

ALLEGRO MA NON TROPPO



Allegro ma non troppo was written by the Italian economic historian Carlo Cipolla (1922-2000). It is a very short book that takes perhaps less than an hour to read.

Cipolla wrote the original in English, as two separate essays in 1973 and 1976, during his tenure at Berkeley. For more than a decade

the texts circulated in photocopies and even in manuscript transcriptions. The first printed edition came in 1988, in Italian, when the Bologna publisher Il Mulino convinced Cipolla to allow an official version. As far as I know the original English text is impossible to obtain. The diligent legal office of Il Mulino has been sending "Notifications of Infringement of Copyright" to the few web sites around the world that kept the original canon. The translation rights, according to the publisher's web site have been sold to Turkish, German, Greek, Japanese, Spanish and Portuguese (Celta Editora, Oeiras, 1993).

The two essays deal with very different topics. The first is about "the role of spices in the economic development of the middle ages". There is more to it of course than scholarly economic history. Cipolla constructed an historical fable connecting the aphrodisiac powers of pepper to the need to overcome the decline of the European population after the fall of the Roman Empire. From that initial insight the author explains the invention of the crusades and of the chastity belt (two simultaneous events of course), the resurgence of metallurgy in Europe and the popularity of surnames like Smith or Ferreira, linked to professions that became popular at home as the noble crusaders sailed away. In a few pages the reader goes from the fall of Rome to the Italian Renaissance in a succession of unexpected causal links between events and characters.

But the true popularity of *Allegro ma non troppo* comes from the second essay: "*The fundamental laws of human stupidity*". Unlike the first essay, writ-

ten in a detached narrative style, the second one has a rather formal structure, with axioms, laws, corollaries and Cartesian graphs. Also unlike the first text this second one is intended as useful advice for everyday life. I will try a short summary of Cipolla's approach for those that cannot read Italian, Turkish, German, Greek, Japanese, Spanish or Portuguese.

Cipolla targets on stupidity while looking for the root of the current deplorable state of human affairs. He produces a theory and a praxis that explain the problem and define a way out of it. The fundamental concept is Cipolla's definition of stupidity (also called the Golden Law):

A stupid is someone that causes damage to another person or group of persons without gaining any personal advantage and in most cases even causing considerable damage to himself () .*

So stupidity has nothing to do with intellectual qualities or innate aptitudes, but is rather linked to the "balance sheet" of inter-personal interactions. Stupid people are one of the four groups in which human beings can be divided. The other are: the "*credulous*" (those that cause damage to themselves while causing gains for the others), the "*thieves*" (those that obtain gains by causing loss to others) and the "*intelligent*" (those that obtain gains for themselves while also producing gains for the others). Cipolla provides nice graphs to illustrate this and even a blank set of labeled Cartesian axes so the reader can map his own acquaintances in X and Y coordinates.

From the Golden Law a number of other principles are developed:

Law: Always and inevitably each of us underestimates the number of stupid individuals in circulation. This means that it is impossible to give a numerical estimate of the fraction of stupid people in any given population (or sub-population). Cipolla uses the symbol ϵ when referring to this (irrational) number. This is a fundamental axiom that the author presents as self-evident, arguing that, however high the esti-

mate one has of the stupidity around us, we are constantly surprised by: a) people that we considered in the past as rational and intelligent and that suddenly reveal themselves as hopelessly stupid and b) day after day, with reckless regularity, we are hindered in our activities by stupid individuals that pop up in the most unexpected places.

Law: The probability that a given person is stupid is independent of any other characteristic possessed by that person. This is a tragic law derived from the axiom that we find the quota ϵ of stupid people in any profession and at any level of an organization. It also means that one cannot detect stupid people until one actually interacts with one -- and then it is too late.

Law: Non-stupid people always underestimate the harmful potential of stupid people; they constantly forget that at any time anywhere, and in any circumstance, dealing with or associating themselves with stupid individuals invariably constitutes a costly error. Cipolla goes to great lengths to convince the reader of the disastrous effect of entertaining any sort of relation with stupid people. He specifically warns that intelligent people are particularly vulnerable to the fatal temptation of interacting with stupid people, whom they tend to consider erroneously as their inferior, frequently trying to reason with them for extended periods of time, with invariable disastrous results to everyone involved.

Law: A stupid person is the most dangerous type of person there is. Discussing this law Cipolla makes a fundamental digression on the macro-level impact in society of the interaction between stupid people and non-stupid people. If you go back to the definition of the four groups of human people you realize that the interaction between Credulous, Intelligent and Thieves is, in the worst case, a zero sum game.

But interacting with stupid people decreases the

overall level of happiness and resources available to society: it is always a negative sum game. So successful societies or organizations are those that minimize the global level of interaction with stupid people, recognizing that their number is by definition irreducible.

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The fundamental laws of stupidity, in my experience, are both absolutely true and impossible to proof. Since I first read *Allegro ma non troppo*, almost twenty years ago, its wisdom frequently came back to me, especially in difficult times, providing comfort and hope in the possibility of a better world.

There is much more in the original than in this quick digest. If you cannot read any of the published versions try to get someone with the required linguistic skills to translate it aloud to you and a group of friends or co-workers, preferably in the company of a good wine. Do it as a contribution for a better world.

(*) English version of the laws, in italics, come from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carlo_Maria_Cipolla, in the hope they are based on the original English version.

Carlo M. Cipolla
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