

LAWS OF HUMAN STUPIDITY

The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity is a short essay written by the Italian economist Carlo Cipolla. The first edition was written in English and released in 1976. Originally, it was intentionally distributed only among his friends on a confidential basis. The reason is simple. That book was intended as a sort of joke, where he faced a few serious topics in a lighthearted and not-to-be-taken-too-seriously way.

The most famous excerpt is the one on human stupidity. When addressing such a sensible theme, he came up with an extravagant and interesting theory, which earned him incredible success. Not only was the essay officially published, but it was also translated into many languages and distributed worldwide. Now, it represents a milestone on [the controversial topic of human stupidity](#).

Let's dive into the 5 basic laws of human stupidity.

First Basic Law

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

Stupid people exist, but according to Cipolla you may be deeply underestimating their number and influence in our society. He was so strongly convinced about this that he asserted that “*any numerical assumption would turn out to be an underestimate.*” This statement was obviously an exaggeration, part of his playful writing style. On the other hand, such an idea should not be taken too lightly. After all, this is not the first law by accident.

Please, think about all the people that you had judged intelligent, before realizing they were actually behaving stupidly and obtusely. If you are still not convinced, Cipolla suggested an experiment. Go out in the street and see how many people insist on obstructing you for no apparent reason. What would you call their behavior if not stupid?

Second Basic Law

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

Cipolla considered stupidity as a human characteristic, like having blond hair or black eyes. Consequently, it cannot but be distributed roughly equally in all walks of society, regardless of people's level of education. “*Whether one frequents elegant circles or takes refuge among cannibals, whether they lock themselves up in a monastery or decide to spend the rest of their life in the company of a beautiful partner, the fact remains that they will always have to deal with the same percentage of stupid people,*” he concluded.

In this pessimistic view, human beings are doomed to deal with stupidity. Also, according to Cipolla, there are no safer places or solutions to avoid it. The only thing you can do is accept this and live with it for the rest of your existence.

Third Basic Law

A stupid person is one who causes losses to another person or a group of people while they gain nothing or may even suffer losses.

Carlo Cipolla considered this the golden and most important law, never to be forgotten. He did not consider stupidity a matter of IQ, but rather a lack of relational skills. In particular, he believed that [it is possible to classify people based on their behavior](#). Stupid people are the ones who harm others and often themselves. On the contrary, the behavior of intelligent or overly naive people is aimed at helping others.

Specifically, he believed that stupid human beings behave in an irrational and difficult-to-understand way. This does not mean that their actions do not have an impact on your life. On the contrary, you are very likely to remember people who hindered you, causing you difficulties, frustrations, and suffering. What is even more surprising is that such stupid people may not even gain anything from their behavior. In fact, Cipolla stated that *“there are people who, by their illogic actions, not only cause harm to other people, but also to themselves. Such people belong to the genus of the super stupid.”*

Fourth Basic Law

Non-stupid people always underestimate the damaging power of stupid individuals. In particular, non-stupid people constantly forget that in any time and place and circumstance dealing and/or hanging out with stupid people always turns out to be a costly mistake.

To make this law clearer, Carlo Cipolla added that *“stupid people are deadly dangerous because reasonable people find it difficult to imagine and understand stupid behavior.”* In such a view, stupid people’s attacks always catch intelligent ones by surprise. This makes it even more difficult to come up with a rational defense. On the other hand, this would be of little use since illogical actions cannot be understood using logic.

As a result, by underestimating their power, you are vulnerable and always at the mercy of stupid people’s unpredictability. He was also convinced that intelligent people tend to think that the stupid ones can only harm themselves, that they are immune to their actions. This is a huge mistake making reasonable people feel invulnerable, dangerously lowering their guard.

Fifth Basic Law

Stupid people are the most dangerous type of people.

This law comes as a natural consequence of the previous and fourth basic law. Also, if you have no clue about what Cipolla meant here, he made it even more obvious by adding the following corollary:

A stupid person is more dangerous than a bandit.

Of the five laws seen so far, this should be the most understandable and reasonable one. In fact, common sense tells us that intelligent people, no matter how hostile they may be, are predictable. In contrast, stupid people are not. This subtle difference makes [stupid people incredibly more fearsome than intelligent people](#). In conclusion, this should be regarded as a kind of compendium of his entire theory on human stupidity.

Conclusion

The Italian economist Carlo Cipolla taught us that by using only irony and common sense, it is possible to conceive captivating ideas. As we have just seen, he was able to lightheartedly address human stupidity in a clear and incisive way. By summarizing such a complex and controversial subject in five basic laws, he devised a genuine and fascinating theory. Initially shared only with his friends, that theory became internationally known, and it is now studied in many disciplines. Although it should not be taken too seriously, this theory is something to keep in mind when inevitably hampered by human stupidity.
