

(SSH)²: The hidden rules of academic life.

**Why social science historians do what they
do, do not do what they should, or cannot
do what they would like to do**

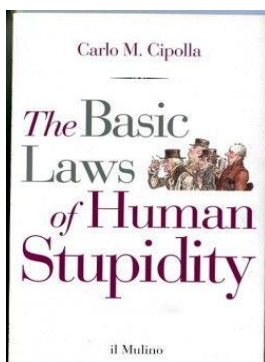
Marcel van der Linden

(SSH)²: The hidden rules of academic life. Why social science historians do what they do, do not do what they should, or cannot do what they would like to do

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Social science historians may lead fascinating lives, but they do not always have an easy time. On the one hand, we are privileged to be able to pursue what intrigues us, often work with inspiring colleagues, and contribute toward insight into developing social relations. On the other hand, we are all subject to rules imposed 'from above,' are assessed in quantitative terms for our qualitative achievements, and need recognition in our discipline and ideally among a broader public as well. Besides, we all make mistakes – as do the administrators aiming to circumscribe our professional latitude. All such patterns result from cause-effect relations. Over time several scholars have tried to fathom such cause-effect relations. Some of their efforts were meticulous and thorough, while others were less serious. I will share some examples of such self-reflective considerations today, focusing on three related fields: foolishness, fame, and fictions, inevitably followed by a firm conclusion.

Fools

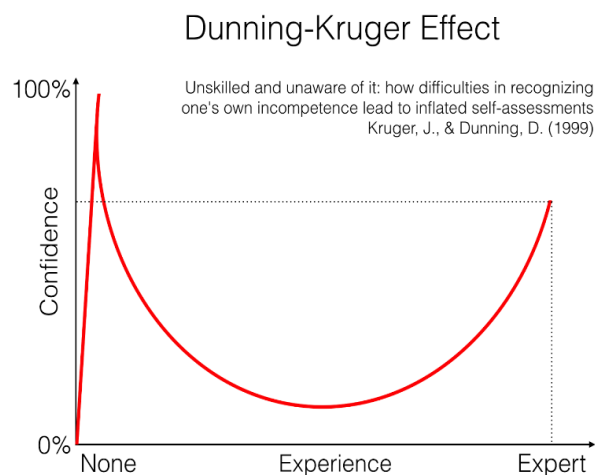


In 1976 the great economic historian Carlo Cipolla (1922-2000) published his pathbreaking essay *The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity*, which to date has unfortunately received little attention. Cipolla

defines a stupid person as “a person who causes losses to another person or to a group of persons while himself deriving no gain and even possibly incurring losses.”¹ He identifies two types of stupid people. The ordinary stupid people are those who cause damage to others without deriving any personal benefit. And the super-stupid people are those “who by their improbable actions not only cause damages to other people but in addition hurt themselves.”² Stupid people are more dangerous than thieves, because thieves play a zero-sum game: since their loot is what they steal from others, the total wealth remains constant and is merely redistributed. Stupid people, on the other hand, reduce the combined assets.

Foolish people are present in all segments of society. Cipolla even suspects that the stupidity percentage is identical everywhere and is therefore present among social science historians, as well as among plumbers, painters, and politicians. Some people, however, cause only very limited damage through their foolish actions, while others cause extensive damage to entire communities or societies. These are the people with power. “Among bureaucrats, generals, politicians and heads of state one has little difficulty in finding clear examples of basically stupid individuals whose damaging capacity was (or is) alarmingly enhanced by the position of power which they occupied (or occupy).”³

If we all (or in any case most of us) behave stupidly so often, why do we acknowledge it so rarely? Recognizing stupidity is not always easy, both the stupidity of others and our own stupidity. Our self-reflections are often coloured by inflated self-assessment. Psychologists describe this as the **Dunning-Kruger effect**.



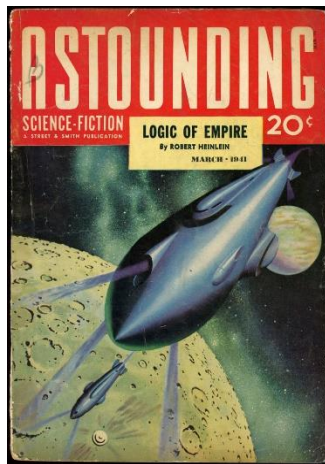
¹ Carlo M. Cipolla, *The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011), p. 36.

