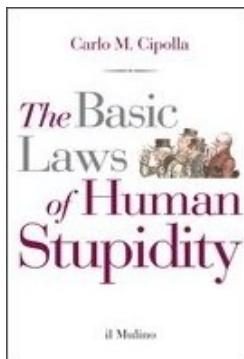


At last – thirtyfive years later

Cipolla's Laws in English

Giancarlo Livraghi – November 2011

Unexpectedly, thirtyfive years after a few copies were printed in a privately distributed book, Carlo M. Cipolla's *Basic Laws of Human Stupidity* were published as a commercially available edition at the end of October, 2011.



This is also the first time that they are published as a separate book, in any language. An Italian translation was included, following another interesting essay by Carlo Cipolla, in a book called *Allegro ma non troppo* (1988). And so it was in later editions (2001) in Spanish and Portuguese.

As I have always remarked in my articles on *The Power of Stupidity*, and later in all editions of my book on this subject, Carlo Cipolla's "Laws" are one of the three best books I have ever discovered on the very serious, but scarcely studied, subject of stupidity. The other two are *A Short Introduction to the History of Human Stupidity* by Walter B. Pitkin (1932) and *Understanding Stupidity* by James F. Welles (1986).

Two other books aren't about stupidity, but relevant on a closely related subject, "why things don't work". *Parkinson's Law* by Cyril Northcote Parkinson (1957) and *The Peter Principle* by Laurence Peter (1969) as explained in chapters 5 and 6 of *The Power of Stupidity*.

The peculiar fact is that Carlo Cipolla wrote *The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity* in English, in the early Seventies, but his essay wasn't made publicly available. A photocopied pamphlet shared with a few friends, in 1976 a "private edition" of 100 numbered copies, by an imaginary publisher called "Mad Millers" – only as a personal gift to a privileged few.

In following years there were no other editions in English, except for an unauthorized publication in *The Whole Earth Review* in 1987, with the awkward addition of confusing “funny” drawings by James Donnelly.

This article was made available online in 2002. It can still be found sometimes in some places, though the Italian publisher has been aggressively requesting that all be removed because they are violations of copyright.

I still don’t understand why it took so long to make the original English text publicly available. But it isn’t “too late”, because Carlo Cipolla’s bright observations are as relevant now as they were thirtyfive years ago.

Some parts of my book are clearly inspired (though with some differences of perspective) by Cipolla’s work. As explained in chapters 7, 8 and 11 of *The Power of Stupidity*.

But I differ from his approach on two crucial points.

Like almost everyone discussing stupidity, Carlo Cipolla stays with the widespread assumption that “the stupid” are «*a group of people in the human race*». A distressingly large group, as explained in Cipolla’s First Law. «*Always and inevitably everyone underestimates the number of stupid people in circulation*». According to Walter Pitkin, they are four out of five people. This is to say between 5 and 6 billion people as counted today – and growing.

Carlo Cipolla also states that «*some are stupid and others are not, and the difference is determined by nature*». Stupid people «*are so because of genetic traits*» – therefore, incurable. A very distressing assumption. But, on the other hand, it can encourage complacency. We are led to believe that the author and his readers don’t suffer from that genetic mishap. And of course the stupid person is always someone else. So «*if it proves impossible to save ourselves from stupidity, we can at least take vengeance by laughing at it*». A touch of humor, of course, can help – but the power of stupidity isn’t funny.

My view (shared by one other author, James Welles) is that we are all, to some extent, stupid – and understanding our own stupidity is the basic step in beginning to understand everyone else’s and so learning how we can prevent, or at least reduce, the awful effects of the power of stupidity. Jim Welles and I also agree that human stupidity (like intelligence) is a predominantly cultural, not genetic, «*learning process*». As a «*maladaptive dysfunction*» stupidity can be understood and so, to some extent, controlled.

In spite of these relevant differences, *The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity* remains one of the best essays ever written on this subject. A pleasantly small book with a remarkable concentration of brilliant insights on «*one of the most powerful dark forces which hinder human welfare and happiness*».

I am pleased that it’s now available to many more readers around the world.