are often the tool of those who use them to gain power and influence over others. To steal some money – or to cause much greater damage. Such as exploiting disease, pain, unhappiness or fear to offer bad remedies or unlikely luck – and so make things much worse for people who are already in trouble.

There is also a perplexing behavior of mainstream media in too many countries. They publish horoscopes – and report prophecies (rarely going back, after the fact, to find that whatever was predicted didn't happen.) They offer much more space than they deserve to soothsayers, healers, wizards and necromancers. They insouciantly report that someone belongs to this or that astrological sign. Etcetera.¹⁰

The excuse is clumsy. «*If that is what people want, that we must give them.*» That's ridiculous. Media can be popular, amusing, relaxing, without spreading false beliefs. There is no proof whatsoever that a newspaper or a magazine ever lost readers, or a television show viewers, by staying away from superstition.

And even if they had to get into those subjects, a touch of irony and humor would help to put them in the right perspective. In a not-so-remote past astronomy and astrology were relatively close. If anyone assumed that astronomical events could have an influence on human affairs (which, of course, is possible) the way of trying to guess was based on astronomy as it was perceived. Now we know that even Copernicus had a very limited perception of the universe and the movements of planets and stars. If anyone really wanted to look into possible relations between human events and outer space, they should do so by starting from scratch in a completely different perspective.

It may be too much (and probably counterproductive) to put a warning on horoscopes (and other wizardries) like the ones on cigarette packs: "scientifically meaningless and may cause mental disorientation." But it would help if mainstream information didn't continue to support all sorts of prejudice – and so spin the vicious circle of stupidity (see chapter 18.)

¹⁰ Even scientific information is distorted. As in the case of the new Cern particle accelerator supposedly causing the Earth to be swallowed by a black hole in October, 2008 (when the system wasn't even tested for any application – as confirmed by the fact that it needed re-engineering to become functional several months later.) This is only one of many such absurdities. One of the unfortunate effects of misinformation is that it makes people skeptical about dangers that can be real.

Of course astrology is only one of many examples. There are all sorts of things that we are in the habit of believing – or that we like to believe for a variety of reasons, from the desire to be comforted to the fear of what we don't understand (see chapter 14.) The remedy isn't a hypothetical (and often debatable) "absolute rationality." Emotions, feelings, intuitions, imagination are essential for the completeness and balance of human nature.

They are as necessary in the development of knowledge as the methodic use of reason. But we can pleasantly read a fairy tale without fearing that we will be devoured by an ogre or hoping that we can be helped out of trouble by a whim of a benevolent genie.

We can dream, asleep or awake, of riding a gryphon or floating above the clouds on a flying carpet. But when we wake up, or maybe after some relaxing daydreaming, we must get back to a world where, if we want to fly, we need an airplane – or, at least, a parachute.

We can study and enjoy an old myth or legend, discovering its meanings and values (often deep and fascinating) without literally accepting the reality of the story. We can heed the warnings of Hamlet's father without believing in ghosts.¹¹

Difficult as it may be to draw the line between bewildering possibilities and ridiculous beliefs, or to separate harmless habits from mischievous delusions, the fact remains that superstition is a dangerous form of stupidity. We can be tricked by hucksters who steal our money – or, much worse, we can be exploited and enslaved. And even when nobody else is trying to deceive us we can hurt ourselves for all sorts of absurd reasons.

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A particular form of obnubilation is called "fundamentalism." We are aware of its extreme consequences in crime and violence, oppression and slavery, murder and exploitation, war and genocide. But it's lurking in many other ways. Not only in religion or ideology. There is fundamentalism in politics, sports, society, economy, corporations, professions, all sorts of groups and communities – even in family feuds and neighborhood conflicts.

It can also be called integralism, dogmatism, absolutism, extremism, fanaticism – and of course it relates to obscurantism and superstition.

In this era, that we hoped would be a time of civilization and freedom, enlightening and awareness, there is an awful resurgence of intolerance. Not only in remote places or repressive cultures, but also close to home, wherever we are.

We can be fans without being fanatics, enjoy spectator sports without becoming hooligans, disagree without fighting, have fun without humiliating or hurting anyone, etcetera. But we are still living in a dark eclipse of good sense and civility. One more proof of the fact that stupidity can hide in all sorts of disguises and prevail in many insidious ways.

A description of the book
is online – stupidity.it

11 Of course the most widely quoted statement is not in what his father's ghost said, but in Hamlet's comment to his friend: «*There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*» (William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 5.)