² *Idem*, p. 44.

³ *Idem*, p. 47.

That is a cognitive bias, in which people of low ability have illusory superiority and mistakenly assess their cognitive ability as greater than it is. Those with low ability are unable to acknowledge their lack of ability and are therefore unable to assess their actual competence or incompetence.⁴

We often fail to recognize the stupidity of *others*, because we assume that their unfathomable action derives from highly intelligent but obscure and concealed motives. Frequently this is unjustified. In 1941 Robert Heinlein published “Logic of Empire,” a science-fiction story in which what was known as the “devil theory” is elaborated.



One of the protagonists says: “You have attributed conditions to villainy that simply result from stupidity.”⁵ The psychologist William James appears to have shared a similar observation at one point, as Napoleon Bonaparte may have done as well. But the idea later became truly known as **Hanlon’s Razor**, because Robert J. Hanlon, a resident of Scranton, Pennsylvania, pithily formulated it as: “Never attribute to malice what can be adequately explained by stupidity.”⁶

Fame

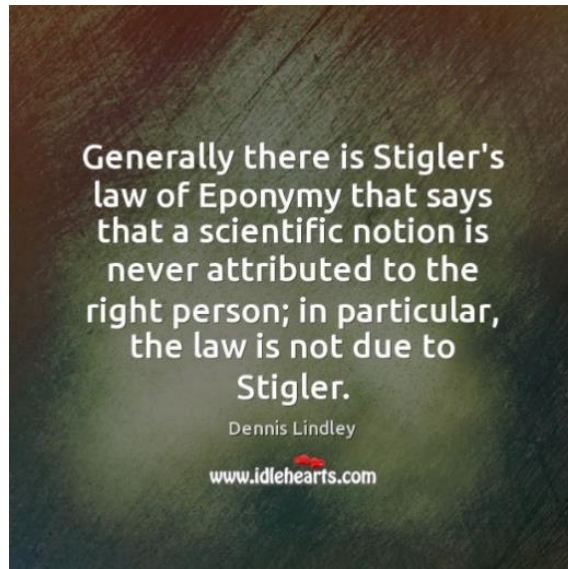
That the argument described by Heinlein is not credited to him brings to light a different regularity, also known as **Stigler’s law**: “No scientific discovery is named after its original discoverer.”⁷

⁴ Justin Kruger and David Dunning, “Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One’s Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 77, 6 (1999), pp. 1121–1134.

⁵ Robert A. Heinlein, “Logic of Empire,” *Astounding Science Fiction*, March 1941.

⁶ https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Robert_J._Hanlon.

⁷ Stephen M. Stigler, “Stigler’s Law of Eponymy,” in: Thomas F. Gieryn (Ed.), *Science and Social Structure*, Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences, series II, Vol. 39 (1980), pp. 147-157.



Mark Twain was long aware of this. Back in 1903 he wrote his friend Helen Keller: "It takes a thousand men to invent a telegraph, or a steam engine, or a phonograph, or a photograph, or a telephone or any other important thing — and the last man gets the credit and we forget the others. He added his little mite — that is all he did. These object lessons should teach us that ninety-nine parts of all things that proceed from the intellect are plagiarisms, pure and simple; and the lesson ought to make us modest. But nothing can do that."⁸

The same type of injustice appears in the system of academic awards. Why does one person receive far more grants and awards than another? As you probably know – being well-versed in the Bible – the Gospel according to Matthew lists two main rules:

