

In-Sight Publishing
Ask A Genius 144 – Zipf’s Law-Pareto Distributions¹
Scott Douglas Jacobsen & Rick Rosner
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[Beginning of recorded material]

Rick Rosner: Anyway, Zipf’s Law.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Yea, Zipf’s Law, Pareto Distribution, apparently, this dominates any official formal mainstream form of competition: sports, science, arts, humanities. Picasso was massively productive. Most artists aren’t. Poets: Shakespeare, Ezra Pound. These people produced large volumes, very popular, lots of sales – J.K. Rowling.

RR: Basically, what you’re calling a Pareto Distribution or can be called Zipf’s Law, it is likely in any field that that field, whether human endeavour or something else like the population of nations, you have a biggest one and a much less second biggest one, and a much smaller third biggest one. You have one or two giants dominating fields and a bunch of also-rans well below.

SDJ: Yea, these are the people we talked about before. These are the people that lose themselves to the sport watching the sport.

RR: Like frickin’ Yukon women’s basketball team has made it to 25 consecutive sweet 16s, they dominate. You have among the countries of the world. You have China with a population of like 1.5 billion and India at 1.3 billion, then it drops way down. Are we in 3rd place? I don’t know. The US with 330 or so million. It keeps dropping. Brazil with 250, maybe, million. Eventually, you get down into dozens of countries with under 10 million.

SDJ: Yea! Music: Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart. The three most commonly referenced.

RR: State populations. California, 35 million. Texas, probably 25 million. New York, probably 20 million. Then you’ve got 30 states with populations under 10 million.

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1. American Psychological Association. (2010). Citation Guide: APA. Retrieved from <http://www.lib.sfu.ca/system/files/28281/APA6CitationGuideSFUv3.pdf>.
2. Humble, A. (n.d.). Guide to Transcribing. Retrieved from <http://www.msvu.ca/site/media/msvu/Transcription%20Guide.pdf>.

SDJ: Yea, and if your human endeavour is to kill a lot of people that you don’t like, you can have a simple model in mind, “Get rid of all people that disagree with me or that I don’t like. So I can have only people around me that I like or who agree with me.” In a dark analytic way, you can take Zipf’s Law or Pareto Distributions into the world of mass killings.

RR: Hold on, hold on. What Zipf’s Law reflects, or Pareto, a perfect storm of circumstances, a rare confluence, a rare conjunction, of the conditions necessary for super mass murder. Germany was a super special set of circumstances. This country was pissed off by what it felt was being mistreated after WWI, a charismatic leader, a rich minority that you could drum up a lot of hate. Same with China.

Huge population in place. Charismatic leader. A change in government as the communists took over after WWII. Stalin, a charismatic leader taking over after a fairly recent revolution. Just looks like there are necessary circumstances. And they don’t arise that often. India would be a place that could have been potentially a site of 20th century—it has the population to support mass murder. Other circumstances, fortunately, were in place.

[End of recorded material]

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