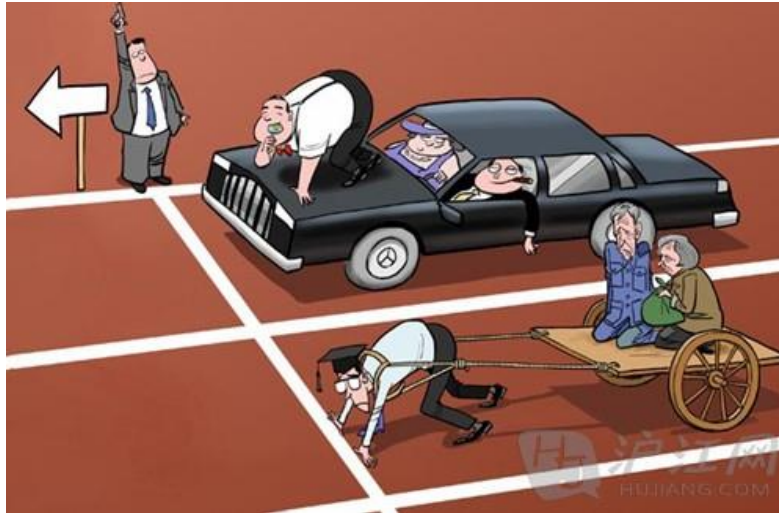
[1] "For whomsoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance; [2] but whomsoever has not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath."⁹

In 1968 the sociologist Robert Merton (1910-2003) considered the first sentence ("whomsoever hath, to him shall be given"). He inferred from it the well-known Matthew Effect. Basing his arguments mainly on the dissertation by his wife Harriet Zuckerman about Nobel Prize winners, Merton described "the accruing of greater increments of recognition for particular scientific contributions to scientists of considerable repute and the withholding of such recognition from scientists who have not yet made

⁸ "Letter from Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) to Helen Keller". Perkins Archives. 1903.
<http://www.perkins.org/history/archives/collections/highlights-perkins-archive#twain>.

⁹ Matthew 13:12. Similar statements also appear in Matthew 25:29, Mark 4:25, Luke 8:18 and 19:26. See: Charles D. Geilker, "Matthew, Mark, or Luke Effect," *Science*, New Series, 159, No. 3820 (March 15, 1968), p. 1186: "since Mark unquestionably published first, it would be more in accord with scientific practice to have named it the 'Mark Effect.' Moreover, it is obvious (if you have a red-letter edition, as well as a concordance) that all three gospel writers are really quoting the words of Christ, so that it would be still more logical to call it the Jesus effect." Another example of Stigler's Law of Eponymy.

their mark.”¹⁰ Of course you will recognize this from academia: this concerns over-recognition of those at the top of the scientific profession – those who have received grants and awards may for that reason alone expect more grants and awards.

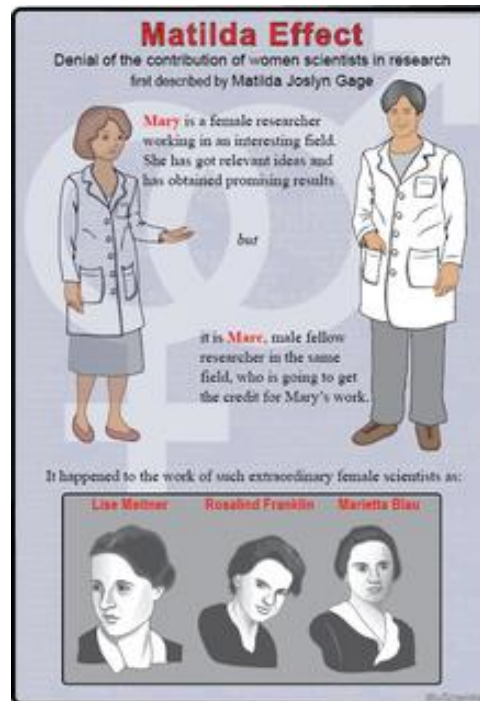


The second sentence (“whomsoever has not, from him shall be taken away”) received consideration far later, thanks to the influence of feminism. Historian of science Margaret Rossiter (1944-) introduced the Matilda Effect, named after the American suffragette Matilda J. Gage (1826-98) and offered a wealth of examples to illustrate “the sexist nature of much of the women’s systematic under-recognition.”¹¹ Both the Matthew Effect and the Matilda Effect have been confirmed through empirical research.¹²

¹⁰ Robert K. Merton, “The Matthew Effect in Science,” *Science*, 159, 3810 (5 January 1968), pp. 56-63. See also Merton’s “The Matthew Effect in Science, II: Cumulative Advantage and the Symbolism of Intellectual Property,” *Isis*, 79, 4 (December 1988), pp. 606-623, where Merton concedes that his wife should have been listed as co-author (p. 607n2), and Merton, “The Thomas Theorem and the Matthew Effect,” *Social Forces*, 74, 2 (December 1995), pp. 379-422.

¹¹ Margaret W. Rossiter, “The Matilda Effect in Science,” *Social Studies in Science*, 23, 2 (May 1993), pp. 325-341.

¹² Thomas A. DiPrete and Gregory M. Eirich, “Cumulative Advantage as a Mechanism for Inequality: A Review of Theoretical and Empirical Developments,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, 32 (2006), pp. 271-297; Daniel Rigney, *The Matthew Effect: How Advantage Begets Further Advantage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick and Carroll J. Glynn, “The Matilda Effect—Role Congruity Effects on Scholarly Communication: A Citation Analysis of *Communication Research* and *Journal of Communication Articles*,” *Communication Research*, 40, 1 (2013), pp. 3-26.

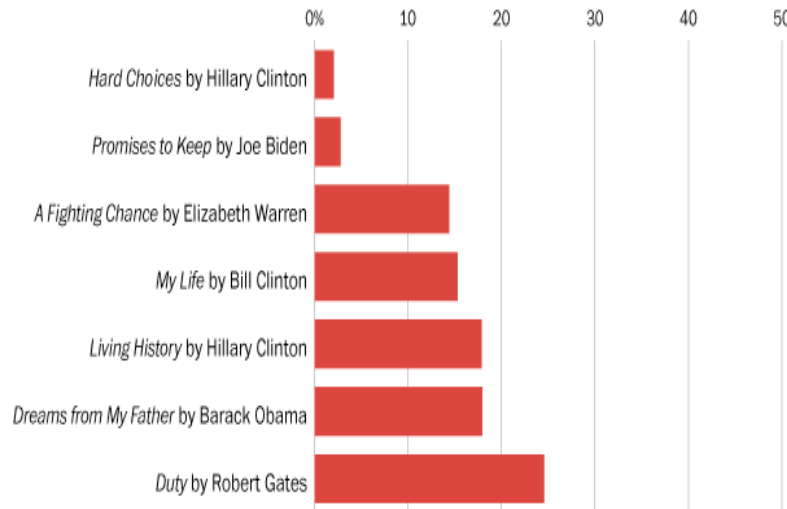


If we want our colleagues to respect us, being or giving the impression that we are well read is essential. We need to be familiar with authors and book titles and to know their main ideas. But reading is very time-consuming. Bluffing – in the sense of pretending that we know things without it becoming clear that we do not – is therefore helpful. The **Hawking Index**, invented by mathematician Jordan Ellenberg (1971-), is useful to this end.¹³

¹³ Jordan Ellenberg, "The Summer's Most Unread Book Is...", *The Wall Street Journal*, July 3, 2014.

The 'Hawking Index' for political books

A rough guide to how far into books readers actually get, out of 100 percent.



This index refers to Steven Hawking's renowned book *A Brief History of Time* ("widely called 'the most unread book of all time'") and is inspired by the phenomenal sales figures of Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Ellenberg proposed using Amazon's "Popular Highlights" feature. Every book offered by Amazon has a Kindle page listing the five passages most highlighted by readers. "If every reader is getting to the end, those highlights could be scattered throughout the length of the book. If nobody has made it past the introduction, the popular highlights will be clustered at the beginning." This leads to the Hawking Index: "Take the page numbers of a book's five top highlights, average them, and divide by the number of pages in the whole book." The higher the number, the more of the book people are likely to have read. The highest index in Ellenberg's sample was for *The Goldfinch* by Donna Tartt (98.5 %). *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E.L. James had an index of 25.9%, *A Brief History of Time* 6.6 %, and Piketty trailed at 2.4 %. Presumably, therefore, many colleagues who say they have read *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* are bluffing. The same probably holds true for other voluminous books, such as Marx's *Capital*, Weber's *Economy and Society*, or Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*.

Fictions

This brings me to the administrators. Another fellow professional, naval historian C. Northcote Parkinson (1909-93), has done pioneering work in this field.



He discovered that the number of admiralty officials in the British navy *increased* nearly eighty percent between 1914 and 1928, while the number of warships had *declined* by nearly seventy percent during the same period. With this paradox in mind, Parkinson formulated the **Law of Multiplication of Subordinates**. According to this law, “An official wants to multiply subordinates, not rivals.” Consider, for example, a civil servant who feels he has too much work. We will call him A. He has three options: he may give notice; he may suggest sharing his work with a second colleague B; or he may request assistance. The first option (giving notice) is rarely appealing, if only because this will jeopardize A’s pension. The second option means that A gains a co-worker who is his equal in rank, and consequently he would be creating a rival for himself. The third option (assistance) is therefore the most obvious choice. But A will never want only one assistant. He will always want at least two, C and D. I quote Parkinson: “[By] dividing the work into two categories ... [A] will have the merit of being the only man who comprehends them both. It is essential to realize at this point that C and D are, as it were, inseparable. To appoint C alone would have been impossible. Why? Because C, if by himself, would divide the work with A and so assume almost the equal status that has been refused in the first instance to B; a status the more emphasized if C is A’s only possible successor. Subordinates must thus number two or more, each being thus kept in order by fear of the other’s promotion.”¹⁴ So there seems to be an *organizational multiplier*; the natural organizational growth rate in the public administrative sector

¹⁴ Parkinson, *Parkinson’s Law*, p. 6.

is probably just under six per cent per year, irrespective of any variation in the amount of work to be done.¹⁵

Staff numbers are therefore growing faster than the amount of work, despite everybody insisting that they are busy. This process seems to resemble what physicists call the “ideal gas law”: a gas expands to fit the volume allotted. Likewise, we grow our activities to fill the work time available¹⁶ – often by reducing the pace or performing unnecessary duties. The agricultural historian Folke Dovring observed half a century ago: “Productive work consists of motion elements, but it is measured in time elements. If fewer motions are performed in a time span, underemployment may be disguised and the analyst will have difficulty finding the redundant time element though in fact less time is required to do the job by workers working at full capacity.”¹⁷ For example, the sociologist John Lie, of Korean descent, wrote: “When I worked at a *chaebŏl* in the late 1980s, I was struck by how many people went around saying ‘I am busy’ in lieu of ordinary greetings. Although they were busily pacing to and fro or conspicuously shuffling papers at their desk, I noticed over time that their punctuality and overt expressions of diligence masked a variety of efforts to avoid work. Managerial gaze targeted discernible features, such as tardiness, early departure, or relaxed demeanor. The constant refrain ‘I am busy’ not only reminded superiors and colleagues about their busy-ness (and therefore their excellence) but also warded off additional business that would otherwise be foisted upon them.”¹⁸

The career pattern of administrators correlates with the expansion of administrations. Two observations are relevant here. The first is the well-known **Peter Principle** of the Canadian educator Laurence J. Peter (1919-90). In 1969, he noted that “In a hierarchy every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence... [I]n time every post tends to be occupied by an employee who is incompetent to carry out its duties.”¹⁹

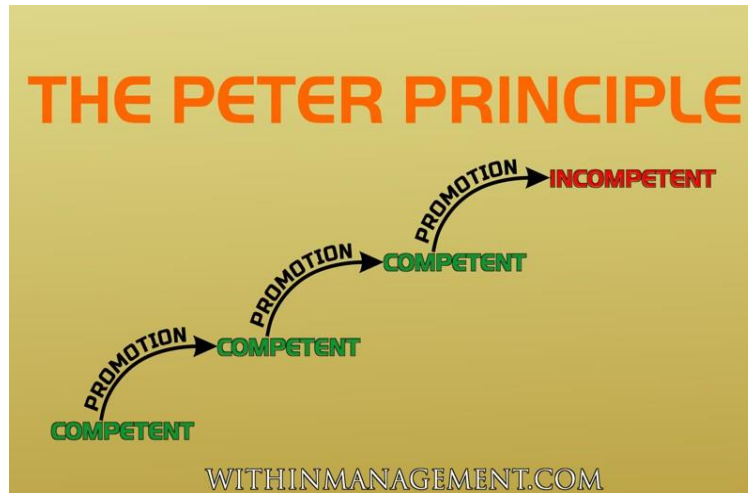
¹⁵ Herbert G. Hicks and Benjamin B. Graves, “Is There an Organizational Multiplier?,” *The Academy of Management Journal*, 6, 1 (March 1963), pp. 70-78, at 71, note.

¹⁶ <https://www.economist.com/news/1955/11/19/parkinsons-law>.

¹⁷ Folke Dovring, “Underemployment, Slow Motion, and X-Efficiency,” *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 27, 3 (April 1979), pp. 485-490, at 485-486. Dovring added: “Underemployment is, in fact, extremely widespread and highly frequent in all walks of life, in high-income no less than in low-income countries. Not having enough to do is a commonplace cause of morale among employees, both of bureaucracy and business. The amount of make-work that weights down many forms of organized endeavour is too familiar to insist on.” (pp. 488-489) Also consider what David Graeber has described as “bullshit jobs.”

¹⁸ John Lie, “What Makes Us Great. *Chaebŏl* Development, Labor Practices, and Managerial Ideology,” in: Chang Yun-Shik and Steven Hugh Lee (eds), *Transformations in Twentieth-Century Korea* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 130-152, at 143.

¹⁹ Quoted here according to the new edition: Laurence J. Peter with Raymond Hull, *The Peter Principle: Why Things Always Go Wrong* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), p. 20.



The underlying idea is simply: competent employees are continuously promoted, but at some point they will ordinarily advance to a level that exceeds their abilities. Because of the prestige and salary associated with it, most people will not refuse such a promotion to their level of incompetence, even if they know that they are not really qualified.²⁰ The second important observation is known as the **Dilbert principle**, a reference to the Scott Adams cartoon figure who argued that the least competent employees are promoted to middle management, because that is where they can do the least damage.

²⁰ "There is substantial evidence of the Peter Principle." Edward P. Lazear, "The Peter Principle: A Theory of Decline," *Journal of Political Economy*, 112, No. S1 (February 2004), pp. S141-S163, at S142 (with further literature).

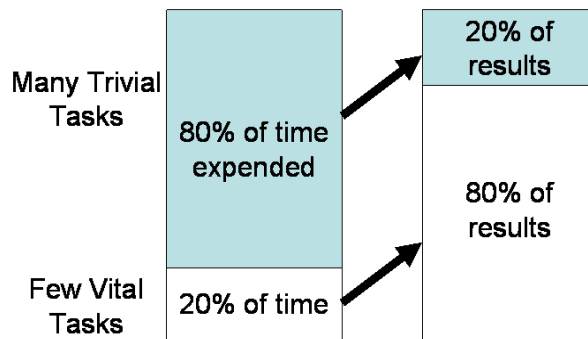
The Original Dilbert Principle



If Laurence Peter and Dilbert are right, then the higher ranks of our administrations are filled with completely or partially incompetent employees. The most useful work is therefore performed mainly by those who have not yet reached their level of incompetence.²¹

²¹ Peter, *The Peter Principle*, p. 30.

This takes me to the Pareto Principle.



This principle, popularly also known as the 80-20 rule, is an economic rule that Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923) noted in his *Cours d'économie politique* from 1906. He determined that 80% of the property in Italy was owned by 20% of the Italian population. Comparing this ratio with the situation in other countries, he discovered to his surprise that the same ratio applied there. Business consultant Joseph Juran (1904-2008!) then popularized this term. He discovered that the 80-20 ratio applies to a great many aspects and generalized the rule by arguing that 80% of the outcome arises from 20% of the causes. In a classroom, for example, 20% of the children may be responsible for 80% of the noise, while in the chemical industry 20% of the processes generates 80% of the emissions. The Pareto Principle is controversial.²² Some studies suggest that often the ratio is not 80-20 but 70-30 or 60-40. Still, we have reason to suspect that in academia most of the work is also done by a minority. For example, that a minority writes the majority of the publications, and that a minority does most of the teaching.

In addition, administrators and scholars alike often have difficulty with new ideas. One reason has been revealed by Ronald B. Lee (1933-), a former Head of Planning, Marketing and Systems Analysis at the United States Post Office. In 1969 he formulated his **Law of Bureaucratic Assimilation**, in which he aimed to reveal how slowly new ideas were adopted by the administrations. He concluded that: "The length of time in weeks required for the acceptance and internalization of a new idea in a government bureaucracy varies as $T = 2 + 2(n-3)^2$ in which n is the number of individuals or discrete organizational elements involved in agreeing upon the fact and form of the idea and required for its adoption."²³

Lee noted three significant qualifications about this at the time. First, he noted that "even at $n = 1$, there is considerable time required to decide upon and internalize a new idea or new program.

²² See e.g., Erik Brynjolfsson, Yu Hu, and Duncan Simester, "Goodbye Pareto Principle, Hello Long Tail: The Effect of Search Costs on the Concentration of Product Sales," *Management Science*, 57, 8 (2011), pp. 1373–1386.

²³ Ronald B. Lee, "The Law of Bureaucratic Assimilation," *Public Administration Review*, 29, 2 (March-April 1969), pp. 203-204, at 203.

One and one-half months is used to mull over the idea to insure its funding relationships, or legislative soundness, and to identify the responsible parties for directing, reporting, and controlling activities created by the innovation. Secondly, all times are in even-numbered weeks.” This is because, for obscure reasons, “deadlines are always expressed in terms of two weeks, a month (roughly four weeks), etc.” “Third, and probably most important, is the fact that at $n = 0$, $T = 20$ weeks. The phenomenon admonishes that considerable time is required even to turn down useless ideas that are generated within a bureaucratic unit. A bureaucracy will fan even a bad idea for five months before it finally gives up and allows it to succumb. The formula also allows administrators to premeasure the waste involved in a form of bureaucratic sabotage previously unquantifiable. The sabotage referred to, of course, is the purposeful generation of lousy ideas and useless work. The formula states that the insertion of a useless idea into the system, when no one is expected to agree to it ($n = 0$), requires 20 weeks to resolve.”

Administrators spend their time in part by participating in meetings. Here, a second law of Parkinson applies: the **Law of Triviality**.

Law of Triviality: Real Life Examples

- Building a house and focusing on the window treatment at the cost of everything else
- Development – spending hours optimizing a rarely-used function instead of the application as a whole
- Spending an hour tweaking animations on a PowerPoint slide and not working on the rest of the presentation 😊

@malekontheweb

The time devoted to an item on the agenda is inversely proportionate to the amount of money involved. Large investments are complex and technical and require extensive knowledge on the part of the decision makers. Most people therefore do not have a clear opinion about them, enabling such decisions to be taken relatively quickly. On the other hand, everybody has an opinion about a small investment, such as purchasing a new coffee maker, resulting in hours of debate on that subject.²⁴

Final word

What I have just told you might be cause for pessimism. I have not even mentioned **Finagle’s Law**, which narrows down Murphy’s well-known Law by stipulating that “Anything that can go wrong, will—

²⁴ In the 1950s a closely related law was formulated by U.S. political scientist Wallace Stanley Sayre: “In any dispute, the intensity of feeling is inversely proportional to the value of the issues at stake”. *The Wall Street Journal*, December 20, 1973.

at the worst possible moment.”²⁵ Nor have I mentioned **Hofstadter’s Law**, according to which “It always takes longer than you expect, even when you take into account Hofstadter’s Law.”²⁶ And I have definitely not described the **Ruffing Rule**, devised by the Anglist Robert R. Ruffing. According to this rule, “things can never be right again. [...] In] a technological and affluent society, the demand for knowledge, self-discipline, and intelligence always exceeds the supply.”²⁷

Fortunately, most of the laws, rules, effects, and principles mentioned here are merely hypotheses. They do not describe general laws but only patterns recurring more or less frequently. So there is still hope, but then we do need to try to transcend the apparent certainties. Perhaps we can glean hope from **Miksch’s Law**: “If a string has one end, then it has another end.”²⁸

Miksch’s Law: “If a string has one end, then it has another end.”



²⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Finagle%27s_law.

²⁶ Douglas Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*. 20th anniversary ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1999), p. 152.

²⁷ Robert R. Ruffing, “The Ruffing Rule (Why Things Can Never Be the Same Again),” *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 55, 6 (February 1974), p. 439.

²⁸ Arthur Bloch, *Murphy’s Law Book Two: More Reasons Why Things Go Wrong!* (Los Angeles: Price, Stern, Sloan, 1977), p. 16.

Thank you for listening.

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Translation by Lee Mitzman